

The Barrel

In a small village in Poland, excitement was growing. The town had only one rabbi, the rabbi had only one son, and the only son of the only rabbi was going to be married to a beautiful young woman of the village. Everyone was looking forward to the wedding, and in honor of the upcoming nuptials the mayor of the town issued a proclamation.

First, the mayor instructed that a huge barrel be built in the middle of the town square. The mayor explained that a ladder should also be constructed, to lead up to the top of the barrel, just like the kind of ladder that would lead up to the top of a water tower. Next, the mayor decreed that during the coming two weeks everyone in the village was to fill a pail with the best wine from his or her wine cellar and bring it to the village square. Then each villager was to climb up the ladder and pour the wine into the barrel. That way, the mayor said, on the evening of the wedding, the bride and groom and their guests would tap the barrel and have the sweetest, most wonderful celebration the village had ever known.

After the carpenter, Shmuel, had built a gigantic barrel and set it on top of tall poles, he constructed the ladder. Over the next two weeks, hour after hour, day after day, a procession of villagers carried their buckets into the square. Then each villager climbed the ladder and poured the contents of his or her bucket into the barrel.

As the days passed, everyone could see the level of the liquid moving up the barrel because as the moisture was absorbed, it began to seep through the wood. As the barrel became more and more full, the villagers grew more and more excited.

Finally the blessed day of the wedding arrived. The rabbi was cheerful as he married his only son to the beautiful young woman. After the vows were exchanged, the groom broke the glass. Everyone shouted, “*Mazel tov!*” and the villagers moved into the town square to begin the celebration.

Music was playing, and the villagers sang with joy. They watched from below as the mayor of the town, who had proclaimed that the barrel be built, mounted the ladder and climbed to its top. He carried a mallet with

him and stood ready to tap the large barrel. The villagers held empty jugs in their hands and stood ready to fill their glasses with the rich, sweet wine.

“*Mazel tov* to our only rabbi, his only son, and the lovely bride,” the mayor said. “*Mazel tov* to our village on this happiest day ever, and blessed be God, who has brought joy to this bride and groom and to our small village.”

Finally the mayor tapped the barrel and placed his mug under the spigot. Everyone in the village was shouting, “*Mazel tov! Mazel tov!*”

The entire village fell silent as the mayor turned the spigot and the liquid poured forth. And what flowed from the barrel? Nothing . . . but . . . water. The villagers lowered their eyes with shame.

But why? How could this be?

Well, you see, for two weeks every villager had thought that he or she could get away with pouring a pail of water into the barrel because, after all, what would one pail of water matter with all of that wonderful sweet wine? Each villager had expected the other villagers to do their part, figuring that he or she had to do nothing.

What should have been a glorious celebration turned into the saddest day that the small village had ever known. ✨

Rabbi Steven Z. Leder

of Wilshire Boulevard Temple, a Reform

congregation in Los Angeles, particularly likes this story because it reminds us that we always need to bring our best instead of trying to get away with less. Reward, the rabbi reminds us, is commensurate with effort and sacrifice—so we can’t expect everyone else to do his or her part while we do nothing. “If one partner in a marriage tries to add water because he or she expects the other will bring the wine, the couple will have a watered-down marriage,” says Rabbi Leder. “If you try to parent according to that principle, you’ll have a watered-down family. If you behave that way as an employee, you’ll have a watered-down business. If you put nothing into your Judaism, what do you expect to get out of it? As a Jew, as a citizen of this country, as a citizen of the world, you always need to bring your best.”