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Managing Fear and Cultivating Generosity

Tonight, I'd like to retell a story, which is based on "A Rich Man" by Meyer Levin (1932).

Once a very wealthy Jew lived traveled to Medzibuz, the town where the Baal Shem Tov, the great rabbi who founded Hasidic Judaism, lived.

He had come to visit the Baal Shem Tov himself, to talk with him and to learn from him. As the visit ended, the rich man took a purse full of gold and placed it on the rabbi's table.

"There's nothing you wanted to ask of me?" asked the rabbi.

"No," said the rich man. "Everyone speaks so highly of you. So I wanted to meet you and to leave a small gift."

"There is nothing I can do?"

"I don't need any help. I have much gold, my children are grown, all are in good health."

"If you have a moment," he said to the man, "let me tell you a story."

In a city near where we sit, almost a hundred years ago, two wealthy Jewish merchants lived. Their houses stood next to each other. The men were very close. Each had a son, and they grew up together, as brothers. When they were thirteen, they swore to enter eternal brotherhood.

When they reached the age of marriage, the first young man, Lev, traveled to the west to be with his bride. The second, Yehuda, traveled to the east to build a life with his wife. They now lived three hundred miles apart.

At first Lev and Yehuda wrote letters to each other. But as they began to have families, and became absorbed by their business affairs, the letters became less and less until eventually they stopped.

Both men became successful in business and amassed much wealth.

But then—Lev's business affairs turned sour. He lost a huge sum of money on a deal, and after that his earnings spiraled downwards. Before long he had become poor.

One day he remembered his friend, Yehuda. It had been many years since they had written to each other. He took his last coins, traveled three hundred miles to the city where Yehuda lived, and found his home.

He rang the door and a servant welcomed him in. It was a house two stories high, with heavy mahogany doors and white marble walls. Beautiful paintings hung on the wall and soft rugs covered the floors.

Before long Yehuda walked in. The men embraced as brothers. "Tell me, how are you?"

Lev answered, "I am not well. I have lost everything."

Yehuda called his steward. "Count for me, please, all of my possessions. Make me an account."

The steward returned with a slip of paper showing a dazzling amount. Yehuda had indeed become a very rich man.

Yehuda said to him, "Divide it into two parts."

And to Lev he said, "We are brothers. Take half of all that I possess that you may live and be well."

Lev was overjoyed. He hugged and blessed his friend. And then he rode back to his own city and continued his business affairs.

Lev soon became the wealthiest man in the city. He built a house three stories high to store his gold. To protect it, he hired workers to build him a high fence, and he stationed a guard at the entrance.

Day and night, Lev sat in his house surrounded by his most precious treasures. He concentrated only on his business affairs. His family became a distraction. His friends faded away. He imprisoned himself with his riches.

You see, Lev was determined never to be poor again. He worked and worked and worked and he became the richest man in the entire land. But still, he feared that one wrong move, one mistake, and he would lose everything.

Now hard times fell on his friend, Yehuda. After he had given half of his fortune to Lev, he was robbed by a trusted business partner. He could not pay his bills, and before long he lost his beautiful house.

Yehuda and his family suffered from terrible hunger. And then one day he thought of Lev. "Lev will help me. I must travel to see him."

He wrote a letter to Lev telling him that he was coming by foot. He thought, "Lev will meet me on the road, take me to his home, care for me, and provide for my family."

Each time the road turned, Yehuda expected to see Lev. But day after day passed, and Lev did not come. "Perhaps he has taken a different road and we have missed each other."

At last Yehuda arrived in Lev's city and found Lev's home. He saw the huge iron fence around it. He approached the gate and knocked.

"No beggars allowed," muttered the guard.

But Yehuda responded, "Your master, my friend, Lev, he is waiting for me. Tell him that Yehuda is here." The guard laughed.

Yehuda refused to move. He was so insistent that finally the guard went to Lev and told him about the beggar.

"He says he's Yehuda, your childhood friend. He will not go away and wishes to speak to you."

Lev thought for a moment. "If he comes in, and we speak together, my heart will become soft and I will give him money. I might then get carried away and give half of my possessions to Yehuda. And then I will become poor once again. Look at what happened to him: he was foolish enough to give me half of everything he had, and now look how poor he is. No, I must not risk it."

"Send him away," demanded Lev.

The guard returned to the gate. "My master does not know you."

Yehuda could not believe it. "There must be a mistake. We are brothers." He wept outside the gate. Weak from his journey, from the pangs of hunger, he sat with a broken heart.

"I refuse to die here at his gate. It will bring him dishonor." With Yehuda's last ounce of energy, he dragged himself away, fell into the street, and died.

A few months later, Lev became sick and he died.

Now, the souls of both men came together before God Almighty, ready to be judged.

It was decreed that Yehuda would go to heaven. And Lev would go to hell.

But Yehuda cried out, "I cannot go to heaven without my brother, Lev. Let me go to hell with him, rather than remain in heaven alone."

But God Almighty said, "This is the decree. But if you do not agree with this judgment, then you be the judge. You decide what should be done with your two souls."

Yehuda responded, "It is not right to condemn my brother. Surely there must have been a mistake when he refused to allow me into his home. Perhaps the guard had mixed up the message. Almighty God, send both of our souls back to earth. Let me be born into poverty and let him be a wealthy man. I will come to him again, begging for bread. This time he will do the right thing."

And so it was.

They were born again. Yehuda was born poor, and Lev was born rich. When they grew into adulthood, the poor man approached a magnificent house. He thought, "I will knock on the door, ask to see the master, and beg for bread."

And so he did. As he approached the door, the rich man opened it. The poor man said, "I am starving, please, give me a crust of bread."

The rich man looked at the beggar and laughed in his face. Every person here knows that I do not give alms. You are foolish to beg from me.”

But the poor man—who did not know that he was actually Yehuda and did not know that the rich man was actually Lev—began to beg with all the passion of his soul, as if his life depended on this crust of bread.

He fell on his knees, and his eyes were wild. “Do not send me away empty-handed. Do not let me starve!”

The rich man became angry. “Go away!” he shouted. But the poor man would not leave. Their faces came close together, and for an instant they saw into each other’s eyes.

“Give me bread!” cried the poor man with his last breath. The rich man slapped him across the face.

The poor man was so weak from hunger, and his life hung by a thread. The blow to his face snapped the thread in two. He fell down, lifeless.

The Baal Shem Tov finished talking. He looked at his visitor again. “You have nothing to ask of me?”

The wealthy man could hardly breathe. “I am that man in your story, that wealthy man who refused to give the poor man a scrap of bread. Rabbi, what shall I do?”

The rabbi looked at him kindly. “You must take all of your possessions and sell them for gold. And then take all of your gold and walk along the road. Whenever you meet a poor person, or someone in need, say to yourself that he is a family member of your dead friend. Give away all the gold that you possess to the great family of poor people that your friend has left in this world. And when you have given away everything, beg from other people. And give what is given to you to those who are more needy than yourself. Give, and love those to whom you are giving.

The rich man listened to the rabbi. And then he went out and began walking along the road.

We come together to begin the Jewish year, 5784. We reflect on who we are and who we want to become. How we have hurt others and how we have fallen short of becoming our best selves.

In our story, I was most curious about Lev’s fear. He knew the sting of poverty and hunger, and rightly or wrongly he was prepared to do anything to avoid it again. We live in a different world, but as we enter this new year of possibility, we too bring our insecurities—heavy or manageable, deeply rooted or superficial.

We can chastise Lev for not being more generous, for failing to understand that his wealth was so great that it should be shared with others, but I am also sympathetic to his fear—of losing his

livelihood once again, of watching his life circumstances change overnight, of becoming powerless.

As we all know, life is unpredictable. Unexplained symptoms lead to a devastating medical diagnosis. The death of a loved one leaves a gaping hole. Stress at work permeates all areas of our lives. Children and teenagers, as wonderful as they are, add additional burden. We fight with a spouse and consider, or follow through with, divorce. We can't make ends meet, or are stuck in debt, and worry what comes next. We are ashamed or frustrated or angry. These feelings vary, of course, and can be more or less pronounced depending on a myriad of circumstances.

While the precarious nature of life is existential, our society deepens our insecurities. Incessant advertisements tell us we need to buy more. Happiness will come when we lose 15 pounds. And so we compete, we consume, we worry about status. Are we wealthy enough, talented enough, successful enough, beautiful enough? Have we ensured that our friends on Facebook or Instagram know it?

We know we should wave away these concerns and reassure ourselves that these things don't matter. But like Lev in our story, we can become trapped in a beautiful house, imprisoned by our riches. We need not be wealthy to get stuck in these insecurities. Indeed, the less we have, the smaller a safety net we can count on. Economic inequality—with the soaring cost of housing, lack of affordable health care, and crumbling public schools—deserves much blame.

As we usher in the new year, we take time over these holidays to struggle with these questions. How can we cultivate a sense of generosity by sharing our wealth and sharing our spirit? How can we keep our worries at bay so we are fully present to our families and friends and coworkers? How can we turn our focus to what is truly important, with less focus on material or superficial items and more on relationships and communities?

There are no simple answers. There are no shortcuts to teshuvah. To address the complexity that these questions raise requires a much more subtle and long-term approach. It requires deep introspection, but also real conversation with the people impacted by our actions. It means rebuilding our society, because trust and concern for the common good have largely been eviscerated.

We do not need to dwell in an isolated, competitive society forever. We can prioritize mutual support for others. We can create and cultivate strong communities and fight for a stronger safety net. We can work together so we feel less alone, and so that we are less vulnerable. And so that our neighbors are less alone, and so that they are less vulnerable.

As we begin this time of teshuvah, let us empathize with Lev, the man who became trapped by his insecurities, who could not manage his fear—so much so that he failed his dear friend and loved ones.

And then let us consider: Lev is not the person whom we want to be.

Instead, let us be brave. Let us be vulnerable.

Let us do the deep introspection necessary so that we can choose a different path, so that we can care for ourselves, our friends, and our families.

Let us join together with others so that we can build a world based on respect and deep care for others, one which is rooted in cooperation and solidarity.

Ken yehi ratzon. Let it be.

Wishing you a *shanah tovah umetukah*, a sweet new year.