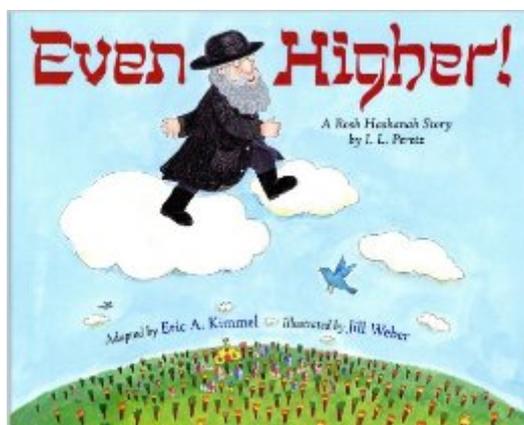


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# Even Higher!: A Rosh Hashanah Story



## Synopsis

Every year, just before Rosh Hashanah, the rabbi of Nemirov disappears. The villagers are certain their rabbi flies up to heaven to speak with God before the fate of every soul is decided for the coming year. But a skeptical Litvak scoffs at the villagers, claiming miracles cannot happen, and secretly follows the rabbi early one morning. What he witnesses--an enormous act of human compassion--changes his heart. Readers will be taken to a higher place in this celebration of the power of miracles.

## Book Information

Paperback: 32 pages

Publisher: Holiday House; Reprint edition (June 1, 2010)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0823422984

ISBN-13: 978-0823422982

Product Dimensions: 8 x 9.8 x 0.1 inches

Shipping Weight: 2.4 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.2 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (15 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #182,630 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #68 in [Books > Children's Books > Holidays & Celebrations > Religious](#) #74 in [Books > Children's Books > Literature & Fiction > Religious Fiction > Jewish](#) #207 in [Books > Children's Books > Fairy Tales, Folk Tales & Myths > Multicultural](#)

Age Range: 5 and up

Grade Level: Kindergarten and up

## Customer Reviews

In the original Yiddish short story by I.L. Peretz, the rabbi of Nemirov disappears on the days preceding the holy days of Rosh Hashanah. The Ukrainian villagers believe he has gone to speak to God on their behalf. A doubting Litvak, sceptical as men from Lithuania have a reputation for being, questions the truth of their belief. Kimmel opens his picture book adaptation with the core question, "Where did the rabbi go?" The Litvak determines to find out. Playful, gouache illustrations, chock full of cats, chickens, mice, and a nibbling goat, follow the human rabbi and spying Litvak as the Litvak hides under the rabbi's bed and sneaks behind when the rabbi, disguised as a peasant, chops wood in the forest and then lights the fire for a sick woman in the poorest section of the village. An endnote tells that the next scene was inspired by Kimmel's own grandmother at age 95 - The rabbi

sings a Ukrainian drinking song and pulls the old woman up to dance - before returning to the traditional tale. Afterwards, the Litvak, now a disciple, asserts that the rabbi of Nemirov has gone even higher than heaven. Aside from a curious three pages which slow the story down to over-explain how the Litvak is a doubter, this is the most child-friendly version of Peretz's classic story now in print. Light, upbeat art with figures like paper doll cut-outs and clear black font help connect this accessible tale of truly unselfish giving for readers ages 6-9. Sharon Elswit

Prolific children's author, Kimmel, scores another winner with this story that is based on a story by I. L. Peretz (1852-1915), titled "Oyb Nit Nogh Hekher", or "If Not Higher." In the original story, the miracle is that there are no miracles. You can save the world simply by being kind to others. In Kimmel's retelling of the story, we find ourselves in the colorful, simple country village of Nemirov. No one could find the rabbi, not among the hens, the homes, the pushcarts, or the shul before Rosh Hashanah. The villagers are convinced that their rabbi goes to heaven. It is Rosh Hashanah when God opens the Book of Life. Obviously, the rabbi goes to heaven to plead the case of forgiveness for the villagers before God. Well, it so happens that a Litvak came to town. A religious man, of course, but a skeptic, since he was a Litvak. (note: Litvaks are from Lithuania. Nemirov is in the Ukraine today, and was the birthplace of Reb Noson the disciple of Nahman and Bratslav, and at one time, part of the Austro-Hungarian empire, but I digress) He will prove the villagers wrong. He will follow the rabbi in secret and see where he disappears to. He follows the rabbi. The rabbi dresses as a peasant and heads to the forest. He cuts a load of wood and heads to the village to give it to an old, sickly woman. He poses as Vasily the wood cutter. He gets this sickly woman to live life. Ah ha... the Litvak realized, the rabbi did go to heaven,... or maybe even higher

I loved this story as a child and bought this book for my nephews...but this is such a weird version. It ends with the rabbi dancing with the old lady in her house but am definitely not giving it as a gift.

Had I not read the reviews ahead of time I would not have thought about the dancing not fitting in, but I did, and I understand why Mr. Kimmel put it in as a reminder of his grandmother, but maybe it wasn't such a great idea - out of respect for I. L. Peretz, maybe he should have just given us the story as it was. I also, like one of the reviewers, was very surprised at the description of the Litvak - but, I take into consideration when it was written. But, I was taken aback. That being said - I still gave it 4 stars. What a wonderful story about going even higher.

Peretz criticized holy people in a very subtle way, as he does in this short story. The rabbis congregants said that when their rabbi disappeared before the holiday, he went to heaven to pray for them. A man doubted this. He discovered that the rabbi used his time to help the poor, which reached higher than heaven.

This book, based on the traditional High Holidays story about the truly amazing Rabbi of Nemirov, is perfectly illustrated for youngsters. In addition, it has a most unusual twist from the classic Peretz version that is both "upbeat" and innovative--a cheerful semi-climax to a wonderful story. I believe this telling of the story with all the colorful and captivating illustrations will prove of value in sharing the theme of "righteousness" with children of all ages. It's great for parents and grandparents to read to the youngsters all through the year, not just before or during the High Holidays season.

Before I review this book, I just want to say that I generally love Eric Kimmel. I just don't think that this is him at his best. In *Even Higher*, Kimmel's adaptation of I.L. Peretz's classic tale, a Litvak follows the Rabbi of Nemerov on his mysterious excursion prior to Rosh HaShanah. I won't summarize the book further, as the other reviews do a good job of that. What I liked: The simple, folksy illustrations are quite pleasant and engaging. The way the text dances around the page shows excellence in art direction. I enjoyed the insertion of the historically appropriate drinking tune and the change in palette when the fire gets going in the old woman's cottage. What I didn't like: The absolutely terrible and inaccurate description of a Litvak. #1 - A Litvak is a Lithuanian (esp. a Russian-speaking one). #2 - A Litvak isn't a scoffer. A scoffer scoffs at everything, including G-d. A Litvak is a misnaged, someone who specifically scoffs at chassidim and their rebbes. He doubts their "miracles." Kimmel brings attention to the Litvak, but he never points out that the Rabbi of Nemerov isn't simply a rabbi, but a REBBE. These are not the same things. I understand that Mr. Kimmel wanted to give a little context to the story. The problem is that his mishandling of the chassidus vs. misnaged battles of the 18th and 19th centuries makes the subject more murky, not less, and is probably not age-appropriate anyway. I also think that the dancing is simply ridiculous. As another reviewer mentioned, if the old woman is so weak, how can she suddenly start dancing? It's a little over-the-top. Also, it is highly unlikely a Chassidishe rebbe would dance with a woman. There's a lot to like in this little picture book. There's also some problems with it. You might want to look at it carefully before deciding whether it's appropriate for your kids.

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