

Yom Kippur 5769

The Empty Flower Pot as told by Rabbi Greg Litcofsky

Temple Shir Tikva Wayland, MA

I know I can do better this year! I know I can be a better father to my children– I know I can be a better sister to my younger siblings, I know I can be a better friend, I know I can be a better son to my parents – I know I can do better this year – I know that I can always do better – I know that I am not perfect – but I also know that nobody wants me to be perfect – not my parents, not my children, not my teachers, not my boss, not my friends, not my spouse, I know that no body wants me to be perfect – including God – right – right? I know that my best should be good enough - right?

I recently learned the following story from two of my friends and fellow rabbis – originally it was told about the emperor of China, but as you will see I have made a few minor adjustments.¹

There was once a king, beloved by his people, a king whose heart shined as bright as the most precious of stones. To everyone in the land the king seemed as if he had it all – and the people thought that he was a happy man. However, this was not the case, you see the king was growing old and he had no one to take his place, no sons and no daughters – no children to fill his royal shoes.

¹ I was introduced to this story by Rabbi Dara Frimmer and Rabbi Stephanie Kolin. The story in its original is called “The Empty Pot” and it a Chinese folktale.

One morning the king awoke from a restless night's sleep with an idea...that day he sent messengers throughout the land – calling upon each and every child in the kingdom to gather at the palace. On that very same day the palace was packed – all the kids in the kingdom and their parent's gathered together just as the king requested. As the king appeared the crowd erupted in applause and cheers. Sadly, the king explained, that he had no daughters and no sons, and that he was searching for someone to take his place when he was gone. The king said "I have a task for each and every child in the kingdom. I will give you all a single seed. Take it home with you, plant it in a flower pot and care for it...and in one year we will all gather again with your flower pots in hand – and the most successful among you will become the new king."

Each child took their seed in hand and ran home as fast as they could. Among all of the kids that day was a young girl named Shlomit. Now Shlomit wasn't the tallest, she wasn't the fastest, and her family wasn't the wealthiest – but she knew what she was going to do, she had a plan - she knew that the seed needed soil, water, sunlight, and of course love. When she arrived home, Shlomit reached up on the top shelf, pulled down a flower pot, went out to the garden scooped up some dirt, put some in the flowerpot, dug a tiny hole, placed the seed in the hole and filled the rest of the pot with the remaining dirt....she poured some water over it, placed on the window sill and waited....and waited...and waited....and waited...and waited....each day she would run home from school, and tend to her flowerpot, hoping and praying that this would be the day it would sprout. Yet day after day, nothing, no sprout, no stem, no stalk, no flower, nothing. How could this be, Shlomit wondered, she was doing everything right, she gave it water, not too much and not too little, she gave it sunlight, moving the flower pot from place to place making sure

the sun hit the soil at just the right angle and she even sang to it at night before she went to bed....but nothing....days passed, weeks passed and nothing grew from Shlomit's flowerpot.

One day at school Shlomit heard all of other kids talking about how their seeds had sprouted, how their flowers were growing and growing, some even had to move their flowers into new and bigger flowerpots. That same day she ran home, tears streaming down her face, up the stairs, she slammed the door to her room and cried...quietly her parents knocked on the door, came in and said lovingly "Shlomit, you are trying your best, you are trying your hardest, and that's always good enough...we love you...." Shlomit, dried her eyes, looked up from her pillow, walked to the window, and proceeded to do what she did every day since she got the seed - she watered it, moved it into the sunlight and even sang it a little song...she refused to give up trying....yet, her pot remained empty.

The day had finally arrived, a year had passed, and it was time for all the children to bring their flowerpots before the king. Shlomit slowly removed her pot from the sill, sobbing she brought it down to her parents, filled not with a beautiful flower, but filled only with dirt. She cried "I'm so embarrassed, how can I bring this empty flower pot before the king...I have nothing to show for all the hard work I have done..." Her parents looked at each other and then looked at Shlomit, dried her tears and said "It's ok, you've tried your hardest, and your best is good enough to present to the king that's always good enough!"

So Shlomit, empty pot in hand went before the king. There at the palace she saw some of the most beautiful flowers she had ever seen. Sunflowers, as tall as she, orchids, roses, violets, all more beautiful and more exquisite than then next...and she...an empty pot. One by one the king inspected the flowerpots, admiring their beauty, but he still looked and felt sad...why was the king still so sad, wondered the children? Then the king came upon Shlomit and her empty pot and he asked her “Why have you brought me an empty pot?” Shlomit, fighting back the tears responded “I planted the seed, I watered it, I gave it sunlight, I even sang to it, day after day, I tried my hardest, did what I knew I needed to do it, and nothing, and nothing grew! I guess this empty pot was the best that I could do. Suddenly the king himself began to cry, but his tears were tears of joy, and a smile came to his face. He knelt down in front of *shlomit*, kissed her on the forehead and said “I have found the one who will take my place, here is our next Queen....she brought me the most important thing anyone could bring me, she brought me the best she could...the best she had...you see last year the seeds I gave all of you, they had all been boiled in water, and then dried, none of them would have, could have grown anything at all!” Thank you *Shlomit*, thank you!

I remember my first days at Comly elementary school, each day I would come home and feel like my best just wasn't good enough. new school, new classmates, new teachers...I looked around and like *Shlomit* saw all the beautiful flowers, and felt that my empty pot just wasn't good enough. That year I met Mr. Sawyer, our vice principal, he taught me that in order to be successful I didn't have to measure myself against others but rather he taught me to measure myself against what I know I can do – he taught me that it's my

own hard work that truly matters and that I will know when I have given my best effort – and that’s what counts. Mr. Sawyer never asked me to be perfect, never asked me to be THE BEST, and neither did the king in the story when he gave the children the seeds. He did not ask for the biggest flower, or the most beautiful plant – he just wanted their best. But while every child in the kingdom tried to compete with one another, Shlomit did what she knew how to do –she did her best – and she succeeded! Shlomit cared enough about herself not to give up, and not to give in to everyone else’s definition of success. Lovingly Shlomit’s parent’s embraced her, when they could have, perhaps like the other parents in the kingdom, helped to plant a new seed – but they saw the hard work and effort that she was putting into her own pot – and they refused to allow her to measure her success against any other child in the kingdom!

Today on Yom Kippur and every other day of the year, God, like the king in the sotry, doesn’t demand perfection from us, nor does God want us to measure ourselves and our abilities against our friends, or our neighbors. No, GOD wants us to bring the best that we can offer – God wants our empty pots! God knows that when we try our hardest, as Shlomit did, it shows we care – we care about God, we care about ourselves and we care about each other.

Just as God doesn’t ask us to measure ourselves against anyone else, so too should we not measure our parents, our children, our friends, our lived ones, against anyone else as well. We all live in a world where perfection seems to be the measuring stick for success. We see it on TV when an athlete plays through pain and injury risking their long term health an even their life, we experience it at the office when we feel the pressure to work

extra hours perhaps at the expense of our personal well being and our families as well, we experience it at school when we overextend ourselves with classes and extracurricular activities....we all feel it when we put unrealistic expectation on ourselves and others that somehow, we have to be the best, the brightest, the fastest, somehow, we have to grow the tallest flower, the greenest plant! When we are all pulled in a so many directions, how can we possibly expect ourselves to do our best or try our hardest...how can we possibly expect the ones we love to do their best and try their hardest?

On Rosh Hashana we reflect and on Yom Kippur we consider...On Rosh Hashana we reflect and think about the person we were and the person we wanted to be, we reflect and think about the families we were and the families we wanted to be. On Yom Kippur we consider - consider what the year to come may hold for us as individuals and as a family, and then we glance ahead in the year yet to be and consider the person we know we can be and the families we know we can be...On Yom Kippur we consider the actions and efforts that it will take – together - to work towards the vision that we have for ourselves and for our families. Yom Kippur is the day we are given to recognize that it's our empty flowerpots that God desires of us – and that we should desire from one another! Yom Kippur is the day that we must say to one another – I know your tried your hardest this year – your best is good enough for me, and that is all I every really want from you!

Imagine now, Shulamit's pot, was it really empty – or was it filled with her love, her care, was it filled with her best effort – and isn't this what the king wanted all

along...isn't this what God wants from all of us – and isn't this what we should want from one another?

May God give us all the courage and strength to recognize and know that it's OK to bring your empty flower pot before the king! This year what will you fill your flower pot? How are you going to help yourself and the one's whom you love do their best?