

There is a Yiddish expression which helps us understand the difference between two different types of people. Translated, it goes like this: A schlemiel is somebody who often spills his soup and a schlimazel is the person it lands on.

In the movie *The Frisco Kid*, the great actor Gene Wilder, who passed away this summer, portrayed a classic schlemiel.

In recent years, I had the opportunity to watch this film three times, as it was in a curriculum that I taught for our post Bar Mitzvah teens, in conjunction with my friend Rabbi Kogan, from the shul down the street. When we heard about Wilder's passing, we sent each other Youtube clips of our favorite scene and we both knew this was the year to discuss it on the High Holy Days, in Gene Wilder's memory.

Wilder played Avram Belinsky, an Eastern European Yeshiva student who gets shipped off to America to become the rabbi of a new frontier community in San Francisco. Upon arrival in Philadelphia he is beaten by con men and he is relieved of many of his belongings.

Without too much of a spoiler alert, by film's end, Avram makes his way across the country. Even though he is constantly tested - like Abraham our patriarch - he still guards both his little Sefer Torah and his unique personality.

Some critics labeled this film a "comedic Western" but really it's a tale of a resilient schlemiel staying true to his principles, beliefs and identity when no one around him shared them with him.

It is the story that many of us are familiar with, of being a determined token Jew in a multi faith environment, workspace or school.

If you are a lover of Gene Wilder's films, then you will remember this one particular scene.

The rabbi is sitting with a tribal chief, having just had his faith tested yet again, and he is being pressed by the chief as to whether his God, our God can make rain. It's a hysterical scene that is also profound, because Rabbi Avram expresses a theology which is radically different than what is found in our machzorim.

בן זומא אומר, איזהו חכם, הלומד מכל אדם

In the mishna Ben Zoma asked: Who is the wise one? He who learns from all people.

All people includes the schlemiels of the world, even fictional characters from the movies.

Avram: Nice dancing.

Chief: Nice does not make rain. Yes or no, can your God make rain?

Avram: Yes.

Chief: But he doesn't?

Avram: That's right.

Chief: Why?

Avram: Because that's not his department!

Chief: But if he wanted to, he could?

Avram: Yes!

Chief: What kind of God do you have?

Avram: Don't say my God. He's your God too.

Chief: [in reference to Avram's god] What does he do?

Avram: He... He can do anything!

Chief Gray Cloud: Then why can't he make rain?

Avram: Because he doesn't make rain.

He gives us strength when we're suffering.

He gives us compassion when all that we feel is hatred.

He gives us courage when we're searching around blindly like little mice in the darkness... but He does not make rain!

[Thunder and lightning begin, followed by a downpour]

Avram (with a little smirk): Of course... sometimes, just like that, he'll change His mind.

In her book "The Schlemiel as Modern Hero," Harvard professor Ruth Wisse discusses the origin and rise of the literary schlemiel. She saw the schlemiel as a symbol of the Jewish people as a whole, their staying hopeful and optimistic in the face of tremendous suffering.

She wrote that a schlemiel had a dual role as comic relief and as an anxious reminder, that there is something painfully familiar about that fellow. The schlemiel was ever present in the characters of Chelm, when humor was used to ease a challenging time for our Ashkenazi ancestors.

A classic schlemiel was either criticized for his weakness or praised for his inner strength. In the Frisco Kid, Rabbi Avram's inner strength was tested throughout the film, but it never subsided. His belief in God, as made evident in many scenes in the film, carried him from Philadelphia to San Francisco. As he said

He gives us strength when we're suffering. He gives us compassion when all that we feel is hatred. He gives us courage when we're searching around blindly like little mice in the darkness.

- There is not a person in this room who has not experienced suffering.
- Countless of us have filled our hearts with compassion, some to the point of running over.
- And to the person in this room who has never felt like a little blind mouse running in the darkness--please stand up and tell us your secret.

While the greatest hits of the High Holy Days liturgy features a God that is an Avinu Malkeinu sitting at a throne on-high, making lists of who was good and who was

not-- centuries of Jewish wisdom, poetry and prayers stretch our understanding of God in so many other directions.

My mentor Rabbi Ed Feinstein teaches that once upon a time, our ancestors attributed everything in their lives to the will of God. Health and sickness, war and peace, poverty and affluence, were rewards and punishments cast down from heaven.

But then, sickness, we discovered, is not a divine punishment, but the result of infection, faulty genetics, the deterioration of organs and cells. Drought and tsunamis are the products of shifts in atmospheric pressure and moisture. The movement of tectonic plates brings earthquakes, and the movement of capital markets produces economic booms and busts. Not all of us look to God's will to explain our fate.

While some do, many of us don't ask why did God do this to me when we get a diagnosis we don't like or when Superstorm Sandy hit us and left us with serious damage. Unlike our ancestors, we accept that "these things happen" and leave God out of the equation.

But yet we are here on Rosh Hashanah, with a new modern machzor, albeit filled with ideas from centuries ago-when our understanding of the world was different; so what are we do to? If God-on-high is not a God we want to be in relationship with, to what understanding of God do we direct our prayers in order to make them more meaningful?

For the many of us who examine our lives at this time of year and are not comfortable with the classic image of God jotting down our fate in a book with a divine quill pen, I invite you to take your cue from the theology offered by Gene Wilder's character, the Rabbi from The Frisco Kid.

We must look deeper into centuries of Jewish wisdom, from thousands of years ago until today, and if necessary, bypass the imagery of our High Holy Days greatest hits and realize that indeed, just like our schlemiel told the chief, our tradition paints a picture of a compassionate God who lifts us up and gives us courage.

I am going to share some examples of how our schlemiel teaches us solid Jewish theology.

From Rosh Hashana until Yom Kippur, we add this line into our Amidah, silent prayer.

מִי כְמוֹךָ אֱבֹהָרַחֲמִים. זֹכֵר יְצוּרָיו לְחַיִּים בְּרַחֲמִים:

Who is like you source of compassion, who remembers with compassion Your creatures for life?

For the entirety of the Ten Days of Teshuva we add a verse into a prayer that daily daveners know by rote. This extra line forces us to recall God's compassion at this time of year. God gives us compassion because God IS the source of compassion.

In Genesis Rabbah, a book of midrash on the first book of the Torah we read Be filled with compassion for one another and the Holy One will be filled with compassion for you. Whether compassion begins with us or with God, it is one of God's main attributes.

Throughout this holiday and on Yom Kippur, when the Ark opens before we read from our Torah, we describe God as El Rachum v'chanun, a merciful and compassionate God who is abounding in love.

This understanding of God is a God who gets off the royal throne, comes down and gives us all really great hugs.

With so much hatred in so many forms in the world today, it is comforting to know that God is the source of compassion and that those are words we use to describe God as we begin our Torah service.

In The Frisco Kid, the rabbi not only told the chief that God gives us compassion, but he also said God gives us courage and strength. Once again, these are normative ideas in Jewish thought, going back thousands of years.

In the eighth century BCE there lived a prophet named Isaiah, who authored a 66 chapter book.

The first 26 verses of chapter 40 are used as the haftarah for parshat Vaetchanan, the Shabbat we call Shabbat Nachamu, the Shabbat of Comfort. It begins with Isaiah saying נַחֲמוּ נַחֲמוּ עַמִּי יֹאמַר אֲ-לֹהֵיכֶם "comfort oh comfort my people".

The rest of the parsha is used as the haftarah for Lech Lecha, when Abraham is initially contacted by God and told to go on his journey. Three verses into this haftorah, chapter 40, verse 29 we read: נִתְּנוּ לַיָּעֵף כֹּחַ. God gives strength to the weary.

How brilliant of those who came before us to place this verse in the Torah portion where we read about Abraham starting his journey.

This acts as a reminder that God gives us strength to get through our life journeys.

Equally as brilliant is that the initial rabbis who assembled our prayerbooks, include this notion in the Birkot Hashachar.

It is the final blessing we utter as we start our morning prayer.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱ-לֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם. הַנּוֹתֵן לַיָּעֵף כֹּחַ.

Blessed are you God, and then those three same words from Isaiah, הַגּוֹתִן לְיַעֲרֵךְ כֹּחַ that gives strength to the weary.

Ironically, after those words are recited, I usually say "you may be seated."

Everyone single day, one of the first blessings we make is thanking God for giving us strength.

At every interval in our people's existence, from Abraham in Lech Lecha to Abraham in today's Torah reading, we have needed God to give us strength.

So many of us in this room have uttered "Lord give me strength" when we have felt powerless, defeated and down.

Just like the schlemiel in The Frisco Kid, we have looked to God to gives us strength when we're suffering.

We have looked to God to give us courage when we're searching around blindly like little mice in the darkness.

In The Frisco Kid, our schlemiel rabbi was powerless, and he was knocked down time after time. If only he had entered the scene 100 years later.

Imagine how he would have cried at a Debbie Friedman concert when he heard:

May the source of strength who blessed the ones before us,
Help us find the courage to make our lives a blessing
And let us say: Amen.

These are modern English words that we sing in this synagogue every single Shabbat and Yom Tov morning before I recite the misheberach for healing. We started this about a year ago.

Every Shabbat and Yom Tov morning we sing IN ENGLISH, a language we all understand and call God our source of strength and ask God to give us courage. In one of the only English prayers of our entire morning this is how we relate to God, just as our schlemiel did.

As Ruth Wisse writes (p. 90)The schlemiel did not abandon faith in the Almighty simply because he was confronted by proofs of God's perfidy. He still kept a deep belief in God. We might have days when we feel that God is disloyal to us but keeping the faith is what is most important.

If most of your interaction with Jewish thought occurs during this ten day period of reflection, challenge yourself to expand your knowledge of Jewish thought and theology.

The descriptions of God we read today are mostly metaphoric and the machzor is designed to help us reflect on our year and encourage us to be better people.

Ruth Wisse teaches that the schlemiel was a resilient character who suffered "vicious, unrelenting harassment" but "whose continuing ability to experience frustration without yielding to desperation or defeatism may be reason enough for winning our interest."

When we get to that point of frustration, remember that God is a compassionate God that lifts us up and gives us courage. Be like the Rabbi Avram Belsky and Let God in.

You don't need to be a schlemiel or a schlimazel for this to be true.

Before we continue with Musaf I welcome you to close your eyes and listen to this popular poem that many of you have heard before.

One night I dreamed a dream.

As I was walking along the beach with my Lord.

Across the dark sky flashed scenes from my life.

For each scene, I noticed two sets of footprints in the sand,

One belonging to me and one to my Lord.

After the last scene of my life flashed before me,

I looked back at the footprints in the sand.

I noticed that at many times along the path of my life,

especially at the very lowest and saddest times,

there was only one set of footprints.

This really troubled me, so I asked the Lord about it.

"Lord, you said once I decided to follow you,

You'd walk with me all the way.

But I noticed that during the saddest and most troublesome times of my life,

there was only one set of footprints.

I don't understand why, when I needed You the most, You would leave me."

He whispered, "My precious child, I love you and will never leave you

Never, ever, during your trials and testings.

When you saw only one set of footprints,

It was then that I carried you."

שנה טובה ומתוקה 