"If Not Higher"—A story from *Three Times Chai* edited by Laney Katz Becker
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Every year, the rabbi of Nemirov was late for Yom Kippur services. And every year, the people of the congregation would speculate about the reason, "Maybe the rabbi goes to visit the sick before services," some said. "Perhaps he prays alone for all of us before coming here to be with us," others suggested. Still other members of the congregation said, "Maybe he does something we just can't understand."

There were two precocious boys in the congregation, and they decided they would find out the truth about why the rabbi was always late. So the night before Yom Kippur, they sneaked into the rabbi's house and hid under his bed. They watched and waited as the rabbi got into bed and snored throughout the night.

While it was still dark, the boys looked on as the rabbi woke up, went to the closet, and put on clothes they had never seen him wear: heavy boots, overalls, a thick wool jacket, and a peasant hat. Once he was fully dressed, the rabbi took a long rope and slung it over his shoulder, grabbed an axe from the closet, and walked out of the house.

The two boys looked at each other in amazement and decided to follow the rabbi to see where he went dressed in such an unusual manner. As the rabbi walked through the streets of the village, lit only by the light of the moon, the boys took great pains to make sure the rabbi couldn't see them. They watched as he entered the forest, took the rope, put it down on the ground, and chopped down some trees with the axe.

After a few trees had fallen, the rabbi used the axe to cut the trunk and branches into smaller pieces. Then he took the rope and tied the pieces of wood into a neat bundle, which he hoisted over his shoulder. He left the forest while the boys, still unseen, followed close behind.

The rabbi walked a distance and came to a small, dilapidated cottage. The boys were silent as the rabbi knocked on the door. They heard a faint voice come from inside the cottage.

"Who's there?" asked the voice, which sounded like that of an elderly woman.

“It is me, Vassel the wood chopper,” the rabbi replied. “I have wood for you on this very cold morning.”

“Please go away. I have no money to give you for wood,” the old woman said.

The boys looked on as the rabbi opened the door. “Don’t worry about the money,” he said to the woman.

He went to the stove, placed the wood in it, and lit a fire. “Now you’ll be warm on this cold day,” he said. Without another word, the rabbi left the cottage. The boys looked at each other and followed the rabbi as he quickly returned home, changed into his rabbi’s clothes, and made his way to the synagogue for Yom Kippur services.

Once again the people questioned, “Why is the rabbi always late for Yom Kippur? Where does he go? What does he do before services?”

The two boys listened to the speculation: “Maybe the rabbi goes to the hospital to visit the sick,” one congregant suggested. “Maybe the rabbi takes an especially long time washing and dressing for Yom Kippur,” another guessed. And then one man said, “Maybe the rabbi goes to heaven before coming to pray with us.”

The two boys listened, and together they responded, “No. The rabbi does not go to heaven before services. He goes even higher.”

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I shared this story tonight because it highlights the importance of performing mitzvot, especially the mitzvah of helping others and treating them with respect. The rabbi, just before Yom Kippur services, doesn’t take time for himself; instead, he chooses to help those in need.

As we enter this time of year, when we focus inward on *t’shuva* (repentance) and *t’fillah* (prayer), let’s not forget about *tzedakah* (charity). Tzedakah isn’t only about giving money; it’s also about giving our time and kindness. We all share this planet, and it’s essential to support those who need our help.