

January 5, 2023

The New Year Edition

Dear friends,

Happy 2023. I don't think I'm alone in thinking that the Gregorian calendar's change from 2022 to 2023 doesn't have the same emotional or spiritual impact as does Rosh Hashana. Yet in most other respects – our work timelines, schedules, and deadlines as well as in our social and personal lives – don't most of us think, plan, and even dream that January is the first month?

As the first month for at least a lot of important purposes, it seems fitting to dedicate this first email of the year to closing out one of the old and ringing in one of the new.

Closing Out An Old: Masking. In the past few weeks I've been suggesting that a change in attitudes towards masking to prevent Covid-19 disease spread might be appropriate. Since the science suggests that masking confers at least some benefit to the mask wearer, I've been urging us to let those who want to mask mask and sit socially distant while those who don't (assuming they are vaxxed, boosted, and don't feel sick) can make that different choice without imposing undue risks on the masked population. It is the way our Synagogue has been functioning, and it seems like a good strategy even as positivity rates exceed 15%, are populated by yet new and different variants, and are still climbing.

I now have a bunch of physicians writing in on the subject. The group is split with about as many agreeing with me as disagreeing. I am more willing to cite them anonymously, since they are rightly concerned that their educated but in the end personal expressions of opinions will be mistaken for fact (a problem I only *wish* I had). Several docs want to see more science supporting one-way masking. That's a fair point, but it misses my point. The problem is that the alternative that most people would opt for -- as an alternative to one-way masking -- is not two-way masking but no-way masking. And as compared to no-way masking we are certainly on safe ground saying that one-way masking has to be safer for the masked congregant—the one who likely is or feels vulnerable-- especially when sitting apart and in the vicinity of others who are also masked. Not everyone insists on remaining nameless. Dr. Michael Schulder, for example, agrees that we are proceeding down a "*sh'vil hazahav*" in our approach. Our favorite AI program enlightens us into what Michael meant, saying:

Sh'vil hazahav is a Hebrew phrase that translates to "golden path" in English. The phrase is used to refer to a course of action that is the most beneficial or desirable in a given situation. It is often used in the context of decision-making or problem-solving, to describe the option that is most likely to lead to success or the best outcome.

With that, I think I will close out 2022's discussion of masking, since I'm pretty sure I have now tired everyone with it.

Ringin in a New: C-A-M-P. Rabbi Yisroel Salanter is quoted as saying that, when he gets to his final resting place in the World to Come, all he asks for is 1) a shtender, and 2) Tractate

Nedarim. The preference makes so much sense given the vast scope covered and wisdom imparted by that Tractate, which we are now learning as part of the Daf Yomi Talmud study cycle. And who doesn't love those pithy yet profound sayings, aphorisms, or apothegms? There is another one of those that I think about all the time, and I'm willing to award a whopping three inflation-adjusted points to be reminded who said it: In a preface to some translation of the small Book of Kohelet, or Ecclesiastes, the scholar-translator turned a phrase to the effect that, as you go through life's journey, it is best to have this little book tucked under your arm.

I would like to share a tangentially related thought as well as invite you all to send in pithy and profound sayings, whether your own or another's. As background, I marvel at how our Sages and tradition teach us to approach each day. The education starts in our early morning prayers - the prayers before Kaddish and *Baruch SheAmar*. We usually recite these Morning Prayers at about 75 miles per hour; they take, oh, less than two minutes (max!) to race through.

Yet it is these Prayers of the Morning that give us all we need to make each day a blessing. I would like to focus on four short passages, which I think of by the abbreviation of C-A-M-P.

"C". The "C" in its hard sound stands for the first letter of the word "*ketoret*", which appears in a passage describing the incense burned in the Temple every day. We have observed many times that it is an essential part of our lives to see that we cannot see everything, to understand that there are things beyond our understanding. This is not a temporary state of ignorance. It's built in to the human condition. We need to start each day with the demoralizing sense of our mortal finitude. Yet even as staring our limitations and mortality in the face is a necessary condition, it cannot be all we do; too large a dollop of existential dread makes it impossible to get out of bed or into the office.

"A". Each morning we also recite the story of the sacrifice of Isaac, or the "*Akeda*" (hence the "A"). The story combines the inexplicable with one of its antidotes: faith. Without faith the swirling mass of "sense" is, as William James said, just busy, bussing, confusion. Faith is an island in the setting sun (yes of course it's Paul Simon). It reintroduces meaning into meaningless chaos.

"M". We at the top of the animal heap have also been endowed with more than faith. Each morning we recite the thirteen principles of interpretation said in the name of R' Yishmael. The "M" is for the word "*midot*", or principles, and also for the first letter in the first logical principle of the thirteen - "*may kal vachomer*". In the face of the mess that is reality, don't just sit there and have faith. [They'll be time enough](#) for faith when we run out of our human abilities to ratiocinate. THINK! Figure out this world. Make it better.

"P". But how to make it better? Every day we read two simple passages that some traditions put even further up in the prayers than we do (for us it's on page 7). "P" stands for the first letter of "*paya*", Hebrew for the corner of the field left for the poor. The term is found in the paragraphs telling each of us what acts of goodness and lovingkindness either have no limit or are as fundamental to the operation of the world as is Torah study. The paragraphs are chock-full of suggestions of good deeds in addition to leaving the corner of your field for the poor: gift of the first fruits; the pilgrimage offering; mercy; honoring parents; more deeds of

mercy; visiting the sick; befriending the stranger; helping community building by attending synagogue, bringing peace between human beings and between husbands and wives.

I do not know why “C-A-M-P” seems so meaningful to me. (Is it because there are few other words that connote such vastly different states of reality – from the most pleasant to the most monstrous?) You can use a different set of abbreviations if you want. The simple point is that, every morning, if you think about our finitude, our mortality, our being unto death-hood, and about the perceived senselessness of reality, and then you think about the three ways to overcome the dread that attend that senselessness – faith, reason, concrete good acts to help others – then you WILL find the blessing in every day.

Built Back Better.

Haiku Real or AI? The reactions to the demonstration of Artificial Intelligence-creating haikus were quite varied. Sarah Meira Rosenberg, who brought this cool new AI program to my attention (here is the link [again](#)), doesn't care much. She says just try to find new ways to compose haikus that the AI program can't. Others, like Haiku master Susan Vorhand, smirk at the poor ability of the computer to do something as simple as count syllables accurately. Susan keeps pumping out weekly parasha haikus, such as this one for parashat Vay'chi this week:

*Yaakov blesses sons
Life's lessons told and unfold
Eternity calls*

Here is another one from Cantor Jay Harwitt for this week's parasha as well:

*They moved to Goshen
And they all lived happily
Ever after. Not.*

David Sable loves the whole enterprise and, like me, is now obsessed with the AI capabilities available to normal humans like you and me. David went further. In a first of its kind that I've seen, he actually [did an interview](#) WITH the AI program. It's a hoot, but I have to say that if you were not concerned before, you might well be after reading the AI programs answers to David's questions.

As I mentioned, starting next week, for Sefer Shemot, we will be moving to limericks. Joel Schreiber wants us there already and offers the following, just to make sure haikus don't get resurrected any time soon:

*There once was a man with high IQ,
Yet so confused about Haiku...
His questions were good...
Yet still not understood...
He settled for the standard
TEIKU!!*

Two Final Hanukiot Sets. These were late, but they are both wonderful. The first is from Ruth Moser Riemer (can you see her reflection in the windows of her apartment?). The second, from Sarah Gross of our office, was done when she was at Stern College some years ago. Enjoy them both:



And a Final Farewell. This is not the place to mourn the world's loss of figures great and small in 2022. We do want to note with sorrow the recent passing of Maestro Leon Hyman. Leon served as Choirmaster of our Congregation for 66 years. He retired only just a few months ago, after conducting the choir during our most recent High Holiday services, and we paid tribute to him with a special performance of his original compositions this past Shabuot. He will be missed.

Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom. Here here! *Kaminando kon Buenos.*

Louis Solomon, Parnas