

April 11, 2024

Dear Shearith Israel family,

Our Year of Hope. The earthquake and eclipse that New Yorkers (among others) experienced this past week were, in their own way, seismic. Clearly, one of the things that made each special was the fact that many other people were experiencing the same thing at the same time. Special purpose communities came together – in one case by chance (and unwitting chance at that) and in the other, deliberately (some of our congregants traveled long distances to be part of the eclipse experience – if you did, email us, and let us know).

These natural events lasted between a few minutes and, oh, about an hour. Yet each is the stuff of a collective memory – did you feel the earthquake? Did you see the eclipse? (BTW, I can't compete with the photos online of the eclipse. But Tess did take a photo of an eerie blue in the Brooklyn skyline, which captures well what I saw outside my office window in Manhattan. If you took some cool photos, please send them in.)



Our Congregation's continuing ***Year of Hope*** celebration is also a communal event. It is also the stuff of collective memory. And unlike the two "e"s of this past week, Shearith Israel programming

is more enduring. I make a modest recommendation. Pick just one thing to devote yourself to for the balance of this Year of Hope – meaning until Rosh Hashana. Come to weekday minyan just once a week, in either the morning or late afternoon. Zoom into a class or lecture. Come to services on Friday night (this Friday night, by the way, is this season’s finale of Friday Night Lights – though the choir will be off, the rest of us can SING). Pick just one thing. Be part of the community. There is zero doubt in my mind that you will feel better not just for being able to experience the one thing but for being part of a community. I marvel at how such a simple task can pay so much dividend. But it does.

Daniel Kahneman posthumous post-script. Thanks to a tip from Joel Schreiber, I found that Nobel Laureate Daniel, whose passing we mentioned last week, was the nephew of Rav Kehanamen of the Ponevitz yeshiva. Rav Kehanamen was a powerful force during the Twentieth Century in the Israel yeshiva system. He is credited with building not only three yeshivot but a school and an orphanage. He died in 1969. Says Joel: “another great mind in Israel” but with such a “different life” from his nephew’s.

Muted Joy in Our Enemy’s Destruction. The “you’ve got to be kidding” reaction to my suggestion, that we might stick to Tehillim and the singing of Hatikvah and our National Anthem rather than join in the louder shouting of war songs with war imagery, has died down a bit. And I don’t want to pick at any scab that is healing. I did, though, want to share a nice thought that Gil Deutsch shared with me (it was not on this topic, so don’t blame Gil). Gil reminds us of the Almighty’s comportment in the Jonah story. Jonah finally gets to Nineveh, declares that it will be destroyed because of their evil, sinful behavior, and Nineveh repents and is spared by the Almighty. Jonah seems peevish and at best may be said to be respectfully confused about the absence of justice in the face of evil. The Almighty, however, treats Jonah with compassion, trying to teach him the modalities of mercy and empathy given the hopeless fallibility of human beings.

Humility in Action: Tractate Baba Metziah Page 42a. This week, the worldwide Daf Yomi learning cycle is studying pages 39 to 46. This Chapter of the Tractate (Three) focuses on *shomrim*, or guardians of property, as we discussed last week. The Mishna at the top of page 42a contains predictable rules that, for a *shomer* who is a volunteer – that is, one who is neither getting paid nor an expert *shomer* – the imposition of liability for a lost or stolen object will typically turn on how far the *shomer* deviated from the norm of how bailees (the term of art for *shomer* in most English translations of the Talmud) typically protect the property of others. You might think that that is an uninteresting proposition. Suffice it to say: it took the common law more than 1,500 years to arrive at the same understanding.

After this Mishna, Page 42a contains two related items of interest on the subject of quiet humility:

First, the Talmud retells a number of adages in the name of R’ Yitzhak. One states:

ואמר רבי יצחק: אין הברכה מצויה אלא בדבר הסמוי מן העין, שנאמר: "יצו ה' אתך את הברכה באסמיה". תנא דבי רבי ישמעאל: אין הברכה מצויה אלא בדבר שאין העין שולטת בו, שנאמר: "יצו ה' אתך את הברכה באסמיה".

And Rabbi Yitzhak says: Blessing is found only in a matter concealed from the eye, as it is stated: "The Lord will command blessing with you in your storehouses" (Deuteronomy 28:8), where the grain is concealed. The school of Rabbi Yishmael taught: Blessing is found only in a matter over which the eye has no dominion, as it is stated: "The Lord will command blessing with you in your storehouses."

What this is teaching, both by its plain language and as interpreted by later Sages, is that the right and good path is that of humility, the non-ostentatious, the non-showy, the discrete, the hidden, the *tzniut*.

Second, the very next thought makes the point even more powerfully:

תנו רבנן: ההולך למוד את גורנו, אומר: "יהי רצון מלפניך ה' אלהינו שתשלח ברכה במעשה ידינו". התחיל למוד, אומר: "ברוך השולח ברכה בכרי הזוה". מדד נאחר כך ברכך – הרי זה תפילת שוא, לפי שאין הברכה מצויה לא בדבר השקול ולא בדבר המדוד ולא בדבר המנוי, אלא בדבר הסמוי מן העין, שנאמר: "יצו ה' אתך את הברכה באסמיה".

The Sages taught: One who goes to measure the grain on his threshing floor recites: May it be Your will, O Lord, our God, that You send blessing upon the product of our hands. If one began to measure the grain he says: Blessed is He Who sends blessing upon this pile of grain. If one measured and afterward recited this blessing, this is a prayer made in vain, because blessing is found neither in a matter that is weighed, nor in a matter that is measured, nor in a matter that is counted. Rather, it is found in a matter concealed from the eye, as it is stated: "The Lord will command blessing with you in your storehouses."

I find the advice profound and beautiful. Before the event, ask for a blessing of success. Once the event is done, be thankful for what you achieved, not for what you might have had. Blessing is not going to be found in what you can measure by your artificial and arbitrary rules of weights, measures, or numbers. Be humble. Be discrete. Be *tzniut* (or would you rather use the more grammatically correct form *tzanua*).

Books. To all of you who are reading and not writing in about what you liked or didn't like, I have to ask only one question?

Nu?

For me, I think I expiated my error in confusing *The Man in the White Sharkskin Suit*, by Lucette Lagnado, and *The Orientalist*, by Tom Reiss. They are not confusable. As I mentioned last week, the

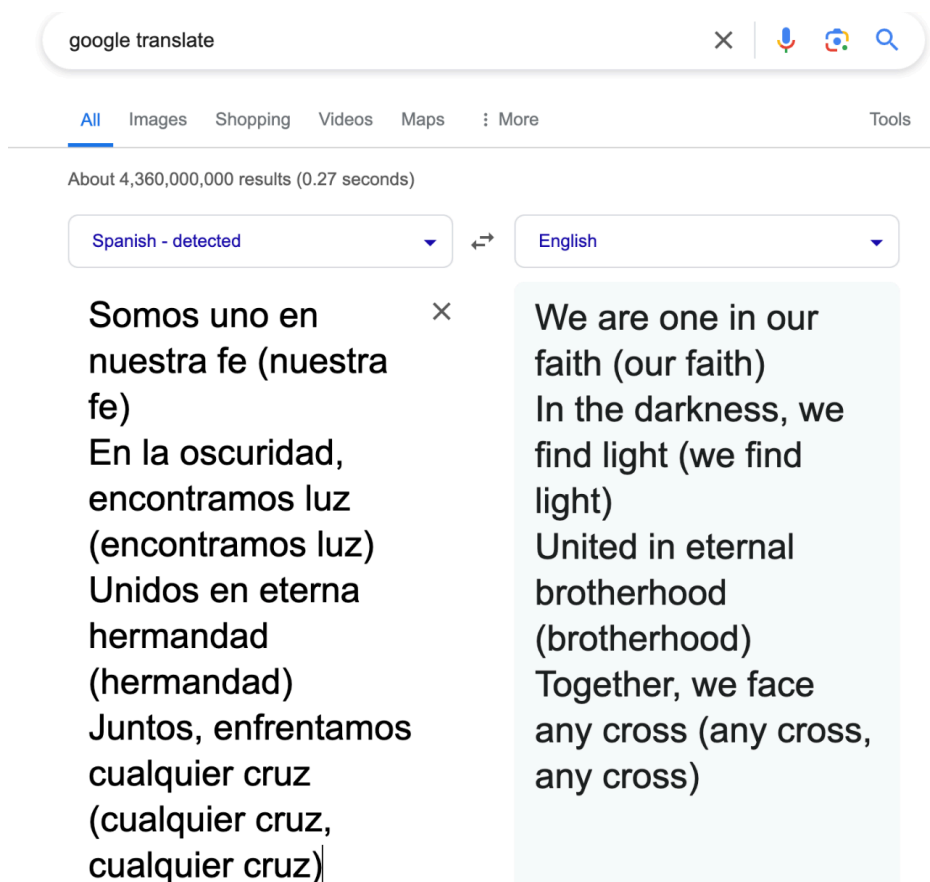
Reiss book is good (still no sighting of what Reiss has been doing for the past decade – weird). But I think there are plenty of better books like the Lagnado book, so respectfully I would skip it.

Shearith Israel Songs in the Key of AI. Can we fathom how fortunate we are to have SM Rosenberg working at Shearith Israel as our Communications Associate and Programs Coordinator? And not just because she is an author in her own right and our able next-gen editor of these emails.

I suggested last week that we should embrace, or at least experiment with, using artificial intelligence to generate songs about one aspect of Shearith Israel. SMR stepped up. The effort and the result are brilliant. She queried an AI music generator (Suno) and gave it a prompt of:

a cantorial chant about how nobody understands Spanish & Portuguese Jews but that's okay because we have each other

This is what she came up with: [listen here](#). Is it Rossi, to be sung for the next 200 years? Well, no, but that can't be the standard. It does capture something, especially the lyrics and especially the refrain or last stanza, which SMR ran through a Google translator to give this:



The image shows a screenshot of the Google Translate interface. At the top, the search bar contains "google translate" and navigation icons for search, voice, and image. Below the search bar, there are tabs for "All", "Images", "Shopping", "Videos", "Maps", and "More". The search results show "About 4,360,000,000 results (0.27 seconds)". The main content area displays a translation from Spanish to English. The Spanish text on the left is: "Somos uno en nuestra fe (nuestra fe) En la oscuridad, encontramos luz (encontramos luz) Unidos en eterna hermandad (hermandad) Juntos, enfrentamos cualquier cruz (cualquier cruz, cualquier cruz)". The English translation on the right is: "We are one in our faith (our faith) In the darkness, we find light (we find light) United in eternal brotherhood (brotherhood) Together, we face any cross (any cross, any cross)".

I'm blown away by the combination of music and lyrics and actually the whole enterprise. And, as SMR rightly notes, the use of "cross" in the refrain or last stanza is redolent of a double meaning of great moment for us.

More of us should try our hand at this. It looks like the prompt is key, so we need to think hard about how we would describe ourselves to a computer.

GOAT Songs Long and Short. We are in the meat of the order. The power hitters are starting to send in suggestions. The eclectic array is marvelous.

GOAT Long Songs. As of last week, we had

- [Layla](#), by Derek and the Dominos (Eric Clapton)
- [In-a-Gadda-Da-Vida](#), by Iron Butterfly, is a loooong song, says Billy
- [Won't Get Fooled Again](#), by The Who
- [Season of the Witch](#), here by Al Kooper & Co. (which I don't love, btw)
- [American Pie](#), by Don McLean
- [Stairway to Heaven](#), by Led Zeppelin
- [The Rain Song](#), also by Led Zeppelin

For this week, Lynnette Gruenhut suggests clearly one of the very best songs much less one of the very best *long* songs ever (the Guthrie):

- [Alice's Restaurant](#), by Arlo Guthrie
- [Hurricane](#), by Bob Dylan

Dr. Zachary Gorden also suggests the Guthrie great and then hits four more homeruns:

- [The End](#), by The Doors
- [Paradise By the Dashboard Light](#), by Meatloaf
- [Nights in White Satin](#), by The Moody Blues (I would disqualify this as too short to be long, but Zachary has an argument).
- [Bohemian Rhapsody](#), by Queen

Beth offers up:

- [Funeral for a Friend/Love Lies Bleeding](#), by Elton John

Warren Stern suggests one of the better Dylan songs:

- [Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands](#), by Bob Dylan

And, if we are going to be lenient on how long is a "long song", I want to offer

- [Band on the Run](#), by the incomparable Paul McCartney

GOAT Short Songs. Last week we had:

- [Her Majesty](#), by The Beatles
- [Oxford Town](#), by Bob Dylan
- [One by One, Two by Two](#), by Burl Ives

For this week, Joel Maxman clearly takes the prize with

- [The Shortest Song in the World](#), by Kenny Price.

I'd like to suggest, as a runner up, this great, unforgettable ditty from Mason Williams:

- [Life Song](#), by Mason Williams

These were sleeper categories of songs, and these lists are great. Ok, we need MORE.

Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom. *B'yachad* (united together). יהיה טוב *Yihiyeh tov* (things will be good).

Louis Solomon, Parnas