

When I went to college, I knew I wanted to be a rabbi. So, I took lots of Jewish studies classes. But Hebrew was impossible for me, and I nearly failed two years in a row. In my Talmud seminar I was the only student attending who had not gone to day school. I felt ignorant and inauthentic compared to the others in the class. For a time, I questioned whether I was really meant to be a rabbi, feeling that being Jewish was rigorous and only for a learned elite.

It turns out I was not the only one who has thought way. In the Torah portion we read on Yom Kippur Moses reminds the Israelites that to be God's people is not as hard as they think.

This Instruction ... is not beyond you or beyond reach. It is not in heaven, so that you to say: "Who will go up to heaven on our behalf, get it for us, and let us hear it, that we may do it?" And it is not across the sea, that you should say: "Who will cross the sea on our behalf, get it for us, and let us hear it, that we may do it?"

You think a good Jew is somehow "more religious"? No, Moses teaches. Torah is not just for those who pious or spiritual. "It's not in heaven." Nor can someone else be Jewish on your behalf – not the Orthodox or Israelis or the rabbis, cantors or Jewish educators. Being Jewish is not "across the sea".

Where, then, do we find Torah? "This is so very near to you - in your mouth and in your heart - so you can surely do it."<sup>1</sup> A decent Jewish life begins within the heart, and then it has to be expressed. Why with words (spoken, written or in our body language)? Because just as God creates the world by speech, words are the bridge between the good we want to do and good we actually convey.

What are the sacred words that build such good life? I think you already know the answer. I believe we all do. The proof is from something discovered through Google Translate, the software that is used to translate more than 100 billion words every single day. What are the most translated phrases? What is it that human beings most seek to say to one another? These three things: "How are you?", "thank you" and "I love you".<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Deuteronomy 30:11-14

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/Google/videos/2044277925668212>

The answer is *not* in the heavens. It is not across the sea. It's already there - in us. Yom Kippur simply asks us to be more aware of it. "How are you?" – express empathy. "Thank you" – show gratitude, be kind. "I love you" – take the risk of connection.

### **How are you**

Israeli Rabbi Dani Segel tells a story about how he had a child who had trouble going to sleep. He and his wife went to a therapist who suggested that for the first few days, when they put their child to sleep, stand next to her and say, "It's OK, sweetie, I'm here." Then, the therapist said, a few days later go further away in the room and say the same thing. The next week stand in the hallway and say, "It's OK, sweetie, I'm here." A few weeks later you will be in your room and, even without words, she will hear you saying, "It's OK, I'm here." Dani ended his story by asking, "How can I speak in a way that my children will listen; and how can I listen in a way that my children will speak?"

That is the power of a good question, one that comes from heart that is open, a mind that is curious and a place of inquiry instead of judgment. That is what "how are you?" is, at its best – not a phrase simply meant to fill the silence, but a way to say to the one before me that I am truly concerned about you. It is a phrase of empathy, saying I care enough to want to know what you are feeling. Yes, to really know how someone feels can be scary, because if you ask, the other person may actually tell you. But only when we ask – and truly pay attention – does real communication begin.

That is why, when I ask, "how are you?", I do it best if I remember to add just one word, "how are you ... really?"

### **Thank you**

Anyone who is a Factbook friend of mine knows that I like to share photos and stories of our grandson. What you don't know is how often my wife Anne has to stop me from putting up so many more posts. One of things I love that Asher does is that

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whenever I give him something he says, “tank u Baba”, melting my heart. That spontaneous expression of thanks is clearly because of his parents, and I admire that they are teaching him to say those words, for gratitude is the antidote to selfishness and entitlement.

Early on during this time of plague I came to understand that so many I take for granted – those who deliver our packages, who stock the supermarket shelves, health care providers and those who clean the bedpans, the teachers of our children, train conductors and bus drivers – are indispensable. What could I do to let others know how grateful I was? I wasn't in a city, like Italians who sang from their windows or New Yorkers who banged pots. So, I decided to start doing something I learned from my son by love, Danny, who goes out of his way whenever he sees police officers to say “thank you for all you do” to them. Time and again I saw how those officers reacted, and decided to do the same – in the supermarket line, to our mail person, to anyone I see helping others. I just say, “thank you for all you are doing right now. Thank you.”

Will it change the world? Perhaps not. But just maybe it will remind those I talk to that what they do is important. If a one and half year old can never say, “Tank u” enough, surely his Saba can, too.

### I love you

Every year right before Hanukkah I teach our 6<sup>th</sup> grade students and their parents the Jewish tradition of writing an “ethical will.” Unlike a legal will that deals with how an inheritance should be split, an ethical will talks about Jewish values. In that session we examine examples from the past. Some talk about maintaining family traditions. Others implore their descendants to keep a connection to Jewish rituals or Israel. Many speak about being a good person, showing humility or maintaining a sense of humor. What all of them have in common is the sense that if we really love others, we will live as they did in their most noble moments.

A few weeks ago, the rabbi I served with when I was first ordained, Rabbi Mark Shapiro, died after a long struggle with Parkinson's. There is so much that I learned

from him as rabbi. But one of the most important lessons I got from him was at his Shabbes table. Every week, after candles and *kiddush*, he put his arms around his wife Hanna and recited the traditional words from the Biblical book of Proverbs, *Ashet Chayil*. I know that some think this prayer too tightly defines the proper role of a wife. That said, there is something worthy about saying to a life partner, week after week, “you are a person of valor and what you do I not only admire but need to acknowledge.” It took me far too long for me to start saying that to Anne, but now I do. And I realize, now doing it many years, that I really cannot say, “I love you” enough.

The traditional words may not work for you; maybe you are not married; perhaps you don’t have a Shabbat meal every week. Even so, find a way – in notes, by text, through email – to ritualize the saying of “I love you” to those who matter in your life. This year, more than any other, we have seen how we can lose those we care about. If you want to follow God, to follow Torah, it certainly could not hurt to begin by saying “I love you” just a little more.

We come on Yom Kippur because we want to be better; but we forget, grow lazy, and our pain, fear or ego block us from saying the words we know can heal and unite. Far from feeling like failures for this, however, today reminds you and me how uncomplicated it is to get back on the right path. The answer isn’t far off. It’s here ...it’s here – and the collective yearning of what we want to say to one another as human beings is the proof.

This year, then, let us, with whole heart, say what God knows is there in us. “How are you?” – being more empathetic. “Thank you” – being grateful and more kind. “I love you” – taking the risk of connecting, knowing that even when those we love are gone, what matters most remains.

*G’mar chatimah tovah.*