

Yom Kippur Shoes

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Our small congregation was Orthodox, but not what I would call “*meshuggah* Orthodox”. I mean no disrespect. There are many fine Orthodox Jews and Orthodox congregations. I’m just saying: there’s Orthodox, and then there’s Orthodox. The *haredim* in Israel—these guys in black hats, throwing stones at Jewish women who only want to pray at the Western wall!—that’s *meshuggah*. Temple Beth Shalom, in -----, New Jersey, was not filled with geniuses, but we knew enough to show a little *sechel*, a little common sense, when human needs trumped scripture or tradition. So while, naturally, the men sat in a separate section from the women, we made exceptions, allowances. When Irwin R----- was getting a little senile, and prone to cackle or cry during the service, nobody stopped his wife, Rivka, from sitting next to him, rubbing his back, and saying, “*Se brent nit! Calm down... I love you!*” For the most part, we didn’t have a lot of *hasid shoteh* types—pious fools—who made a fetish of some ancient commandment or prohibition. This is why it was so surprising, in our little *shul*, when all hell broke out on Yom Kippur day, 1964.

I’m 82 now, not so spry anymore with the arthritis, and long ago retired. Back then, in the sixties, I ran a pharmacy in town, just getting started in the business—young and strong--with a nice home, a wife and kids. I was respected, not because I knew Talmud or Midrash, but because I did my best to make peace when there was bad blood in the congregation. As the saying goes, “*Hint beissen zich iber a bain*”—dogs fight over a bone—and we had a few pit bulls in our congregation, never mind the “House of Peace” moniker.

Max Pinsky ran the largest Furniture store in town, not to mention having branch stores in Paramus and Hackensack. Max was, as we say, *frum*—strictly observant, and from an old Lithuanian

rabbinical family. Not to mention, the man was built like a Patton tank, and no one would raise a hand to him who had any brains. Also, nobody ever questioned Max's business ethics, since he went by the book. I mean, of course, the Talmud, which says—as I recall the saying—“When a man goes to the next life, he will first be asked if he was honest in his business dealings.” So Max was honest as the day is long, at least in business. Now, at home—what do I know? A man's honesty at home, nobody really knows but him. That said, Max's wife, Ida, seemed happy with him, and was renowned in our congregation as a *balabusta*—a good homemaker and the queen of her household.

Now along comes Herb Rosen, who runs the second largest furniture store in town. As unlike as two people could be, this was Max and Herb. Where Max was built like a bull, Herb looked like a poodle. When Max breathed in, Herb breathed out. If Max voted Democrat, Herb voted Republican (and we had more than our share of Republicans in the congregation, whatever you've heard about “liberal” Jews). Even their two stores were like night and day—Max with a showy, glitzy place that looked like a Las Vegas hotel lobby; Herb with a dark, musty, football-field size furniture warehouse, where you could sometimes spot a mouse scurrying across the floor. And if I said that Max and Herb were like oil and water, you'd say I was using a cliché, but still, that's the truth: you did not mix the two of them in the same room, if you could avoid it. Herb, for one thing, never forgave Max the success of his business, and always went around muttering about “tax breaks Pinsky never deserved” and “somebody over at Pinsky's cooking the books.”

Now, over the years, I had tried to do a little mediation, a little negotiation, between Max and Herb. It's not that I'm some kind of *tzadik* or saint—I just happen to think that peace is better all around for everyone, and, to tell the truth, I wanted both Pinsky and Rosen as good customers at the pharmacy. (I not only ran the place, I was the pharmacist, which, back in the 60s, wasn't nearly the *tsuris* it is these days).

And, truth be told—I always loved the stories about Moses’s brother, Aaron, who would sometimes try to bring sworn enemies together by shading the truth just a little. You know what I mean—like saying to Mike, “Oh, Joe really wants to bury the hatchet with you, Mike,” even if Joe never said a thing about making peace. With Max and Herb, I did my best, but the peacemaking never took. When the two of them were within five feet of each other, you could slice the tension between them like hard salami.

Now, you may not know—even some Orthodox Jews aren’t aware of this—on Yom Kippur, in addition to the famous fasting business, Jews are prohibited from wearing leather shoes. Why is this? Well, the rabbis tell us that on this holiest of days, we must experience the “five afflictions”—no eating or drinking, no washing, no oiling the skin, no love-making (even with your spouse), and no wearing of leather shoes. For reasons only the rabbis can tell you, non-leather shoes are OK. So, *nu?* What does all this have to do with Max Pinsky and Herb Rosen?

To set the scene: standing outside the *shul* on the morning of Yom Kippur are Pinsky and Rosen. It’s just before the *Shaharit*, the morning service. Their wives, Ida and Doris, are schmoozing with other members of the congregation. The rabbi—our revered Rabbi Isaac Sheinbaum, may he rest in peace—is still up at the *bimah*, talking to the cantor, making sure the *shofar* is ready to sound, like a ram in heat. Pinsky and Rosen are stink-eying each other, doing a little surveillance, circling around like sumo wrestlers. Suddenly, Pinsky makes his move. He sticks his nose within a foot of Rosen’s face and points down at the man’s shoes, stabbing his index finger in the chilly air.

“*Nu*, Rosen,” Pinsky says through steaming breath, “are you a good Jew, or a *traifener bain?* Do you not know leather shoes are forbidden on Yom Kippur?”

By now, the crowd has stopped schmoozing, everyone is dead silent, waiting to see the coming train wreck. Meanwhile, Rosen has turned to ash. His nostrils are flaring, the vein in his neck

is pulsing. All the rage he has stored up for Pinsky—all the pain of being second banana in the furniture business for twenty years—it's all rising in his throat like acid reflux.

“Listen, Pinsky,” Herb Rosen says in a sort of raspy squeal, “it's the holiest day of the year, I don't want to fight. But you have it wrong! You don't know from shoes, any more than you know from furniture!”

“Oh,” Pinsky says, smirking like a ten-year-old, “and you know furniture, Rosen? You wouldn't know Danish Modern from a cheese Danish! And now you have the chutzpah to tell me these are not leather shoes? What then, they're made of gefilte fish?”

“For your information,” Rosen says, his voice now strong and sure, rising in tone and purity, “these shoes are made of *Corfam*—a synthetic material just invented by DuPont! Or maybe you don't keep up with the latest science, Pinsky? Like you don't keep up with the tax laws!”

What happened next is burned into my brain like it took place yesterday. Pinsky, apparently deciding that beating Rosen into poodle-pulp was not worth his time, snorted at the tax jibe, muttered “Putz!” under his breath, and turned his back on Rosen. Meanwhile, Rosen had stooped down, slipped off one of his shoes— tasseled loafers, made of this shiny, synthetic crap--and gripped it by the toe, in his right hand. He approached Pinsky from behind. Suddenly, before any of us could say, “Max, *duck!*” Rosen's right arm came down on Pinsky's head. The heel of the shoe made a dull *thwack*, smacking Pinsky's right temple like a judge's gavel. To this day, I remember the idiotic thought that came into my head at that moment--related, I think, to an old joke about how Lincoln was shot. I thought: “Outside the temple, Pinsky was struck in the temple.”

There is a rabbinical teaching somewhere— from Rav Kook, maybe-- that says, “The Second Temple was destroyed by causeless hatred.” The idea is, the Jews--fighting among themselves in the first century--played into the hands of the Romans, who sacked the Temple. Our congregation wasn't

destroyed by what Herb Rosen did that Yom Kippur, but we never completely recovered. For years afterward, shame hung over our heads like a shroud. Rosen, of course, was booted from the congregation and charged with assault and battery. As for Pinsky, the poor schmoe survived Rosen's attack, but had trouble remembering faces for the rest of his life.

Nu, how far have we advanced since the 60s? And what have we learned? Fifty years later, Jewish men are throwing stones at Jewish women who just want to pray at the Western wall.
