

January 20, 2022

Dear Shearith Israel family,

*That's What I'm Talkin' About!* I can't find an earlier reference to this phrase in music than in Fats Waller's *This Joint is Jumpin'* from about 1937 ([here](#) is a great rendition of that great song from what appears to be four years later). The phrase has been used in some lousy songs since, but I restate here – with proper emphasis on the “that's” – since doesn't it feel warranted? We have cautioned against under- or over-reacting to the admitted tidal wave of the Omicron variant of the Covid-19 virus. True, we have tightened some measures for the protection of those attending services. But we have kept communal services going.

The good news is that, in NYC, all disease spread and intensity indicators have begun to improve just since last week. They are all dropping, on some metrics, like a stone. (Harry Nilsson had his stone skippin', rather than dropping, but his 1968 [Everybody's Talkin' At Me](#), is just too great a song (whether or not you liked the movie *Midnight Cowboy* in which it was sung) to drop *or* skip the song here. Not only are the disease spread numbers improving; our Shabbat services have not just remained functioning but frankly have been magnificent. Last Shabbat, the Sanctuary was warmer, even though it was 11 degrees (F) outside. The choir was back. Rabbi Ira sang the Shira beautifully. Indeed, much of the parasha is in “above the line” trop – that extraordinarily beautiful cantillation that we do at special times of the year. (You have a chance to hear above the line cantillations again this Shabbat, in conjunction with the *Aseret Hadibrot*, or Ten Commandments.) Rabbi Soloveichik gave another terrific little talk. All this is in addition to record numbers of people calling or zooming in to hear lectures and talks during the week. Doesn't it feel like we are doing it the right way? Doesn't it feel like we are moving in the right direction, again?

Precautions this Shabbat will be about the same. Covid-19 precautions, that is. Events last Shabbat in Texas have put all synagogues on a higher security alert. We are all deeply grateful that the situation there ended as well as it did. Here, we are taking appropriate security measures and are relieved that, thanks to a Homeland Security Grant, we just recently replaced our front doors with identical appearing bullet resistant ones.) It should be a little warmer outside, we are determined to keep it comfortably warm inside, and we will again have Kiddush on the portico. This Shabbat is a very special one, and it would be wonderful to see more of you in our truly glorious Sanctuary. In a word, that really would be *what we are talkin' about!*

*Ten Words, For The World.* “Abandon hope all ye who enter here”. That is not only the famous inscription on the gates of Hell in Dante's *Inferno*. It also aptly describes the probability that I'm going to tell you something of value, or something you don't already

know, about the *Aseret Hadibrot*, or the Ten Commandments, or literally Ten Utterances or Ten Words, which we will read in Parashat Yitro this Shabbat. But I'm still going to try.

Of the *Aseret Hadibrot* Rabbi Sacks says (Essays on Ethics at 104):

“They remain the supreme expression of the higher law to which all human law is bound.”

That seems true, and beautifully articulated. These are Ten Words For the World. “L'havdil”, it's a little bit like FIFA's (the international football as in soccer organization) once-ubiquitous slogan, “for the game, for the world”. Now before you beat me up for the metaphor, consider that an order of magnitude of 10 million people watch the baseball World Series, an order of magnitude of 100 million people watch the Super Bowl, but an order of magnitude of 1 BILLION people watch the World Cup. It's truly for the world. Now, I don't rest my argument on sports analogies alone. I would emphasize two more prosaic aspects of the Ten Commandments, which may turn out not to be prosaic at all:

First, it's hard to find greater depth and scope in such brevity of expression. By any measure the Ten Commandments cover the most fundamental precepts of the relationship between the Almighty and human beings (Commandments 1,2,3); the cross-over Commandment in equal parts about our relationship with Heaven and our relationship with others (Commandment 4, concerning Shabbat); the relationship between and among human beings (Commandments 5-9); and the basic psychological underpinning of a law-guided and just society (Commandment 10; how else can you explain the fundamental importance of not envying or coveting). No list of more comprehensive scope could be imagined. And the Torah does all that in about 173 words (don't quibble about the number. I counted them myself, but there are a lot of hyphenated words, which generally I counted as two words each). We hear how amazing it is that Lincoln said what he needed to at Gettysburg in 272 words – but that's wordy and downright lavish in relation to 173. (Two marks for the first five entries of equally compelling, and brief, utterances.) Now I admit that comparison to human speech is unfair; after all, the Almighty didn't need to persuade, just utter. Still, it has been said by many that the Ten Commandments have had such an impact on humanity – certainly on Western humanity – in part because they are short enough to be memorized and absorbed into the consciousness. The lesson here is as plain as the shortness of the writing needed to utter it.

Second, the love affair that the Jewish people have had with the Ten Commandments is really quite endearing. Sure, these were the only Utterances told to the entire Jewish

people directly by the Almighty – though even there there is some dispute about the utterances after the Second. But being Heaven-spoken can't account for how dear they are to us all. After all, unless you were, so to speak, at the mountain where it happened, you didn't hear them directly from the Almighty either. It is hard to think of many more important Biblical passages (sure, the Shema – how about another?). The Talmud reminds us that, during the Second Temple, the Ten Commandments were considered so fundamental, so central, that they were recited at the tail end of the Shema, aloud, every day, as essentially a fourth paragraph. Wowza! The Rabbis stopped the practice because of the fear that the Ten Words would be given too much emphasis and that other commandments would not be treated with the same degree of importance. Interestingly, to this day, as a reminiscence of the central role they played daily, many congregational siddurim have the Ten Commandments printed for silent prayer and devotion. Ours does, on page 473.

The love affair with the Ten Commandments can be seen in another way, applicable to us today. There is a practice to stand for the recitation of the Ten Commandments. Our greatest commentators and decisors roundly decry the practice, including specifically Maimonides, whom we Shearith Israelites venerate nearly beyond measure. The commentators and decisors explain that it is essentially an insult to the rest of the Torah, and possibly even to the Giver of the Torah itself, for us to draw a distinction between the parts of the Torah that are worthy of our upright attention. And commentator after commentator agrees. Still, you aren't going to keep us down or in our seats. We stand, year after year, century after century, millennium after millennium. Could it be that we have such a love-affair with them because even now we and the rest of the world have not found a way to follow their simple and compelling messages? These Ten Words are truly for the world.

*Half-Full Report.*

*After Great Singing, Dance.* It was Faith Fogelman who suggested dance routines to supplement our song fest. SM Rosenberg basically occupied the field with her entries last week. They were:

- First, [a clip](#) of 90-year-old Dick Van Dyke
- Second, from [Anchors Aweigh](#)
- Third, another by Gene Kelly, from [It's Always Fair Weather](#)

But it ain't over. Her picks were great, and fun. But get a load of [Jim Nuzzo's entry](#), which he announced with the attempted game-ending flourish, 'nuff said. OMG those splits!

Do we have enough entries? One more week? Ok.

*Great Signs and Wonders.* Ruth Lazar again holds up the world with a cheery pic from Canada:



Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas