

September 29, 2022

Dear Shearith Israel family & Touro Synagogue Affiliates,

I Finally Begin To Understand. Rosh Hashana services were wonderful. Over 200 congregants and friends attended indoor and outdoor services. Everything went smoothly. Covid-19 did not seem to hinder us. The Rabbi, our Hazanim, our Choir were marvelous and deserve our deepest thanks. So do our lay participants: Avery Neumark, Mark Aaron, and Rafe Sasson.

I was thinking about why I find it so amazing that, as a community, while not fully past Covid-19's perils and challenges, we have found a comfortable way for maskers and non-maskers, Covid-vulnerables and Covid-comfortables, to co-exist in harmony. Why is that amazing at all, you might fairly ask? After all, we are all grown-ups (well, most of us are). Isn't it obvious that we would be tolerant of those with different preferences along the mask/unmask divide? My answer is two-fold.

First, many of us have keen attachment to our normally assigned seats. For some of us, that is an understatement. Yet by designating masked and unmasked sections, in many cases people have had to cede their cherished seats temporarily. We as a congregation are fully capable of having abiding disagreements over smallish things. Yet there hasn't been any fussing over seats. That is a mini-miracle all by itself.

Second, what I find so amazing about the harmony we have achieved is that, in so many ways, we are all so different outside the Sanctuary but, usually, when we enter our Sanctuary, we shed our differences and become one unified community. We hail from over 50 countries. Yet when we come together to pray we diminish if not eliminate inevitable differences in the observance of deeply held minhagim. Together we share one minhag. We all observe it. We all sing and pray in the same melodies. We all even start to look the same (meaning all men wear talitot, all don a hat, jacket, and tie for aliyot, and all the women wear pashminas because it's often freezing upstairs). We are one community without different services serving different sub-communities. One might have thought that the mask/unmask phenomenon, which has seriously divided other social organizations, might strain or stress us. Yet it hasn't.

Seeing us together on Rosh Hashana was deeply edifying. We have so much to be proud of as a community.

The Truly Hardest Three Words To Say. "Three Little Words" was a 1950 Tin Pan Alley movie starring Fred Astaire. "Three Little Words" is also the name of countless memoirs and lyrics and some actual song titles. The three little words, "I love you", seem to have a near monopoly on the hardest yet the best yet most hackneyed yet most profound words in our culture. The phrase is used in literally a zillion songs. It's even the punch line of the great Sinatra song, [here](#).

I'm not here to buck the trend of saying yes to *I love you*. Instead, I am here to suggest that saying *I love you* is indispensable to many interpersonal relations but are not the hardest three-word phrases to say. They are also not the three words comprising the keys to the kingdom this time of year.

I have to start a half-step back. I have quoted before these verses in Parashat Nitsabim, which we read this past Shabbat (30:11-14):

For the commandment that I command you today – it is not hidden from you, and it is not distant. It is not in heaven, [so that you could] say, ‘Who can ascend to the heaven for us and take it for us, so that we can listen to it and perform it?’ Nor is it across the sea, [so that you could] say, ‘Who can cross to the other side of the seas for us to take it for us, so that we can listen to it and perform it?’ Rather, the matter is very near to you – in your mouth and in your heart – to perform it.

These are simple but supremely powerful verses. I think we always read them right before Rosh Hashana (some calendar maven can correct me, but I think I’m right). So it seems generally accepted that what we are supposed to be doing at this time of year should not be all that complicated. It’s within our grasp, the Torah says, and does not lie in Heaven or far across the sea.

So what is it that we are supposed to be doing this time of year? My humble suggestion is that, on a communal level, we are pretty well set in terms of knowing what do to. As a community, our liturgy from Elul to Rosh Hashana through Kippur carries us from deep understanding of our finitude (that was my death-laden email of last week), to an appreciation of the Divine and the Almighty’s role in history and the memory of our people (that’s Rosh Hashana, when we don’t ask for forgiveness; our liturgy emphasizes the remembrance of the magnificence, and transcendence, of creation and our Creator), and then on to the miracle of communal repentance (that is Kippur).

Yet there is one crucial ingredient missing from this Cosmic Recipe of Renewal. It occurs on a personal level, does not have set talismans or rituals, yet it is so important that our Sages say that without it the whole Recipe falters. The crucial ingredient that is missing are in fact the three hardest words for so many of us to utter:

I am sorry; or

Please forgive me; or

I was wrong.

And, from our interlocutor, there are a set of three-word responses just as hard to say in return:

It is ok, or

I forgive you, or

Let’s move on.

By all means we need to tell all those we love that we love them. But we need to tell all those people and many more that we are sorry. Look them in the eye and sincerely, genuinely, earnestly apologize for slights and wrongs big and small. Don’t mumble through it. Details!

Mean it. I know, it seems petty and silly and even embarrassing to do. It's not what grown-ups do. It *is* embarrassing. And it *is* hard to do it. And when grown-ups do it, it changes our relationships for the better. JUST DO IT! Do it up to three times if the person you wronged is intransigent, our Sages instruct.

It is not an accident that the Fast of Gedalia occurs in these days – I'll be corrected if I'm wrong, but it seems to me to be the only fast day that involves contemplation and atonement for internecine fighting *between* Jews. Uttering the three hardest words is of profound importance. It is what makes us human. It is what makes the person we are apologizing to human. It then raises both of us to super-human stature.

On top of all that, here is an even more miraculous truth: If we can find the true strength and courage to say the three little words, *I am sorry*, and we can find the true strength and courage to forgive in return, then, and only then, we can ask the Almighty to do the same (to forgive us, that is). We will supply the missing final ingredient for a successful Cosmic Recipe of Renewal.

Built Back Better.

Hatikvah, again. This fascinating debate just will not end. I thought it was clear that *Hatikvah*, *Smetana's Moldau*, and *Tefilat Tal* came from a cognate source. I also thought we had proven that, absent information in the Ph.D. thesis I mentioned a couple weeks ago, some of the proof was going to have to be experiential – just listen to the pieces, and it just can't be that all these tunes were arrived at randomly. There are two more counties to be heard from on this. First, Barbara Reiss mailed in this interesting piece, [this article](#). Read it, and tell me whether you are persuaded. Second, David Vorchheimer sent in [this link](#) to the Jewish Agency archives on just this topic. He also sent in another piece that fairly mocked my insistence on unproven aural similarities, titling his email, "Oh come on." David attached [this](#), a piece by Saint-Saëns, *Rhapsodie Bretonne for Orchestra Op. 7b*, which has the same melody! (Listen at minute 4:00.) (David also caught a typo in my email last week – a musical canon is not a military cannon. Sorry.)

It makes sense that so many of us would want to know the provenance of *Hatikvah*; after all it is Israel's national anthem. What doesn't make as much sense is why it's so hard to find the answer. The song is not even a century old and was put to first use at a time when we had fairly reliable means of communicating and memorializing and maintaining facts. Does anyone have *the* answer?

5783's Word and Phrase To Live By. Last week we announced that Laury Frieber's suggestion of

Kaminando kon Buenos,

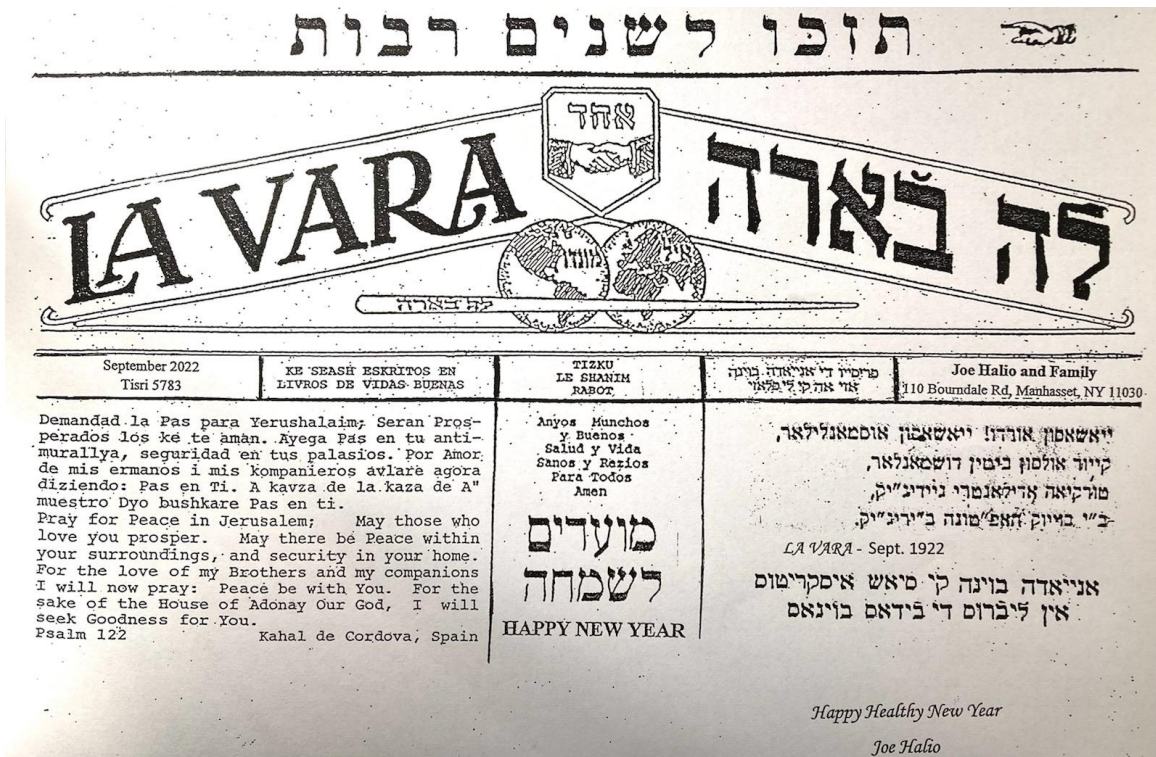
the Ladino adage to "walk with good", was the overwhelming favorite phrase for our community for the coming year. Final ballots this past week also brought us winner of the single word to capture the positive mood we need for 5783. It's is Michael Schulder's suggestion of:

Here, or "hineni"

I observed before that the word has at least five meanings that are meet for the task of describing how we want to be and see ourselves in 5783. It is an immediate call to action. It is reminiscent of our Patriarch Abraham's *hineni*, that spoken manifestation of commitment to do what it takes no matter the hardships. It denotes place, as in our Synagogue, as in come back here. And it denotes space, a "here," as in our observable universe.

So we have both our word and phrase for the year. All we need now are 1) Graphic t-shirts with the winning word and phrase, and 2) actually getting started, together, in making the word and phrase characterize our community. Join us, and help make these a reality.

Tizku L'Shanim Rabot. Many thanks to Michael Schulder, who not only offered the winning Word of the Year (5783) but sent in this photo of a 100-year old newspaper front-page (ignore some more recent insertions):



I can spot English and Hebrew and Portuguese/Spanish. Michael tells me that the Hebrew letters on the right side are a transliteration of Turkish. Can anyone help translate those? Anyway, it's marvelous.

Thank you all. Bless us all. G'mar tov. Here here! *Kaminando kon Buenos*. And don't miss the Rabbi's Shabbat Teshuba drasha this Shabbat after morning services.

Louis Solomon, Parnas