

FOLKTALE

BWC | DAYS OF AWE | 9

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. 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.

During the Days of Awe, we make a very big commitment to turn and change. The act of change is both personal and communal. 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.
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	Did Reb Meyer change at the end of the story? How do you know?
	What does it mean to bring your “whole self” to your work? What makes it so difficult to do all the time? How can you remind yourself to bring your whole self when it is important?
Quote Focus	“You have to act as if it were possible to radically transform the world. And you have to do it all the time.”

Yussel's Prayer

(adapted from Barbara Cohen's retelling of a Yom Kippur story)

In a small town in Poland, Yom Kippur was beginning. Everyone was on their way to temple, where they would fast and pray all day.

Actually, one person was not going to shul, Yussel, the orphan boy who worked in Reb Meyer's dairy barn. He had never been taught anything, but he did know that this was a special day. Yussel stood in the courtyard, waiting for Reb Meyer, who came out with his sons, wearing long black coats and large fur hats.

Yussel tugged at Reb Meyer's sleeve and asked him, "Please, may I go to shul and pray with everyone else?" "No," replied Reb Meyer. "The cows must be tended. They don't know it's Yom Kippur. Besides, what good would it do you to go to shul? You can't read, so how could you pray?"

So Yussel went off to the barn. He picked up his reed pipe and played so the cows would follow him to the river. Yussel didn't stop at the kitchen to beg a piece of black bread from the cook as usual. If he couldn't pray, at least he could fast.

Reb Meyer and his sons, wealthy leaders of the community, sat in seats of honor by the eastern wall of the synagogue. Reb Meyer spoke the words of the prayers, but wasn't really concentrating. His mind was on his business. "If I can buy a thousand bushels of grain in Lublin next week, I can store it in my barns until deep winter sets in, and then sell it at a great profit."

Reb Meyer's oldest son also mouthed the words, but was daydreaming about asking his father to allow him to visit Warsaw. He thought to himself, "What a boring town this is. It will be so exciting to visit the theaters and restaurants of Warsaw."

All day Reb Meyer and his sons prayed and fasted, along with the whole congregation. The day seemed endless. There were many times when instead of praying for forgiveness of their sins, Reb Meyer and his sons prayed only for darkness.

When they saw the sun sinking in the west, they were sure that the closing prayers were near so they would be finished. But the rabbi kept up his prayers. Reb Meyer began to think that if the rabbi didn't start the closing Ne'lah prayer in two minutes, he would leave anyway.

Yussel also had a long day in the pasture. His cows ate and drank, but Yussel didn't even touch water to his lips. When the sun sank in the west, he picked up his reed pipe and cried out, "O God. I don't know any prayers. But I do know how to play the pipe. Since I can't give you my words, I give you this tune instead." On his pipe, Yussel played a song he made up, stemming from deep inside him.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=be1jCH32OU>

He felt at peace with the earth, the stars, and the animals. Most of all, he felt at peace with himself.

At that very moment, the rabbi began to chant the Ne'lah prayers, asking God to seal the people in the Book of Life. He picked up the shofar and blew a long blast echoing far out into the streets of the town. Yom Kippur was over.

Reb Meyer went to the rabbi and wished him L'shone toyve, Happy New Year. "I have a question, Rabbi," Reb Meyer said. "Why did you wait so long to begin Ne'lah and bring Yom Kippur to an end?" The rabbi replied, "I had a vision. In my vision I saw that the gates of heaven were closed. Our prayers weren't reaching God. They were not acceptable to him."

"Why?" asked Reb Meyer. The rabbi shrugged. "I'm not sure," he said. "I think because they didn't come from the heart. And how could I end Yom Kippur when I felt that God wouldn't grant us forgiveness and mercy because he hadn't heard us ask for it?"

"But then you did," Reb Meyer said, "you did end Yom Kippur." The rabbi nodded. "I had another vision. I heard a melody, a simple melody played on a reed pipe. I saw the gates of heaven open up. All our prayers went in to God, because he had opened the gates to admit that melody."

"But why?" asked Reb Meyer. "Why just a tune on a reed pipe and not all the holy words we were saying?"

"Because," said the rabbi, "whoever sent that melody sent it with his whole heart. It was a true prayer."

Reb Meyer left the shul, with his head down and eyes thoughtful. On his way home he met Yussel, coming back from the pasture with the cows. By the light of the moon that shone above them, Reb Meyer saw the little reed pipe in Yussel's hand.

"L'shone toyve, Yussel," said Reb Meyer.

"L'shone toyve, Reb Meyer," Yussel replied. He could hardly believe that this important man was wishing him a happy new year.

"Will you come into my house, Yussel?" asked Reb Meyer. "Will you break the fast with me and my family?"

"Father!" exclaimed Reb Meyer's eldest son. "He's so dirty and so ragged. How can you let him in the house?"

"Very easily," spoke Reb Meyer. "Through the front door." He put his arm around Yussel's shoulders. Together they walked up the moonlit street, all of Reb Meyer's sons and all of Yussel's cows trailing behind.