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THE MIRROR



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Story adapted from “The Mirror” by Chana Zuber Scharfstein; from *The Call of the Shofar*, edited by Nissan Mindel, Kehot Publication Society.

Many years ago, in a small town in Ashkenaz, there lived a man called Abraham. He owned a small store and he earned just enough money to take care of his family. He was not a rich man, but he also was not poor like so many people were in those days. Abraham was happy with his life. Though he was not rich, he always had enough to share with others. No visitor of his ever left hungry and no poor person ever left empty-handed.

Abraham and his wife lived a very simple life. Their home was small. But it was a real home. It was a warm and happy place. Everyone felt comfortable and relaxed there. Abraham had many visitors because everyone knew that he was kind and liked to be helpful.

One day Abraham was standing in the doorway of his little store waiting for customers. Noticing a stranger coming inside, Abraham asked him how he could help. The man looked tired. “Maybe you would like to come to my home and rest awhile?” Abraham said to him. “If you are hungry, be my

guest. If you are thirsty, come with me for something to drink.” Abraham's invitation was so warm and friendly that the stranger decided to come into his house for a rest.

What Abraham did not know was that this was no ordinary stranger. This was a very holy, wise and famous rebbe from a town far away. He was on his way to a wedding and happened to pass through Abraham's town. The rebbe was an important man and many people in Ashkenaz traveled long distances to listen to his words of wisdom, or to ask for a blessing or prayer in time of need.

The rebbe soon noticed Abraham's kindness and generosity. He knew many well-off people who could have helped him more easily than Abraham, but who did much less. Before he left, he blessed Abraham with prosperity, so that he should be able to continue helping the needy and downtrodden.

Not long after the Rebbe's departure, Abraham's store became very busy. All day long customers were coming in and no longer did people leave to shop somewhere else. Soon Abraham had to make his store larger to fit all his new customers and merchandise. Years passed and Abraham became very important and prosperous. The Rebbe's blessing had come to pass.

Unfortunately, now that Abraham had a big store, there was a lot more work for him to do. For the first time he found himself worrying about thieves and robbers. He worried about his business and whether it would grow enough for him to build his family a new house. But at the same time, because Abraham was so busy with his business, he found less and less time for his family, friends and synagogue. He no longer had time to invite in poor travelers and could now be seen by appointment only.

What little free time Abraham and his wife had was devoted to building a new house, a house much larger and fancier than the old one. This new house had many rooms, and each of them was large and beautiful. On the windows hung soft velvet drapes. The floors were covered with thick rugs.

There were lots of fine dishes in the cabinets. All the furniture was made by hand. The walls were each painted a different color and some were clothed in custom wallpaper. And on one wall in the living room there hung Abraham's favorite possession: a huge mirror surrounded by an exquisitely carved frame, covered in gold leaf. For its time, the mirror was a masterpiece and Abraham came to spend hours admiring it.

But something else -- something less good -- happened after Abraham got his mirror. He began spending more time looking in it than at it. That's when he really began to change.

"Abraham is a different person now," people would say. "He no longer cares about us. He was always so kind and good, and now look at him. He has no time for any of us any more. He only has time for himself."

Sadly they would shake their heads and remember the good old times.

Hundreds of miles away, the great Rebbe heard about the change and decided to pay Abraham a visit. When after a long journey, the Rebbe arrived, Abraham welcomed him warmly and invited him into his home.

The house looked very different from the home that Abraham had lived in when the Rebbe first visited him. It was big and beautiful, but gone was the friendliness and warmth one had felt in the simple, old home. The Rebbe walked on the heavy rug. He saw the fancy paintings. He looked at the expensive, new furniture, and at the drapes made of velvet. And then he noticed the mirror. He looked at its shiny gold frame. It was the grandest mirror he had ever seen.

"Quite a change is it not?," said Abraham with a pleased smile on his face.

"And that mirror," he continued, "is my favorite treasure. Of all the lovely things I own, I like that mirror the best. It is truly a masterpiece, a work of art, is it not?," he said, turning to the Rebbe.

"Yes," the Rebbe answered. "Quite a change. Quite a change." He said so in a quiet, almost hushed, voice, his face looking sad.

Suddenly, the Rebbe called to Abraham. "Come here," he said, and asked him to walk over to the mirror and stand in front of it. The Rebbe then walked away a bit and asked Abraham to tell him what he saw.

Abraham was puzzled at this, but answered, "Myself. That is what I see in this mirror. My own reflection -- that is all I can see."

"Look closely," the Rebbe said. "What else do you see?"

"I see my lovely furniture reflected in the mirror. I see my paintings, I see my rugs and drapes. I can see many things in my beautiful home."

The Rebbe then walked over to the window. Pushing aside the drapes, he told Abraham to look out into the street.

Since it was a small town, Abraham recognized almost all the people walking past his house. The Rebbe asked him many questions about all the people they saw. And Abraham told him that the woman Ruchel with the basket was a widow with five children. She was hoping that kind people would put food in the basket for her family. He told the Rebbe about Yossl, the water-carrier who was getting old and found it hard to carry the water. He pointed out Yankel, the tailor who never had enough for his family.

Abraham wondered why the Rebbe was asking him all these questions. The Rebbe was a serious man who never had time to waste. Why should he be so curious about all these people?

Then the Rebbe said to Abraham, "It is strange, is it not? A mirror and a window are both made of glass and yet they are very different."

"What do you mean?," asked Abraham.

"Well," said the Rebbe, "when you looked in the mirror you could only see yourself and the things that belong to you. You could see much more when

you looked out the window. Then you could see all your neighbors and friends from the whole town."

"That is true," said Abraham. "A mirror and a window are both made from glass. The window is transparent. Light can pass right through it. It is clear and you can see everything through it. The mirror, on the other hand, is covered with silver on one side. The rays of light cannot pass through, and therefore a mirror can only reflect what is in front of it."

"I see," said the Rebbe and nodded his head. "I see. The piece of glass that is plain is clear through and through, allowing you to see others and their lives. But when it is covered with silver, then you can see only yourself. Hmm, very interesting. It is really quite fantastic, isn't it?"

"Now do you think it will work the other way too? Could you take a mirror and scrape off the silver so that you would be able to see everyone else instead of yourself?"

Abraham's eyes filled with tears. He felt ashamed. He was beginning to understand everything that had happened to him since he became wealthy.

The next evening, Abraham made a big party in his home. The whole town was invited and everyone was enjoying themselves when Abraham asked for silence. He made a short speech and asked for everyone's forgiveness. He told his guests that he was sorry for the way he had acted. His life would now be different. He promised them that his doors would always be open for everyone, and that he never would be too busy to help those who needed him.

After all the guests had left, Abraham walked over to his beautiful mirror. With a sharp knife he scraped off the silver covering in one corner. He did not stop until that part was as clear as glass. Only then was he satisfied.

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[Ask: "What is this story about?"]

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I think the story is about the different kinds of people we are capable of being. One type is the person who spends most of her time looking in the mirror. The other type is the person who spends most of her time looking through her window.

The first type sees himself at the center of the universe. He invests most of his energy on himself. The second type tends to see himself as part of the bigger world. He devotes much of his energy to making that bigger world better.

Abraham was both types of people. At the beginning, before he grew wealthy, Abraham paid a lot of attention to other people. He was generous with his time and his possessions. He was concerned with the needy and liked being helpful. Helping others made him feel happy. He spent time looking through the glass.

But later, after receiving the “blessing” of prosperity, Abraham got wrapped up in himself and his stuff. He spent more of his time building a mansion and filling it with fancy rugs and art than he did helping the needy and the unlucky. He started to gaze at himself more and more, admiring the image he saw in his luxurious mirror. The further he separated from other people, the closer he put himself at the center of the universe. And the closer he positioned himself to the center of the universe, the more distant and hardened his heart became.

A great, real life Rebbe called Simcha Bunem of Pzishke famously taught that a person should keep one note in each of their pockets. Written on one note: “The entire world was created for Me.” And written on the other: “I am just dust and ashes.” What he meant was that we have to live our lives in the middle of the extremes: to guard against being either too self-absorbed or too self-negating; to keep from being either too proud or too timid.

You know, a mirror can be a very fine thing. A great Israeli and Jew who died on Wednesday, Shimon Peres z”l, once said that the mirror is what

began civilization. Before the mirror, you see, “people didn’t comb their hair, didn’t cut their nails. [But now] With a mirror, everyone washes himself [every] morning” without being made to. Just think about that: because of a shiny, silver-coated sheet of glass, human beings became refined, cultured, and well-mannered. They became civilized.

So the mirror is a very useful thing, for it helps us to see ourselves better and to look and be our best. Indeed, a very insightful four-year old once likened the Torah itself to a mirror. Against it you see your reflection so you can strive toward your highest moral potential. Prayer also is a kind of mirror.

But the mirror can also be pernicious when it captures too much of our attention and puts us under the spell of narcissism. Then it leads us away from our connection to others and away from our sacred mission of *Tikkun Olam*--of repairing the world--through acts of loving kindness.

This, in a deep sense, is why we need Judaism and why we need the Ten Days of Awe which began tonight. We need them to pull us away from the mirrors in front of us and to nudge us toward the clear glass next to us. We need them to thrust us against the gravity exerted by the earthly self and into outer space of the social universe. Rosh Hashanah calls us to ponder creation and our place in it and to integrate our selves, just as a man named Abraham once did through a mirror.