

## **A Breath of Fresh Air**

**Rosh Hashanah Family Service, 5781**

**by Rabbi Sarah Weissman**

Once upon a time in a small village, a poor man lived with his mother, his wife and his six children in a little one-room hut. Because they were so crowded, the man and his wife often argued. The children were noisy, and they fought. The hut was full of crying and quarreling. One day, when the man couldn't stand it anymore, he ran to the Rabbi for advice.

"Holy Rabbi," he cried, "please help me! We are so poor that my mother, my wife, my six children, and I all live together in one small hut. We are too crowded, and there's so much noise. Help me, Rabbi. I'll do whatever you say."

The Rabbi thought and pulled on his beard. At last he said, "Tell me, do you have any animals, perhaps a chicken or two?"

"Yes," said the man. "I do have a few chickens, also a rooster and a goose."

"Ah, fine," said the Rabbi. "Now go home and take the chickens, the rooster, and the goose into your house to live with you."

"Yes, Rabbi," said the man, though he was a bit surprised.

The poor man hurried home and took the chickens, the rooster, and the goose out of the shed and into his little hut.

When a week had gone by, life in the hut was worse than before. Now with the quarreling and crying there was honking, crowing, and clucking. There were feathers in the soup. The house stayed just as small and the children grew bigger. When the man couldn't stand it any longer, he again ran to the Rabbi for help.

“Holy Rabbi,” he cried, “see what has happened to me! Now with the crying and quarreling, there’s the honking, clucking, and crowing. There are feathers in the soup! Help me, please.”

The Rabbi listened and thought. At last he said, “Tell me, do you happen to have a goat?”

“Oh, yes, I do have an old goat, but he’s not worth much.”

“Excellent,” said the Rabbi. “Now go home and take the old goat into your hut to live with you.”

“Oh, no! Do you really mean it, Rabbi?” cried the man.

“Trust me, and do as I say at once,” said the Rabbi.

The poor man tramped back home and took the goat into his hut. When another week had gone by, life in the little hut was much worse. Now, with the crying, quarreling, clucking, honking, and crowing, the goat went wild, pushing and butting everyone with his horns. The hut seemed smaller, the children grew bigger. So the man ran again to the Rabbi.

“Holy Rabbi, help me!” he screamed. “Now the goat is running wild. My life is a nightmare.”

The Rabbi listened and thought. At last he said, “Is it possible that you have a cow? Young or old doesn’t matter.”

“Yes, Rabbi, it’s true I have a cow,” said the poor man fearfully.

“Go home then,” said the Rabbi, “and take the cow into your hut.”

“Oh, no, surely not, Rabbi!” cried the man.

“Do it at once,” said the Rabbi.

The man trudged home with a heavy heart and took the cow into his hut. Is the Rabbi crazy? he thought.

When another week had gone by, life in the hut was very much worse than before.

Everyone quarreled, even the chickens. The goat ran wild. The cow trampled everything. There were still feathers in the soup. So the man ran to the Rabbi for help yet again.

“Holy Rabbi,” he shrieked, “help me, save me! The cow is trampling everything. There is no room even to breathe. It’s worse than a nightmare!”

The Rabbi listened and thought. At last he said, “Go home now, and let the animals out of your hut.”

“I will, I will, I’ll do it right away,” said the man.

So he hurried home and let the cow, the goat, the chickens, the goose, and the rooster out of his little hut.

That night the poor man and all his family slept peacefully. There was no crowing, no clucking, no honking. There was plenty of room to breathe.

The very next day the poor man ran back to the Rabbi.

“Holy Rabbi,” he cried, “you have made life sweet for me. With just my family in the hut, it’s so quiet, so roomy, so peaceful... Thank you!”

And the Rabbi smiled and said, “It was nothing.”

This has always been one of my favorite Jewish folktales, but it’s taken on a new relevance in recent months. So many of us working and learning and playing at home, all day, every day. I don’t have any farm animals, but I do live with a *vilde chaye*, a wild animal, in the form of my four-year old son. Every day, our house seems smaller and

fuller and noisier. And just when we thought it couldn't get worse, the terrible wildfires came and made going outside unpleasant or even impossible for what seemed like an eternity. It wasn't pretty in the Weissman house, I will tell you that.

But then, the wind came, and a little bit of rain, and we saw that the sky was blue again. We played outside and took some deep breaths and all of a sudden, our homes weren't quite so small and our lives weren't quite so difficult. Now, living through a pandemic seems downright manageable, as long as we can breathe the air and let the animals out of the house occasionally. [And even though the smoke has returned, we can remind ourselves that the blue skies and clean air are bound to reappear again.] That's one of the lessons of the story: sometimes, all we need in order to cope with a challenging situation is a change in perspective. Circumstances that feel overwhelming and suffocating in one moment can feel bearable or even wonderful when we look at them from a different angle. Another lesson of the story is: always listen to your rabbis.

So on this first day of a new year, may we find new perspectives and new things to be grateful for, even in the midst of the world's troubles. And may this year bring with it health, love, and happiness to all of our homes, no matter how noisy and crowded they are.