

October 6, 2022

Dear Shearith Israel family and Touro Synagogue Affiliates,

*Kippur 5783.* We made it! I really don't want that to sound like it was a burden. Kippur services at Shearith Israel are beautiful and truly uplifting. As a community, we knock, knock, knocked on [Heaven's Door](#) (see not just Bob Dylan but Tom Petty in this amazing video).

For the more than [# to be entered on Thursday morning] of us who spent all or part of the day together, we saw the beauty, felt the inspiration, and will carry the melodies (if not the feelings) with us all year. For those who were not with us, I hope that, wherever you were, you experienced the power of this blessed day. There is truly nothing as miraculous as a Day of Atonement to conclude Days of Awe.

*More than Just Nasty Aerosols.* I'm keeping a mental list of the *sliver of silver linings* we can attribute to Covid-19. With the deep sadness, set-backs, and dislocations experienced by so many during the pandemic, you can appreciate why I wouldn't turn the effort of finding even a sliver of a silver lining into one of our usual, big, iterative point-granting contests. You will recall that these emails *have* listed some *personal* benefits that some families experienced during the darker days (**see my emails on Pre-N-Post, including [June 9, 2022](#)**). Even there, however, no one thought of it as, net, having been worth it. And now I'm speaking at a more communal level, of benefits applicable to large numbers of us.

It is with this introduction that I hesitatingly offer the following *sliver of silver* proposal: the fact that needing to deal with Covid-19 has led many of us to be more educated about the transmission of airborne viruses than we were before. Put bluntly, most of us are more sensitive to what comes out of our mouths. We have all seen the videos of how far droplets fly from singing, coughing, and sneezing. We are mavens about mask wearing and how different kinds of masks affect how much virus spews from our mouths. We even spell "aerosols" without an extra "e," and how many of us did that before Covid-19?

The holy day of Kippur might encourage us to be mindful of what comes out of our mouths in two other respects. I humbly offer these as being far greater in importance, influence, and effect than just aerosols.

First, I am sure you see this one coming: Far more damage is done by diseased words than diseased aerosols, by vitriol and tones of anger than even a maskless sneeze. We are now so careful about some of what spews forth. How about the spew that does even deeper and more lasting harm?

Second, we live in a time and space of deliberate distortions of the truth, of astonishingly broad dissemination of news and information both false and fake. It wasn't always that bad – and it need not be like that now. My proof is as follows: We learn Tractate Ketubot 93a as part of the Daf Yomi Talmud cycle this week. This page of the Tractate has a Mishna asking how three

wives split up limited resources when the husband, for example, goes bankrupt. You would be skipping this, I know, were it not for the fact that a Jewish Israeli Nobel Laureate wrote a serious paper on this! Do we have many such analyses? Can you identify others? Oh so you're listening now, eh?

The Talmud asks, let us suppose the Ketubah for Wife A promises her 100; the Ketubah for Wife B promises her 200; and the Ketubah for Wife C promises her 300. (Let's ignore complications such as *when* the Ketubot were written or *when* the wives were married.) Now let us suppose, as the Talmud does, that Husband has resources of 100, 200, and 300, in each of three separate examples. By dint of some additional information supplied by the Gemara concerning how much of each example was agreed on and how much disputed, the Mishna arrives at the conclusions that,

- When there is only 100 to be divided, the division is A  $33\frac{1}{3}$ , B  $33\frac{1}{3}$ , and C  $33\frac{1}{3}$ ;
- When there is only 200 to be divided, the division is A 50, B 75, and C 75; and
- When there is only 300 to be divided, the division is A 50, B 100, and C 150.

Making sense of this division took some doing over the centuries. Israeli Nobel Laureate Professor Robert Aumann (who I think is 92 this year) made sense of it by considering the game theory underlying the question and articulating a rule that he did not invent but did make luminously clear, that:

*The division of the estate among the three creditors is such that any two of them divide the sum they together receive, according to the principle of equal division of the contested sum.*

What's even more clever is that Professor Aumann relates the rule to the fundamental rule of dividing contested objects that is adumbrated at the beginning of Tractate Baba Metzia. His paper is [here](#) and is both easy to understand and enjoy.

For our purposes, it is crucial to observe that the rule he derives from the Mishna, and what the Tractate specifically assumes, works only if the Wives tell the truth about what amounts were and were not contested in what they agreed to take from Husband. It is only when what comes out of their mouths is the truth that the "game" works at all. This is related to a point I made some months ago, in discussing how the Talmud's system of truth-finding and justice-dispensing is based on a fundamental respect for telling the truth ([see my email of August 11, 2022](#)).

As we head past the New Year and into our festival celebrating the happiness that comes from being a community, my hope and prayer for all of us is that we succeed in knowing, and controlling, what comes out of our mouths.

*Built Back Better.* What a glorious array of beautiful and brilliant insights from our fellow congregants this week:

[What's Love Got To Do With It?](#) This hit by Kygo and Tina Turner immediately comes to mind in thinking about how two of our best readers reacted to my comment that, as important as saying *I love you* is, apologizing, contrition, and forgiveness are the more concrete means of actually getting to repentance and renewal in these Days of Awe. First, David Sable says it's easy to throw "love" around but that, in a community, we have to live together. His proof-text is the great Frank Sinatra song, [Nobody Wins](#), with its perfect line:

*"The lovin' was easy. It's the livin' that's hard"*

Second, Jack Schenker's contribution is equally penetrating:

*"I love you" [is one thing] but even more powerful is "I like you." People fall out of love all the time; it's crazy rare to fall out of like.*

*Yet Love Endures.* Bentsi Cohen, true to his life's pursuit of excellence, corrected my reference to *talitot* with a short disquisition on the Hebrew of plurals, concluding that the right spelling and pronunciation was *taliyot*. I really do love being corrected. Then Bentsi offered a beautiful thought, this one in favor of love:

*As a cohen . . . I am required to bestow the priestly blessing both with G-d's love and my love. When I was a child in Ponivetz [Yeshiva] every Friday all the cohanim would gather. The Rosh Yeshiva would [question] us regarding our relationship with other children.*

*He (remember, it is 1949 to 1953) would make sure that all the students who were כהנים understood the importance of being at peace and loving the recipients of the blessings. Anyone who had an issue reflecting "bad blood" against anyone would not be allowed to participate.*

*Remember that after the big war many children were still under traumas; their minds had to be set peacefully in this task.*

*And so does positive speech.* Barbara Reiss adds the following beautiful thought:

*Not all of our oral emissions are bad. Although our sages encourage restraint (סיג לחמה שתיקה), there are certainly worthwhile uses for our powers of speech. In addition to prayer, we can inquire about our fellow congregant's well being, we can greet our neighbor with a smile and kind word, we can offer sincere praise to our spouse, child, or friend, we can offer words of encouragement to others, and as we have done throughout the Days of Awe, but can do throughout the year, ask others for forgiveness. These are the salutary "aerosols" that infect the environment with positivity.*

*La Vara*. Responding to Michael Schulder's 100 year-old edition of *La Vara*, Steve Beispiel sent in this fascinating dispatch (after Steve's quote I am re-inserting the image so that you can follow):

*This newspaper clipping is a real treasure. La Vara was the major Ladino newspaper in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century. It was the Judeo-Spanish equivalent of the Forward albeit with a much smaller circulation. La Vara means "stick" or "staff" hence the image of the stick in the logo, resembling a pointer or even a Yad.*

*The translation of Psalm 122 on the left is Ladino not Spanish. The phrase in the middle above happy New Year means, "Many good years, health and life, healthy and strong, for everyone amen."*

*In the lower right there's a Hebrew letter transliteration of the Ladino saying which appears in the box immediately to the right of the date. It says "Anyada buena ke seash eskrito en livro de vidas buenas," or "Good year, May you be inscribed in the book of good life." I'll say amen to that for all of us.*

...

*Ladino, like Yiddish, was written in Hebrew letters. It also had a cursive form known as Solitreo. I remember my great grandmother writing letters to her sons in the Congo in that script.*



Bless us all. Here here! *Kaminando kon Buenos*. Shabbat shalom. And *moadim l'simcha*.

Louis Solomon, Parnas