

September 2, 2021

Dear Shearith Israel family,

*Set Before the Sunset of Reset.* We are about as set for Rosh HaShana as Covid-19 and its virulent delta variant will permit. Maybe that's a little like saying, "people plan, G-d laughs". It's better than that – actually it's way better – but still there are vicissitudes that may require some last-minute decisions. As planned right now, we will be having three services on Rosh HaShana morning and two extra shofar blowings outdoors in the early and late afternoons of each of the two days of the holiday. More than 300 congregants have signed up and have presented proof of vaccination. We have over 50% more attendees signed up this year than last. It's simply miraculous.

You will forgive me for not being able to join in the various laments – why do several of us need to be tested, why do we have to be masked, why can't we sit in the seats bequeathed to us by the Almighty, why can't we hear Honorary Trustee and dear friend Norman Benzaquen read the haftarah (actually that one I do lament), etc. My own view is that, to get over 300 of us able to pray essentially together as a community, I would be quite content if we all had to stand on our heads (for one point, what rock group and album featured "coffee break's over; back on your heads"?!) Happily, science hasn't found that to be necessary or effective. But a year plus of effort has found effective ways to keep us reasonably safe. We will follow those precautions and sing a song of joy that so many of us will be able to pray together, hear the shofar, and usher in the New Year with optimism and joy.

*The Rosh HaShana Reset.* Rosh HaShana has been facilitating a "reset" or "reboot" for millennia, long before that computer jargon became popular. Yet there is something apt about the modern terminology. An electronic reset or reboot is, if you will, content neutral. That is, resetting/rebooting puts you back where you were – not worse off, but not better either. The reset/reboot gets rid of many of the anomalies arising since the computer or program was in its initial state, so you shed the more recent layers of confound and confusion, but really you aren't better off than the way the manufacturer made the machine or program in the first place.

You might say, well, that's not so much – why should we venerate a religion that gets you only back to square 1? The answer, I think, is that the phenomenon of spiritual, emotional, interpersonal do-over is miraculous in and of itself. As deep in holes as some of us dig ourselves, the notion of truly being able to reset is among the most life-affirming aspects of our religion. It is the very notion of *teshuba*, of repentance, of return. None of it would be possible without the initial ability to reset/reboot, which is bottomed on faith.

The theme of a neutral resetting with the capacity to improve features in many of our holiday prayers and themes. It is embedded in the two opposing views of Rosh HaShana itself: among the greatest of our learned Rabbis of the past several centuries have debated whether crying is prohibited or on the other hand required on Rosh HaShana. The theme is on full display on one of the pages of Tractate *Sukkah* that we learned this very week, as we finish that tractate and are moving on to Tractate *Beitzah*. Rabbi Soloveichik teaches a beautiful lesson about the saying of Hillel on page 53a referring to the celebration of the joyous *simhat beit hashoava* ("If I

am here, all are here, but if I am not here, who is here”). I want to focus on the two stories bookending this saying. The second is the famous story of the two attendants to King Solomon (no relation – or is there?). The king saw that the Angel of Death was disappointed because the two attendants were ready to be seized for death but could not be seized in Solomon’s presence. Hoping to help the two escape death, the wisest of kings sent the two to the town of Luz – where upon arrival they were promptly taken by the Angel of Death. King Solomon unwittingly sent them exactly where fate wanted them to go. (This popular story has been retold many times in different countries, languages, and epochs. Who has a version earlier than the Talmud’s? Who has the most famous of them? Two points each.) The point of the story is that we cannot escape fate and, as King Solomon said, people’s feet take them where people’s own inclinations independently incline them to go.

This story is not the only one on page 53a – and it is certainly not the only such story in Judaism. More extensive is the discussion interpreting three praises that were sung during the Sukkot celebration. One was, “happy is our youth, which did not shame our old age”. Such people, says the Talmud, are those pious and righteous their whole lives. The second praise sung, “happy is our old age, which has atoned for our misspent youth”. This praise refers to those who, having reset and rebooted, became righteous and pious later in life. The third praise would sing, both groups together, “happy is he who never sinned, but as for he who has sinned, let him repent and be forgiven”. What an extraordinary lesson, the one everyone could agree on and sing in unison together. At the end of time, fate awaits, but what fate is can be shaped and reshaped by the hardest act of human function: honest introspection, repentance, redemption based on deep faith. There is no more fitting introduction to Rosh HaShana.

Rosh HaShana does not demand all these things from us at once. For starters, all we have to do is reset and reboot and listen to our stirring prayers, participating as best we can. The beauty of Jewish calendar is that the rest of the process is reserved for the Ten Days of Repentance, Kippur, and Sukkot – but more on these later. For now, we cannot do better than to think of Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa’s famous quote (in *The Leopard*):

“If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change.”

Just so.

*Hall-Full Report.*

*The Guy Really Was an Einstein.* I asked a couple weeks ago who knew the intriguing story of how Einstein won the Nobel Prize. No one got it right, but when even a scientist or two didn’t know the story, I thought I would give you the very skinny version, since it fits the themes of the day. Einstein received the 1921 Nobel Prize in Physics. However, it was not conferred on him in 1921 but, highly irregularly, one year later, in 1922 (kind of like this summer’s 2020 Tokyo Olympics). And he won the prize for the photoelectric effect of particles, based on a paper from 1905 (a year in which Einstein published four papers that gave the year the name “the year of miracles”). The citation of the Prize read, for “services to theoretical physics, and especially for his discovery of the law of the photoelectric effect”.

Einstein did not win the Prize for his theories of general relativity or special relativity, even though each was more significant – overturning Newtonian Mechanics -- and even though Eddington had experimentally confirmed general relativity in 1919. There was politics in science (hard to believe, I know), and clearly there was resistance to giving any award to Einstein, a Jewish pacifist. So pronounced was the infighting for and against that the game reached a stalemate in 1921, when if Einstein wasn't going to get it then no one else would either. The impasse could not continue, and the ugly compromise came in 1922, backdating the Prize to 1921 and giving it to the genius for momentous brilliance but only for secondary momentous brilliance. Who got the last laugh? Well, we know that Einstein didn't show up in Stockholm to get the Prize; he was traveling in the Far East and Palestine, his one and only trip to the Holy Land. See [American Scientist](#) Vol. 70, No. 4 (July-August 1982), pp. 358-365.

*Picturing Paved Paradise.* Having been bested by Karen Daar's African Paved Paradise last week, Ruth Lazar roared back this week, with a seasonally appropriate Holy Ark/Synagogue theme for Rosh HaShana. Only one problem, says Ruth, for two of these we will need to sue the Catholic Church and the Government of Spain, and for the other we will just have to steal it from Italy. What a nice thought a week before Rosh HaShana. Karen, you got game!





Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom. Happiest, and healthiest, of New Years to us all.

Louis Solomon, Parnas