

**Shabbat Shuvah**  
**Rabbi Megan Brumer**  
**September 22, 2023**

Tonight, I'd like to share "The Story of the Feather Pillow."

In the town of Pinsk, lived a man who loved to gossip. He knew it was wrong, but he figured it was harmless as most of the stories he was telling about other people were true. One day, he learned a weird but true fact about a local businessman and began to spread that fact around, as he had done so many times before. The local businessman heard the rumor that was being spread around and became upset because he was losing customers.

So, the businessman went to the local rabbi and said to him, "Is there anything you can do to help? This is ruining me. This is ruining my reputation." The rabbi replied, "Of course, bring the storyteller to me, and I will see if I can help things." So, the rabbi summoned the storyteller and said to him, "Storyteller, you must understand that what you're doing is wrong."

The storyteller responded, "I might know that, but I thought it would be insignificant because what I'm saying is true." The rabbi said, "Well, whether or not it's true, or if you believe it to be true, it's still wrong." The storyteller thought for a long moment and then said, "I—I think I understand. And I am sorry. Is there any way I can fix this to somehow undo the hurt that I've caused?" The rabbi said, "I think I might know a way, actually. Do you own any feather pillows?" The storyteller, taken aback at this, said, "I do, but I don't understand what that has to do with anything." The rabbi said, "You will learn. Bring me a feather pillow." The storyteller was completely confused but acquiesced and went to get a feather pillow.

He brought it back to the rabbi and the rabbi said, "Now that you have this, please go to office, open the window and tear the feather pillow open. Make sure that no feathers remain in the pillow." Again, the storyteller was confused. But he did as the rabbi requested. He went to the rabbi's office, opened the window and tore open the pillow. Feathers went everywhere—in the books, behind the shelves, out the window, into the street below—everywhere.

Once this was done, he went back to the rabbi and said, "I've done what you've asked. Now what?" The rabbi said, "The next thing I need you to do is to go and pick up each and every one of those feathers." The storyteller was shocked. "But rabbi, that's impossible. The feathers are everywhere—between the books, behind the shelves, out the window, into the street. How can I possibly pick up all of those feathers?" The rabbi said, "Aha, now you see. Now you understand that what you've said you cannot unsay. What you have done you cannot undo." Again, the storyteller was shocked. But he understood. And from that day on, he only told stories about himself, about the things that had happened to him and the things that he had experienced, like the story of the feather pillow.

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When I was thinking about what to say tonight, I kept coming back to this story. I think it relates in many ways to this time of year in the Jewish calendar.

The man in this story realized what he said was wrong and wanted to make amends. This time in the calendar is about reflecting, taking responsibility for our past actions and going through *teshuvah*, repenting for what we have done.

As seen in this story, your words and actions cannot be taken back. It doesn't take much to do something that might unintentionally hurt another person. I know I talk about others with my friends, sometimes without thinking about the consequences.

In the haftorah for this week, Hosea 14, it says, "Return, O Israel, to the Eternal your God, for you have fallen because of your sin." *Shuvah* (return) has the same root as *t'shuvah* (repentance). We need to return, reflect and repent our past sins and return to God. You might read this literally as a return to God, metaphorically as a return to the way God wants us to live—as kind, considerate and respectful human beings, or anything in between.

On the second day of Rosh Hashanah I posed the question, what are some times when you said or did something without thinking beforehand? That was in the context of self-sacrifice, but the same question applies here. When was a time when you said something without thinking beforehand? When was a time when you gossiped, whether intentionally or unintentionally? Were there consequences to those actions? I want you to take a moment, think about these questions and share with those sitting around you.

(If you are reading this online, take a moment and reflect on these questions.)

The High Holidays season is a time of reflection, looking back at the past year, as well as looking forward and reflecting on how you want to be better in the year to come. Think about what you might have said that was wrong—and work toward returning to God, whatever that means to you.