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Tifereth Israel Synagogue
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THE PRINCE WHO THOUGHT HE WAS A ROOSTER

Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav shared the following story with his *chassidim*:

There was once a king and queen who had a son who was the apple of their eye. Nothing was spared this boy, the greatest shirts and tailors and teachers, so that one day he would be a fine king.

But one day something happened to that boy just as he was becoming a man. He woke up one morning and he thought he was a rooster.

He took off all his clothes, he got under the table, ate crumbs off the floor, flapped his arms like wings, and crowed. It was a disaster.

The King tried everything, healers, doctors, wise men, and advisers. No one could help until one day, an old man with a long beard came to see the King and he said, "Let me have a week with your son, I think I can help."

The King was grateful for any advice, so the old man was brought into the banquet hall where the Prince was under the table, and the door

was closed behind him.

The first thing the old man did was take off all his clothes and get under the table with the Prince. He put his arms out like wings, went around crowing and eating food off the floor. The Prince looked up and said, "Who are you?" The old man answered, "I'm a rooster, who are you?" And the Prince said, "I'm a rooster too."

He was so thrilled to have a bit of company, and they just pecked at crumbs, flapped, and crowed.

The next day the old man got up, put some clothes on, and went back under the table. The Prince looked and asked, "What are you doing? Roosters don't wear clothes."

The old man said, "That's true, but I was cold, and just because I'm wearing clothes doesn't mean I'm not a rooster". The Prince was a little cold too, so he put on his clothes.

The next day the old man was walking around the room. "What are you doing? asked the Prince. "Roosters don't walk like that."

"That's true," said the old man, "but my back was sore, and just because I'm walking like this doesn't mean I'm not a rooster."

The next day they ate fine food at the table with a knife and fork, and by the end of the week they were dressed in fine noblemen's clothes,

sitting at the table, eating beautiful food, and discussing ways of running a kingdom, justice, ethics, and philosophy.

Halfway through the conversation the young boy asked, “But what are we doing? Roosters don’t talk like this.” The old man said, “It’s true, but I’m enjoying the conversation and just because we talk like this doesn’t mean we’re not roosters.”

And so at the end of that day, the old man stood up and he said to the Prince, “I’m going to leave you now. But let me leave you with a little advice: out there in the world there are a lot of enemies of roosters. Take my advice, don’t tell anyone that you’re a rooster.”

The Prince became a wonderful King and no one ever knew that he was really a rooster.

(<http://www.castlemaineindependent.org/2012/10/fiction-month-prince-thought-rooster/>)

It’s a wonderful story, don’t you agree? But as with so many wonderful stories, it is enigmatic. What exactly was the lesson that the *Bratslaver* taught his *chassidim* and what did he want us to learn? Tonight we’ll explore some possibilities.

“The Prince who thought he was a Rooster” is, first of all, a story about teaching and educating. What is the best way to teach people, adults

and children alike, spiritual values and ethical living? It is not by lecturing, condemning, or ridiculing, or by reading “how to,” books, or scouring the internet, or – God forbid - watching reality T.V. It is rather by accepting people as they are and then lifting them up by encouraging and modeling *menschlich* behavior.

On Rosh Hashana, as a prelude to the Binding of Isaac, we read that Sarah demanded that Abraham expel Hagar and Ishmael because Ishmael was mocking Isaac. After Abraham reluctantly banished Hagar and Ishmael, Hagar weeps and says,

אֶל-אֲרָאָה בְּמוֹת הַיֶּלֶד וַתָּשֶׁב מִנִּגְדּוֹ וַתִּשָּׂא אֶת-קִלְעָהּ וַתִּבְדֹּךְ

“‘Let me not look on as the child dies.’ And sitting thus afar, she burst into tears.” (Gen. 21:16)

An angel calls to Hagar,

אֶל-תִּירְאִי כִּי-שָׁמַע אֱלֹקִים אֶל-קוֹל הַנְּעָר בְּאֶשֶׁר הוּא-שָׁם

“Fear not, for God has heeded the cry of the boy where he is.” (Gen. 21:17)

Many commentators note that God does not condemn Ishmael because he mocked Isaac, or his judge him on his future actions as the progenitor of perennial enemies of Israel, but rather accepts Ishmael as

who he was at the moment, a frightened and hungry child cast out into the wilderness.

The next line of the story tell us how Gpd deals with him. The angel of God says to Hagar,

וְהִנֵּיקי אֶת־יְדֵי בֹן

“Come, lift up the boy and hold him by the hand.” What is the best way to help Ishmael? Not by lecturing him on his misdeeds but rather but by gently lifting him up from where he was. God taught Hagar and Ishmael how to be caring and compassionate by showing them care and compassion.

You have probably never heard of am Illinois teacher by the name of Mentor Graham. One day a youthful giant walked into his classroom. Mentor recognized the young man as someone new to the neighborhood who had already gotten into fights with some of the local boys. Instead of warning the muscled and ignorant youth not to start trouble in his classroom, the teacher offered to help him read and lent him some of his books. Slowly, the boy gave up his life of violence and became an incredible intellect and scholar. Although I am sure most of us have never heard of this wise and thoughtful teacher, Mentor Graham, who gently encouraged his student to see life in a new way, we have all heard of his

student: President Abraham Lincoln.

One of the best ways of lifting up the people around us and helping them see the world differently is through the example of our own lives. We can't expect others to be kind and generous unless we are kind and generous. We can't expect others to be helpful unless we are helpful. We can't expect others to want to heal the world unless we heal the world. We can't expect others to be *menschen* unless we are *menschen* ourselves.

This is how the wise man helped the Prince. He accepted him "where he was" and through his gentle example, helped him learn civil and regal behavior.

Then again, perhaps "The Prince who thought he was a Rooster" may not be a story about education but rather a subversive warning against conformity, about the way society attempts to reign in individualism and force those who are unconventional or go against the grain to toe the line.

Henry David Thoreau wrote in "Walden,": "If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away. It is not important that he should mature as soon as an apple tree

or an oak. Shall he turn his spring into summer?”

What if the Prince in the story didn't want to become a king? What if he rejected the pomp, circumstance, power, and responsibility, and preferred instead, the simple life of a barnyard animal? Why does everyone need to be what society expects them to be, especially if they are causing no harm? If people have their own dreams and ambitions and way of looking at the world, who are we to judge or tell them they are wrong or to try to change them?

The writer George Orwell warned of the dangers of forced conformity in his great novel “1984.” In Orwell's world, everything was controlled by Big Brother's decrees and everyone had to act in accordance with the government's demands. The authorities watched everything, dictated what people were allowed to say, and even what they were allowed to think. “Thoughtcrime” was the worst of all crimes. Not a single one of us would tolerate living in Orwell's world.

Some of the world's most famous innovators refused to follow in anyone's footsteps and instead, took a less traveled path. Perhaps, or more likely, it was because of their idiosyncracies that they were so creative. Galileo's theories about the solar system, for example, flew in the face of the church and the conventional science of the day. Albert Einstein

did not fit comfortably into any mold, nor did Thomas Edison, or Baruch Spinoza, nor does anyone else who dares to see the world in a different way.

Dr. Barry Marshall is an Australian physician who, along with his colleague Dr. Robin Warren, theorized around 1984 that stomach ulcers were caused by bacteria. The medical establishment at the time ridiculed them because the universally accepted science of the day was that bacteria could not grow in the stomach and that stomach ulcers were caused by stress.

Marshall drank a bacteria-filled concoction and soon became ill.

Marshall said, "I didn't actually develop an ulcer, but I did prove that a healthy person could be infected by these bacteria, and that was an advance because the skeptics were saying that people with ulcers somehow had a weakened immune system and that the bacteria were infecting them after the event."

(http://www.nbcnews.com/id/9576387/ns/health-health_care/t/two-australia-ns-win-nobel-prize-medicine/#.Uh-E6BvWT4Y)

After enduring about a decade of resistance and bashing from the scientific community, continued experimentation proved that Marshall and Warren were right. Patients with ulcers are now treated with antibiotics and

cured. For their efforts and innovative thinking, Marshall and Warren were awarded the Nobel Prize for their discovery in 2005.

Without their willingness to go against the grain and fight conventional wisdom, such an important discovery would have never been made.

Do we have the right, or even desire to stifle individuality and creativity? Is it in society's best interest to force people into a mold? Would we ourselves want to live in an Orwellian world? As songwriter and wit Alan Sherman once said, "A 'Normal' person is the sort of person that might be designed by a committee. You know, each person puts in a pretty color and it comes out gray."

The Wise Man thought he was doing the Prince a favor, but what he really might have done was force the Prince's behavior to conform to what his parents and society demanded, even though deep inside the Prince wanted to be someone else. In the end, the King and Queen were happy, but was the Prince?

But what if the Rooster Prince was not a brave nonconformist but mentally ill? It's one thing to defy convention by saying the world is round instead of flat. It's quite another to strut around your kitchen naked, flapping

your wings, pecking at crumbs that fall to the ground, and crowing at the sunrise.

According to one of our resident psychologists, Dr. Michael Mantell: “In some cases of paranoia, the approach of the Wise Man is not far off. The Wise Man sided with the irrational, perhaps psychotic thought patterns of the boy. Rather than butting up against likely resistance, he rolled with potential resistance and gained the boy’s ‘trust.’ So the boy still believes he may be a rooster but is able to live appropriately and behave well. Creative to say the least, and it may leave the door open to further discussion leading the boy to question, dispute, and challenge the notion that he’s a rooster.

“Tackling the resistance head-on would not lead to this possibility. Then again, today the boy would be heavily medicated and stopped from acting like a rooster, while possibly continuing to believe he may be one.”

Mental illness frightens all of us. It is a phenomenon that we do not understand. We don’t understand the thought processes of the mentally ill or what they want from us. We don’t know to respond or interact with them. Do we try to have a normal relationship with them, do we humor the mentally ill by pretending that their illusions are real, or should we walk away and not deal with them at all? All mental illness is not the same, so it

is impossible to create a hard and fast rule.

Most of us do not understand the effect that medications have on the mentally ill, or how challenging it is for them to conform to the strict regimen their medications demand.

According to Agnes Hatfield, one of the founders of the National Alliance on Mental Illness: “It is understandably difficult for people to continue to do something to themselves that produces discomfort. Medications used to treat mental illness are known to have an array of potentially unpleasant side effects. They range from restlessness and pacing to excessive sedation, tremor, dry mouth, constipation, impotence, weight gain, missed menstrual cycles, and many others.”

<http://www.schizophrenia.com/newsletter/997/997noncom.htm>

It is very difficult to cure mental illness. Therapy and medication can help the mentally ill behave more normally, but inside they may still be roosters and suffering, as are their loved ones and friends who stand by helplessly.

Or, perhaps “The Prince who thought he was a Rooster” is not a story about individual human beings at all, but rather an allegory about the Jewish People.

In 1869 Yehuda Leib Gordon wrote a poem in early modern Hebrew entitled "*Hakitsah 'ami*," which means "Awake my People." Gordon was a leader of the Russian *Haskalah*, the Enlightenment Movement. According to Rabbi Louis Jacobs: "Haskalah, "[the] Enlightenment,"[is] the movement which originated in eighteenth-century Germany with the aim of broadening the intellectual and social horizons of the Jews to enable them to take their place in Western society."

Supporters of the *Haskalah* urged Jews to move out of the ghetto and to integrate intellectually and socially in to the broader society around them.

Here, in part, is Gordon's poem:

Awake, my people, how long will you sleep?
For the night is over, the sun has shone
Awake, and look with your eyes hither and thither
Please acknowledge your time and place.

The land in which we are born and now live
Is now considered a part of Europe!
Europe may be a small particle in the world,
Yet its wisdom is superior to all others.

This paradise has now welcomed you,
Its sons call us now "our brethren"
How long can you live amongst them as an outsider
Why will you stride against their course?

So contribute to your country's treasuries
And share its assets enjoy its yield
Be a man on the street, and a Jew at home.

Supporters of the *Haskalah* urged Jews to “Be a man on the street and a Jew at home.” In order to fit into broader society, Jews were told to leave that which was distinctively Jewish at home, and on the outside, look and act like everyone else. (This is clearly a time before multiculturalism became a buzzword.) Leaders of the Enlightenment told Jews to drop their distinctive language, dress, and intellectual outlook when interfacing with the larger culture around them. *Yarmulkes* and *Yiddish* should be reserved for use only when you were with your fellow Jews.

Perhaps this is what the story of “The Prince who thought he was a Rooster” is really about. It is a story telling Jews to conform to societal norms on the outside while preserving *Yiddishkeit* at home, to leave their ghettoed existence and become members of the larger world.

This is a message that most Jews have embraced lustfully, even if they have never heard the story. Even the ultra-Orthodox Jews that live in Meah Shearim or New Square, New York cannot escape modern secular society. However, most Jews only embrace half of the story, the need to act like everyone else in public. They forget the other half, the importance of maintaining Judaism and Jewish life and culture within their home.

However, if this is a story about “being a man on the street and a Jew at home” then the Wise Man’s final warning to the Prince doesn’t make

sense: “Out there in the world there are a lot of enemies of roosters. Take my advice, don’t tell anyone that you’re a rooster.”

“Don’t tell anyone that you’re a rooster.” That doesn’t sound so enlightened to me. It sounds instead like a warning, like something that might have been said to Marranos, the hidden Jews of Medieval Spain, who publicly adopted Christianity in order to save their lives but continued to practice Judaism behind closed doors.

If this story is an allegory for Jews, then perhaps it is warning for us to keep our Judaism low key, secret, and quiet, because there are a lot of anti-Semites out there. We need to act like our non-Jewish neighbors, not to integrate into their society, but to protect ourselves from their wrath. We need to be private and secretive and careful about revealing our true identities.

A few weeks ago, Judy and my daughters were at an upscale vegan restaurant in Los Angeles. The people at the table next to them struck up a conversation. One of the women asked point blank: “Are you Jewish? I’m Jewish!” Her husband sat quietly.

It soon became apparent why the woman was so open and forthright. She told Judy that she was a convert to Judaism and proud of it. Even today in the United States, where there is much less anti-Semitism than

there is in Europe and the Middle East, born-Jews are much more circumspect. They raise their antennae and listen carefully to their “Jew-dar” while dropping words such as “shlep” or “bubbe” or “Temple,” and waiting to see the response.

“The Prince who thought he was a Rooster” may be a story warning us that anti-Semitism still exists, to be wary of our place in the world, and to hide our Jewishness until we feel we are safe.

So, in the end, what is this story about? Is it about education? Conformity? Mental illness? Being a Jew in your home and a *mensch* on the street? Is it about anti-Semitism?

I don’t know. Perhaps it is about all of the above or none of the above. “The Prince who thought he was a Rooster” is open to a myriad of interpretations. That’s what makes it such a powerful story. Tonight we have only scratched the surface.

There is, however, an aspect of the story that I find deeply troubling. In the end, the boy acts like a prince and later a king, but he is still a rooster inside. Is it really possible to live a full, happy, engaged, and guilt-free life when your inner soul does not match your outer existence, when you say or do one thing, but believe another? Can a person live happily

when everyone on the outside thinks you're a *mensch*, but deep down inside you know that you're really a rooster?

These are the questions I want you to think about when you leave here tonight, to be continued tomorrow morning.