



HIGH HOLIDAYS

Shabbat Shuva

LaGuardia Is An Unforgiving Airport But LaGuardia Was A Forgiving Jew
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LAGUARDIA IS AN UNFORGIVING AIRPORT BUT LAGUARDIA WAS A FORGIVING JEW

ABSTRACT

Some say when sinners die they go to LaGuardia Airport.

New York City's 99th mayor, Fiorello Henry LaGuardia, initiated New York's first commercial airport.

LaGuardia was Jewish. Indeed, his mother, Irene Coen, was the daughter of Fiorina Luzzatto Coen, a member of the prestigious Luzzatto family, an Italian-Jewish family of scholars, kabbalists, and poets, including R' Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, the Ramchal, author of the Mussar classic Messilat Yesharim.

LaGuardia was also a fervent Zionist. Today, if you walk in Tel Aviv, you may very well be walking on LaGuardia Street or through the LaGuardia Interchange.

Very nice piece of trivia, but what does it have to do with Shabbat Shuva?

A tear-jerking story of LaGuardia as the least judgmental judge you've ever seen, reveals to us a profound and awesome lesson about return, repentance, guilt, innocence and forgiveness.

1. Return Flight To LaGuardia

Some say when sinners and evildoers die they go to New York's LaGuardia Airport.

LaGuardia Airport is legendary for its delays and frustration. It also has a legendary beginning.

New York City's 99th mayor, Fiorello LaGuardia, who was in office for three terms from 1934 to 1945, once arrived on a TWA flight into Newark Airport, which was the only commercial airport serving the New York City region at the time. Newark is in Newark, New Jersey. LaGuardia's ticket, however, said "New York." He therefore demanded to be taken to New York, ordering the plane to be flown to Brooklyn's Floyd Bennett Field, giving an impromptu press conference to reporters along the way.

He urged New Yorkers to support a new airport within their city. Together with American Airlines, the airport opened in 1939.

Fiorello Henry LaGuardia's father, Achille, was a gentile Italian immigrant. His mother, Irene Coen, was Jewish.

The famous LaGuardia was Jewish.

Indeed, his maternal grandmother's name was Fiorina Luzzatto Coen, a member of the famous Luzzatto family, a prestigious Italian-Jewish family of scholars, kabbalists, and poets, including R' Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, the Ramchal, author of the Mussar classic *Messilat Yesharim*, and Samuel David Luzzatto, known as the Shadal, and a bit of a controversial fellow.

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2. A Heavenly Verdict (Story)

In the middle of the Great Depression, LaGuardia strived to live with the people. It was not unusual for him to ride with the firefighters, raid with the police, or take field trips with orphans. On a bitterly cold night in January of 1935, the mayor turned up at a night court that served the poorest ward of the city. LaGuardia, who was a practicing lawyer prior to entering public service, dismissed the judge for the evening and took over the bench himself. Within a few minutes, a tattered old woman was brought before him, charged with stealing a loaf of bread. She told the mayor that her daughter's husband had left, her daughter was sick, and her two grandchildren were starving.

However, the shopkeeper, from whom the bread was stolen, refused to drop the charges. "It's a real bad neighborhood, your Honor," the man told the mayor. "She stole bread. She's got to be punished to teach other people around here a lesson."

After listening to the cases, LaGuardia sighed. He turned to the woman and announced his verdict, "You're guilty of stealing bread. By law I must punish you. The law makes no exceptions. I'll give you a choice, ten dollars or ten days in jail?"

But even as he pronounced the sentence, the mayor was already reaching into his pocket. He extracted a bill and tossed it into his famous hat, saying, "Here is the ten dollar fine which I now remit. Let the record show that the defendant has fulfilled her penitence and served her penalty."

But the five-foot, two-inch LaGuardia did not end there: “Furthermore, every single individual in this courtroom is fined fifty cents for living in a town where a person has to steal bread so that her grandchildren can eat. Mr. Bailiff, collect the fines and give them to the defendant.”

The following day, New York City newspapers reported that \$47.50 was turned over to a bewildered woman who had stolen a loaf of bread to feed her starving grandchildren. The grocery store owner himself contributed fifty cents of that amount, as did petty criminals, people with traffic violations, and New York City policemen.

Legend has it that, after the fines were collected, the courtroom erupted in a resounding round of applause and Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia received a standing ovation.

3. *Shuva* – Return To Beyond

Whether this story is true or apocryphal the message is the same. Justice and being just is not always the same thing. Sometimes a person could do something wrong for the right reasons, like a grandmother stealing a loaf of bread to feed her starving grandchildren. It is wrong to steal and justice demands retribution, but we cannot bring ourselves to punish her. Indeed, the wrong itself could bring out and elicit the best in people.

Often I think that the narrative of this season, the season of repenting and forgiveness – Shabbat Shuva bridging Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur – goes something like this:

We stand before G-d like a child before our Heavenly Father acknowledging our wrongdoings and iniquities, intentional or not. We are not trying to cover up, deny or minimize our errors. We stand accountable without excuses.

Yet, we are standing before our loving Father and creator, and asking for compassion and forgiveness. We show true remorse and are sincerely committing to repair and improve our ways.

Our crimes may also include things that we did with good intentions. I did something wrong. I made a mistake. Maybe, like the grandmother, I took something from someone who needed it less to give to someone else who was starving for it. Or maybe it was a different transgression. Maybe I was overwhelmed with work and forgot to pray; I may have neglected to tell my spouse how much I love him or her; I offended someone, without meaning to.

Whatever the scenario, this period in time – personified by Shabbat Shuva in the ten days of teshuva – is about doing teshuva, which literally means: to return.

To return where? To our true selves. To our home. To our souls. To G-d – *ovinu malkeini*, our Father, our King. G-d for us is not just our Creator, He is our Father and we are His children.

And like a child and father, we are forever integrally connected with G-d, our love is never severed, no matter how we behaved. Regardless of how far we may have wandered, we always remain G-d's children, always able to return (teshuva) home.

This is the significance of this time of the year: To return and reconnect to who you are really meant to be.

We beseech our Father in heaven:

Over the past year I may have transgressed. I may have betrayed myself or another. I may have broken a commandment or a commitment. Now I ask You for forgiveness. *Shuva*, allow me please to return to my inherent, natural innocent state. As we read the first verse of today's Haftorah, from whence Shabbat Shuva gets its name: *Shuva Yisrael... Return, O Israel, to the Lord your G-d, for you have stumbled in your iniquity.*¹

This is the conventional take on teshuva, return, repentance and forgiveness – overcoming our transgressions by G-d forgiving them.

And above all: What is the connection Is there a connection between a tightrope, September 11 and Rosh Hashana?

4. How Deep Does Teshuva Reach?

But I submit there's a much deeper element in teshuva, one that the LaGuardia story illuminates for us.

True and healthy justice is not just about punishing the guilty to teach them a lesson and exact retribution for their behavior. Nor is it only about maintaining law and order, settling scores and meting out reward or punishment, as incentive or deterrent.

True justice is about preserving the welfare of the individual and of society at large. As the verse states:² “And the congregation shall judge... [in order that] the congregation shall *save*.” In the words of the Midrash:³ “When the Jewish people take and sound their shofars before G-d, G-d rises from His throne of judgment and sits down on His throne of compassion, and He bestows upon them compassion and transform their judgment to compassion.”

¹ Hosea 14:2.

² Numbers 35:24-25. See Mishne Sanhedrin 2a. Rosh Hashana 26a.

³ Vayikra Rabba 29:3.

This idea is described in the final verses of today's Shabbat Shuva Haftorah:

Who is a G-d like You, Who forgives iniquity and passes over the transgression of the remnant of His heritage? He does not maintain His anger forever, for He desires loving-kindness. He shall return and grant us compassion; He shall hide our iniquities, and You shall cast into the depths of the sea all their sins. You shall give the truth of Jacob, the loving-kindness of Abraham, which You swore to our forefathers from days of yore.⁴

The verses do not speak of G-d doing justice but of G-d's uniqueness (*who is a G-d like You?*) in being forgiving and compassionate, loving and kind.

Moreover, G-d gives us the truth of Jacob, the loving-kindness of Abraham – *titen emet l'Yakov chessed l'Avraham*.

Truth, *emet*, is different than justice. Justice must follow the letter of the law. Truth behooves the judge to be truthful to his obligation to uphold human dignity and restore the divine soul to its eternal dignity.

5. Lessons from LaGuardia

Even a mortal man like Mayor LaGuardia understood that though justice must be served and the guilty verdict meted out to the grandmother who stole the bread, yet the goal of justice is to “save” (not to punish). He thus transformed the justice to compassion and gave the woman the money to pay her penalty!

Justice must be served. But when the justice is served not just an end in itself, but with compassion and love, taking into account the details of the situation, then even a human judge like LaGuardia goes beyond the letter of the law, in showing sensitivity and compassion by giving the woman the money to pay the fine.

If this is the case with a mere mortal, how much more so with the Divine Judge of the universe, G-d Himself, and as He sits in judgment of His own children – one can only imagine how much love and compassion is being extended to His children, even when they are guilty.

Who is a G-d like You, Who forgives iniquity and passes over the transgression...? He does not maintain His anger forever, for He desires loving-kindness. He shall return and grant us compassion; He shall hide our iniquities... You shall give the truth of Jacob, the loving-kindness of Abraham.

⁴ Micah 7:18-20

That is why we call it teshuva – return – because the transgression is an aberration from the norm, not our natural state. So even when there is a need for justice, it is not as an end in itself, but as a means to clean away the dust and grime, and return and reconnect the person to his/her pristine, quintessential state.

Once a person has demonstrated sincere remorse and commitment to return “home,” to reclaim and regain the deep love and connection with G-d; our Divine Father reciprocates, and even when we may be penalized for our crimes, G-d, in His compassion, can actually help us pay our fines...

This is a very deep level of teshuva.

And through this teshuva we cry out and implore G-d: Master of the universe, Judge of the cosmic courtroom, yes, it's true that the overwhelming evidence may find us guilty of stealing our proverbial piece for bread to feed our proverbial grandchildren, or our own proverbial hungers.

For this transgression, law and justice might demand retribution. We deserve to be fined. But like that destitute grandmother, we may be unable to pay. So we turn to You, our empathetic Father in heaven, on this Shabbat Shuva, and ask that You put Your *yad chazaka*, Your strong hand into Your infinite pocket and pay the fine for us...

6. Collective Responsibility

But, Shabbat Shuva is even more powerful.

LaGuardia didn't just pay the woman's penalty, he had everyone in the courtroom fined for living in a town where a person has to steal bread so that her grandchildren can eat.

This teaches us yet another remarkable lesson in teshuva – and our responsibility to one another:

Though every one of us is individually responsible for his or her behavior, yet as a people we are all intrinsically bound as one entity, like limbs of one single body.⁵ If one part of the body is in pain, even if it's a small toe, the entire body is hurting. And when you strengthen one limb, all the others get stronger.

⁵ See Jerusalem Talmud Nedarim 9:5.

This inherent unity offers us a deeper appreciation of our responsibility to one another. Even if one of us has transgressed, as part of the same “organism” we are all affected, compromised and hurt by the transgression.

Obviously, the guilty individual is responsible to do teshuva and amend his/her ways. Yet, without taking away personal accountability, in some subtle way we are all responsible for the crimes committed by people in our community, if for no other reason than asking ourselves if we did everything possible to prevent the person from committing a crime.

We see this collective responsibility in the Torah law of *Eglah Arufah*: When a corpse (G-d forbid) is discovered between two cities, and no one knows who the murderer is, the priests and the elders of the nearest towns lead a unique ceremony and declare, “Our hands have not spilled this blood.”⁶

Asks the Talmud a glaring question: Why do they need to absolve themselves of responsibility? “Could it have crossed our minds that the elders of the rabbinical court are murderers?!”⁷

Answers the Talmud, that the leaders are responsible, since they failed to provide this wanderer with food and escort. The commentaries explain⁸ that the community’s failure to give food to a poor person could have been the root cause for his murder. The poor wanderer was hungry and was killed while trying to steal food. Even though the victim died while committing an illegal act, the leaders who failed to feed him are responsible. Even though the town’s leaders did not do any direct harm, they are held responsible for the death.⁹

6 Deuteronomy 21:7.

7 Sotah 38b.

8 See Rashi Sotah 45b. Maharal on the sugya.

9 See Shabbat 54b: Everyone who can protest the sin of his household and does not, is responsible for the people of his household; for the people of his city, he is responsible for the people of his city; for the whole world, he is responsible for the whole world. There are many different ways to take responsibility and to fulfill the commandment, “You shall not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor!” (Leviticus 19:16).

See also Shemot Rabba 27:9: As long as one is but an ordinary scholar, he has no concern with the congregation and is not punished [for its lapses], but as soon as he is appointed head and dons the cloak [of leadership], he must no longer say: ‘I live for my own benefit, I care not about the congregation,’ but the whole burden of the community is on his shoulders. If he sees a man causing suffering to another, or transgressing, and does not prevent him, then he is held punishable.”

Did the Jewish Mayor LaGuardia know of this law, consciously or subconsciously?

Regardless, the lesson to us is clear:

As we do our soul searching during this time of year, especially in the Tens Days of Teshuva and on this Shabbos Shuva, we also have to be sensitive to the plight and challenges of others.

At times, particularly when we see that someone has done sincere teshuva and justice has declared their guilt, we may need to offer a lending hand to help that person “pay” their penalty.

If we witness someone stooping to break the law, and we did not assist that person and did not help prevent the crime, every one of us carries some responsibility, since we are, after all, one nation, one people, one body, and when one part is lacking, everyone is lacking. And we all have to give a little bit to help restore the person’s dignity.

On a certain level, if a grandmother feels so desperate as to steal bread for her grandchildren, are we not all in some way culpable?

7. The Cosmic Courtroom

The courtroom is our world. G-d is the judge.

In this High Holiday, *Aseret Yimei Teshuva* season, we are on trial, and the entirety of creation – from the clouds above to the sands below, from the trees to the mountains, from the clothing we wear, to the homes we live in, to the money we earn and spend (or spend before earning), to the food we eat and everything in between – all of creation is like a world court watching the trial. All of existence stands in anticipation of the outcome of this trial in these days of judgment, awaiting its contract to be renewed. The world hangs in the balance.

Picture G-d as the Supreme Judge paying our proverbial ten-dollar fine. And then G-d turns to every creation in the world court and decrees: My verdict is that every single one of you who witnessed this trial carries some responsibility. Every one of you who stood by and under your watch allowed My child, a human being created in My Divine image, be forced to stoop to such a level and transgress – each of you ought help ensure that this person reclaims, and **returns** to, his or her dignity.

Truth, *emes*, compassion, and loving-kindness, *chessed*, is much more than letting the defendant off the hook. It’s about the community sharing responsibility and being invested in the welfare of the defendant.

On Shabbat Shuva our Father is our Judge and we know that He judges to save and preserve our souls through *Emet, Chesed* and compassion.

Surely we will rejoice in a verdict that *shall cast into the depths of the sea all their sins* and leaves us richer than when we started.

Good Shabbos and good returns.

Gmar Chatima Tova and a Happy and Sweet New Year!

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