Sephardic Wisdom for Challenging Times

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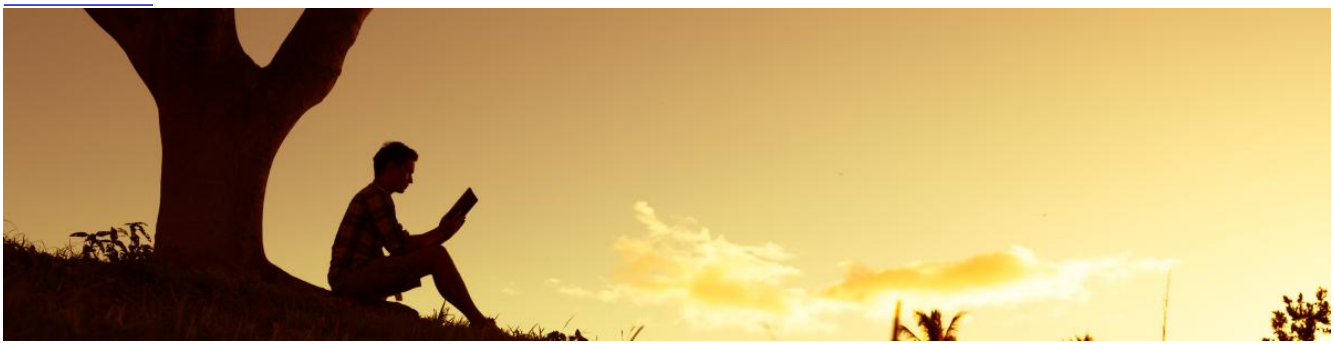

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El Dio no aharva kon dos manos! God doesn't strike with both hands!

In late summer 2020, I was invited by Kol BeRamah Torah Learning Center of Santa Fe to offer a class in Ladino via Zoom. I had been attending their Zoom classes and other events to both support and take advantage of the offerings of my friends Rabbi Avraham and Rabinessa (Italian for Rubisa) Liora Koén Sarano Kelman.

The idea for a Ladino class had come from a member of the community: Karen Teutsch, born in Belarus of parents from Colombia and Nicaragua, where she also grew up, aware of her Ladino-speaking Sephardic origins on her mother's side. After reading *The Key from Spain: Flory Jagoda and Her Music* by Debbie Levy, illustrated by Sonja Wimmer (2019) to her three-month-old son, Asher Emanuel, she was inspired to ask the Rabinessa if we could have Ladino classes. I assumed that Karen had been inspired by my good wishes in Ladino sent by chat at the Zoom *pidyon haBen* ceremony for Asher, which I attended because his name combined my family name, my father's first name, and one of my passions, German. Karen never did see the chats, but this story is worth sharing as an example of the wonderful connections between members of our diverse group. Having taught Ladino Language and Culture to students at Tufts University for 17 years, and, after Tufts, to a very special student, I was anxious to share our Sephardic language and culture with yet more people. I also realized that exploring this culture with its positive outlook embodied in the language might be just what we needed in these challenging times. And so was born "Explore Ladino!"

The class was approved for an initial session of six weeks, starting December 1, 2020, but all wanted to continue. Except for a Pessah break, we have been meeting weekly ever since, for one hour, at a mutually convenient time. Participants come from various parts of the United States and Canada and range from beginners to native Ladino speakers, from undergraduate and graduate students to

retired professors and grandparents, from Jews and others of Sephardic, Ashkenazic, and combined origin to those seeking to join our people. In terms of our ages, we range from one—Asher, our Asheriko—to 90.

While some have left because of illness as well as family and professional obligations, a few have also returned, and others have joined. Given our remarkable diversity, it is a challenge to find ways to bring us together and to ensure that every participant can benefit. One enjoyable, instructive, also typically Sephardic activity is singing in Ladino, even if we don't sound our best all together on Zoom.

At our first meeting I introduced *El Dio ke te dé salú i vida*, my musical version of our essential wish: May God give you health and life! This wish is first addressed to a single person, *te*, then expanded to the plural *vos*, all of you, and finally extended to include all of us, *mos*. Underlying this wish is the great value we place on health and, above all, life, and the unmistakable, confident hope that God will, indeed, hear and grant our wish. We sang these words together when we first met, and they have set the positive tone that characterizes our meetings.

We sing often, and often together. For Hanuka we sang not only "*Hanuká linda"* (Beautiful Hanuka), also known as "*Ocho kandelikas"* (Eight little candles), by Flory Jagoda, but also my own " *Hanuká."* Both celebrate the miracles and pleasures of the holiday with a Sephardic twist. Flory's song mentions the many joyful parties and the pastries with *almendrikas* (little almonds) and honey. The diminutives used to describe the candles and the almonds imply affection and closeness, thus enhancing the positive experience in a way characteristic of the language. The refrain emphasizes how the light multiplies and progresses to reach its full potential for "me," each individual. My song proclaims that even—just when—the weather and times are cold and dark, Hanuka is coming, and that we can, indeed, prevail, with courage and *kon el nombre del Dio.* The refrain, my mother's saying, found in a Hanuka parody from Salonika, features aunt and grandmother dancing for joy in the holiday and the *hanukía* (menorah). Both songs convey the happiness and promise of Hanuka in a specifically Sephardic way, as expressed in their very language.

We are blessed to have among us Susana Behar, who sings and composes songs in Ladino. For Pessah, she treated us to her stirring rendition of a Moroccan version (in Haketia rather than Ladino) of *Mose* [sic] *salyo de Misrayim* (Moses went out of Egypt). The familiar story of Moses' meeting with God at the burning bush is told in stark, almost minimalist terms. In typically down-to-earth, no-nonsense Sephardic fashion, God tells Moses to tell Pharaoh, if he doesn't let my Jewish people go, I'll punish him with 10 plagues that I'll send, *pa ke sepa ken se Yo*—so he should know who I am! The forceful, direct, very Sephardic language shocks us into reliving the heightened drama and relishing the liberating joy of Pessah.

On July 21, 2021, we were honored to welcome two special guests from Israel: Matilda Koén-Sarano, *grande dame* of Ladino and author of our textbook, and her sister Miriam Sarano Raymond, writer and specialist in dreams, whose poem "*La talega"* (The Gift Bag—for Tu BiShvat) we had discussed. We owe the idea and the realization of this wonderful occasion to the Rabinessa, Matilda's daughter, who planned it for during the time she would be visiting her mother. As our surprise gift, Susana and Matilda's grandson, Barli (Baruch-Lev Alfredo Kelman), gave a resounding rendition of Matilda's dramatic masterpiece, *Diálogo de amor* (Dialogue of Love, music by Haim Tsur), which we had sung in a previous class. The dialogue is initiated by and stars a strong, passionate young woman who falls in love with a passionately hostile young man on the bridge in Istanbul. We're told at the end that "They took each other by the hand, / And they went dancing. / And if they're not married yet—today they're going to get engaged." This song is so typically Sephardic, featuring a strong woman who knows and gets what she wants, passion on both sides, a locale that is still home to many Sephardim, and, not least of all, a happy end that respects tradition—they must get married! The

dialogue itself is full of scathing negativity, but the outcome reaffirms our positive outlook.

This positivity, almost palpable through the Zoom screen, pervaded the whole meeting: Matilda singing along with gusto, her masterful telling of a classic Joha tale in which negatives like ignorance and anger are dissipated through the lens of humor, members of the group conversing with our guests in Ladino, all of us laughing together. At least for this hour, the joy seemed to overwhelm the negatives: the technological difficulties that delayed our guests' arrival, the accident one had on the way, the passing this spring of their sister. Of course, we already knew Matilda from her wonderful textbook, the Fourth English Edition (my translation) of *Kurso de Djudeo-Espanyol (Ladino) para Prinsipiantes/Course in Judeo-Spanish (Ladino) for Beginners* (2008), which has provided a common focus for our meetings. A combination grammar, reader, workbook, and cultural resource, it includes a historical introduction, traditional and contemporary songs—like Flory Jagoda's *"Hanuká linda"*—essays, conversations, and proverbs. *Lisión No. 1,* the first lesson, teaches the basics of pronouncing and writing the language. It then presents, as the very first Reading (*Lektura*), a list of 15 *Refranes,* Proverbs (p. 9). They appear suddenly, like an unexpected gift, a reward for having gone through the preceding mechanics of the language, and are a prime example of its spirit, the culture it exemplifies.

These proverbs are overwhelmingly positive, affirming the preponderance of good and the joy of life and respecting women as human beings and as the decisive force in the home. Proverb 1 provides a suitable beginning: *De la spina nase la roza.* From the thorn the rose is born. Out of something that seems bad—sharp, potentially harmful—comes something good— smooth, definitely pleasurable. A similar message is conveyed by Proverb 11, *La ora mas eskura es para amaneser.*

The darkest hour is right before it dawns. This proverb has its counterpart in English, but the language of the Ladino version suggests a yet richer meaning. *Para amaneser* can mean "about to dawn," as reflected in the above translation. But it can also mean "in order to dawn," suggesting that the relationship between darkness and light is not only temporal, but causal as well. Not only will the darkest hour soon give way to light; the darkest hour is, exists, in order to dawn.

Light can grow out of darkness, much like the rose from the thorn in the first proverb. The negative forces and aspects of life become, then, not only things to avoid and overcome, but also sources that nourish the positive. Though we were already in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic when our class was proposed, and I realized the potential of exploring our positively inclined language and culture to provide an antidote, we could not foresee the challenges the following months would bring, nor did anyone anticipate the full effect of that antidote. At the beginning of each meeting I offer the traditional greeting, *Ke haber?* Literally, "What news?" I expect and hope for the stock response, *Todo bueno,* "Everything's OK." Too often I've gotten the alternative answer, which I taught half in jest: *No demandes.* "Don't ask." In these past nine months we have, indeed, faced more than the usual, expected challenges—as individuals, as a group with ties to Jewish and especially Sephardic culture, as a nation, and as creatures who inhabit the earth.

On Wednesday, January 6, we had the first meeting of 2021. I had hoped to share not only good wishes, but news of the many events and resources concerning Ladino and things Sephardic. But that night had already become defined by the unprecedented storming of our nation's capitol. Some emailed me that they were too upset to come. Others came, but they felt as if they were still watching the incredible events unfold live on television and could think of little else. This was no time for my notes and plans. Putting them aside, I asked everyone to think of what they had learned so far. Was anything still relevant? What response could Ladino and Sephardic culture offer? With just a little prodding, a gentle reminder of those proverbs, the answers came, first as a trickle, then as a mighty stream! First came a proverb we had learned, then another, and then one remembered from family tradition. The shocking images on television, though never completely displaced, became more and more overshadowed by the positive spiritual images from a cultural tradition that, rather than succumbing to

the negatives, reimagines them as an often integral part of the basically positive grand design. *De la spina nase la roza! La ora mas eskura es para amaneser!* Though we did not leave that class meeting laughing and singing, as we often do, we did feel better equipped to face new challenges with hope and courage. A few days later, on Sunday, January 10, our Jane Mushabac, author of works in English and Ladino and founding creator of the annual Ladino Day in New York, played a starring role in this year's virtual celebration, which she had co-created. As for me, I left that January 6 class feeling strangely comfortable and confident, with renewed appreciation of and gratitude for the treasure that is our Sephardic tradition.

I usually follow my initial greeting and their responses with news regarding the progression of the Jewish year. As indicated, we celebrated Hanuka with contemporary songs in Ladino, notably Flory Jagoda's *"Hanuká linda."* We also shared our impressions, some from personal experience, of Flory and her music. A little over a month later, we mourned her passing, on January 29, 2021. Some of us attended and even participated virtually in the *shiva*, the *korte de trenta* (*sheloshim*), and the memorial concert. In class we learned and sang another of her masterpieces, *"La yave de Espanya"* (The Key from Spain). Singing those beautiful words to that haunting melody, we could celebrate Flory even while grieving. Like the key from Spain, she was living on in our memory, even while hidden from our view.

We have had our share of challenges during the past nine months of Explore Ladino! Aside from the news of murders, devastating accidents and disasters, and tragedies like the collapse of the Surfside Condominiums in Miami, we faced our own illnesses, operations, accidents, and injuries. We cared for loved ones with COVID-19 and other afflictions, and even mourned them, as we mourned others close to us. Through it all, we have been comforted, nourished, and sustained by the energizing positivity of the language and culture we explore together. Early on I suggested that participants give short, informal presentations in Ladino, in whatever form and on whatever subject they choose. I wanted to encourage active participation and expected simple, pleasant vignettes. To my delight, we have been treated to a series of little masterpieces, with more to come. First to present was Judith Leznoff, who sang and discussed her favorite Ladino song, *"Avre este abajur, bijú"* ("Open This Shutter, My Jewel"), with feeling and obvious pleasure. Jane Mushabac told us how she came to write *Mazal Bueno: A Portrait in Song of the Spanish Jews* for National Public Radio, now a CD, starring Tovah Feldshuh as Jane's wise and exuberant Ladino-speaking grandmother from Canakkale.

Perla Vida (Pnina) Asher Samuels, my relative, shared her touching poem, in which her mother, of blessed memory, offers wise words, including the proverb about the darkest hour, that give her courage, hope, and even joy in these sad and stressful times. The Ladino version of a poem that Noa Eshkar had written in Hebrew and then in English (*"An Actor"*) challenged us to discover multiple layers of meaning, some related to her Sephardic heritage. Elsa Arditti Farbiarz conjured up for us a magical neighborhood in the Bronx, New York (mine!) where Ladino was heard on the streets and in restaurants like her grandfather's. There young men far from home would find familiar food, fellowship, fun, and even love—as did Elsa's father with her mother, who was working there.

In her moving "Sephardic story," Vivi Ojalvo Silverstein, cousin of Susana Behar, honors her family, originally from Istanbul, by detailing their journeys and challenges, recalling their customs, songs and sayings and reclaiming Ladino, her ancestral language. Showing photos she collected, Karen Teutsch told the story of the Teutsch family from late sixteenth-century Hungary, where the family name was Aschkenazy, to their long sojourn in Germany, to the present. Notable in Germany was Arthur (Asher) Teutsch, an honored lawyer. Arthur's two sons made it to the United States, but Arthur was killed in a concentration camp. Karen's son, Asher, is named after this great-great-grandfather. Each presentation is not only an original, contemporary piece in Ladino, but a unique, personal expression of the very spirit of the tradition. Thus Karen's story ends not with the victim of the Shoah,

but with his namesake and heir to his legacy.

Like our singing, learning, laughing, and struggling to find sense and hope together, these presentations have helped us connect to each other and to the language and tradition that unite us. Thanks to these shared activities, *Ya mos izimos famiya!* We have really become a family!

As such, we share anecdotes and jokes, family treasures, and news of our activities. Each participant has made a unique contribution. For example, Stanley Habib, Professor Emeritus of Computer Science, uses his expertise to save us in emergencies and facilitate communication. Stanley has also been introducing Ladino songs, proverbs, blessings, and other materials to the Boston Workers Circle, a traditionally Ashkenazic, Yiddish-speaking community to which he belongs.

Rhonda Miller suggested, set up, and manages our Google group, which helps us communicate beyond our meetings. Rashelika Cohen has organized a Jewish tour of her native Greece conducted in Ladino to be scheduled during a Jewish holiday, so that synagogues there will be filled with worshippers and thus saved from being repurposed by the government. Dianne Mortensen reads aloud and does grammatical exercises with pleasure and precision, reflecting her knowledge of and enthusiasm for linguistics. Torin Spangler, a graduate student who has researched Sephardic connections on his mother's side, enriches our meetings with his perceptive comments and unique Portuguese-flavored Ladino. Sara Gardner, a graduate student who is already a recognized scholar and popular writer, shares her expertise in Sephardic culinary history and its implications with characteristic enthusiasm. Adams Kornnblum Carney, an undergraduate currently exploring his Jewish roots, shares his considerable knowledge with humor and grace. Reed Spitzer, also an undergraduate, brings freshness and curiosity to his exploration of Ladino.

The family treasure that Perla Vida (Pnina) Asher Samuels shared with us is found in a book published in memory of her cousin Shelomo Asher, son of Emanuel Asher, by the family: *Para Munchos Anyos* (For/Looking Toward Many Years, Tel Aviv, 2002). A compilation of blessings, prayers, and songs for Rosh Hashana, including the *irasones* (*yehi ratsones*), according to Izmirli custom, it is written in Hebrew and in Ladino in Hebrew letters (here in transliteration). At the end there are one hundred wishes, one for every occasion, as Perla Vida notes. It is these wishes that she has shared with us, 10 at a time. What a welcome, appropriate, typically Sephardic gift—expressions of hope for something positive, for us and everyone else! As one of the wishes says, *Eyos tengan bien i mozós también!* May they have it good and we, too! This wish, traditionally found at the end of a folk tale, was said in my family when something good happened to other people. Though we didn't begrudge them their good luck, we did wish for some for ourselves, too. This wish is a reminder of where we started: *El Dio ke te, vos, mos* d*é salú i vida!*—and of the positive path we continue to seek.

A month ago, when my dog, Jozepiko (Yosef, originally Joseph Francis) died, I was consoled by our Sephardic language and culture, transmitted back to me by my Ladino family. How wonderful to hear those proverbs and expressions from them! *El Dio no aharva kon dos manos!* God doesn't strike with both hands! A few days after his death, verses came to me, first in English and then, more forcefully, in Ladino. I offer them as a closing tribute to the healing power of our potent Sephardic antidote to all negativity.

Life is flat and empty.	*La vida sta vazía, sin savor.*
Joseph's gone.	*Jozepiko ya se fue.*
True when I (just) wrote it.	*Verdá kuando lo eskriví, agora.*

Now, move on. *Ayde, alevántate!*