



Oyb Nisht Nokh Hekher (*If Not Higher*)

During the Days of Awe, we take the time to reflect on the year that passed and commit to turning to change in the year to come. The act of change is both personal and communal. There are many ways to take stock of who we are and how we have changed over the course of the year. One of those is to come back to the same story you hear, year after year, and consciously reflect on what the story means to you in this moment, this year.

These offerings are designed to support personal and communal reflection, either on your own with family and friends, or on zoom with the greater Workers Circle Community.

Here are a few potential ways to interact with this story, this year. They are designed for our whole community, for folks who have never heard this story before to those who have heard it every year for decades.

All the offerings during the days of awe are meant to be access points. Please feel free to adapt to suit your needs, and then please reach out to Workers Circle to share what you did, as we may want to include it as an option for the whole community next year.

Draw a Picture	Choose a scene from the story you want to illustrate. Explain why you chose that scene and what it means to you.
Rewrite the story for today	What would “oyb nisht nokh hekher” look like today?
Journal Write	After reading/hearing the story, what stood out to you this year. If this was not your first time reading this story, had you noticed that part before? What do you think was different this time?
Discussion Questions	Why do you think the traveler wanted to disprove the villagers? What was his purpose?
	Why does it mean to go “higher than heaven? What does this say about Jewish Values?

Quote Focus

Anthropologist Margaret Mead was asked by a student what she considered to be the first sign of civilization in a culture. Mead said that the first sign of civilization in an ancient culture was a femur (thighbone) that had been broken and then healed. Mead explained that in the animal kingdom, if you break your leg, you die. You cannot run from danger, get to the river for a drink or hunt for food. You are meat for prowling beasts. No animal survives a broken leg long enough for the bone to heal. broken femur that has healed is evidence that someone has taken time to stay with the one who fell, has bound up the wound, has carried the person to safety and has tended the person through recovery. Helping someone else through difficulty is where civilization starts. We are at our best when we serve others. Be civilized.

— Ira Byock, *The Best Care Possible: A Physician's Quest to Transform Care Through the End of Life* (Avery, 2012)

Oyb Nisht Nokh Hekher (*If Not Higher*)
(a short version of a story by I. L. Peretz)

And every year, just before the Days of Awe, the High Holy Days, the rabbi of Nemirov would vanish. He was not in the shul, nor in the study house, nor at home. Where can the rabbi be?

Un der nemirover flegt slikhes-tsayt yedn frimorgn nelm vern, farshvindn! Men flegt im nisht zen in ergets: nisht in shul, nisht in beyde bote-medroshim, nisht bay a minyen, un in der heym avade un avade nisht.... Vu ken zayn der rebe?

The people believed that the rabbi, so good was he, ascended to heaven to plead with God for the good health and fortune of the town's Jews in the year to come.

One day, a traveler came to Nemirov at this time of year. He heard the story of the rabbi disappearing and ascending to heaven, and was full of doubt. The doubting traveler quoted a passage of the Gemorah,

which said that even Moses did not ascend to heaven, but remained suspended two and a half feet below.

The traveler decided to follow the rabbi in secret to disprove the villagers. He hid near the rabbi's home, and in the earliest hour, before even the baker arose, the traveler saw the rabbi leave his house, dressed in tattered old clothes and carrying an ax. The rabbi walked for two hours until he came to a stand of trees. He took out his ax, chopped trees into small logs, tied them together with rope, and walked back toward town.

On the outskirts of town, the rabbi stopped at a beaten down house, half-hidden behind a stone ledge. He knocked on the door. "I have extra wood, my friend," said the rabbi. "Ah, dear woodcutter," replied the woman, "I am a poor widow with nothing to pay you." "It doesn't matter," said the rabbi. "Already it has gotten cold, and you will need a warm fire to heat your home." "Thank you, dear woodcutter. But I cannot even bend down to kindle the fire today, for I am ill." "I shall do it for you," said the rabbi. He laid the wood, struck a match, and as the flames spread their warmth through the house, he quietly said the Penitential Prayers that preceded Rosh Hashonah. The woman, hard of hearing, could not make sense of the rabbi's words, but the traveler could hear them from his hiding place outside the window.

So impressed was he that the doubting traveler moved to the village and became a follower of the rabbi of Nemirov. And ever after, when a follower of the rabbi tells how the rabbi ascends to heaven, the traveler quietly adds, "If not higher!"

Un shpeter, oyb a khosid hot amol dertseylt, az der nemirover hoybt zikh oyf, slikhes-tsayt, yedn frimorgn, un flit aroyf in himl arayn, flegt shoyn der litvak nisht lakhn, nor tsugebn shtilerheyt: "Oyb nisht nokh hekher!"