

Numbers, People!

By: Mordechai Schmutter

Let me start off by saying that I've never been part of Hatzalah. I deeply admire what they do, and it's not that I'm not inspired, but I have what the medical community refers to as "trouble getting out of bed". If I were a member of Hatzalah, and a call came in at three in the morning, the other members of my team would have to swing by my house on the way to the call to help pull me out of bed, and then they'd have to pause again once they got to the patient's house in order to roll me off the stretcher.

Nevertheless, I am close with a lot of the people who are actually involved in Hatzalah. In fact, Hatzalah makes up about sixteen percent of my shul, until such time as a call comes in, at which point they are out of there so fast that their tallesim are still hovering in place for a couple of seconds before settling on their chairs, as if these guys just vanished into thin air. And from what I hear, if there's one thing that really bugs the good men of Hatzalah, aside from getting called away in the middle of making an omelet so that they can come look at a rash or chauffeur someone to a doctor's appointment, it's that people are just not taking care of their house numbers.

You know how it can be. How often have you found yourself looking for a particular house, driving around town at dusk at roughly one mile per hour, squinting around for any numerical sign that you're even on the right block?

"You can't miss it," they told you over the phone. "It's next to the one with the fountain."

"What's the house number?" you asked.

"There's a fountain," they said. "It's right next door. And my black Camaro is in the driveway."

Or else they give you some other clue. "It's the eighth house from the end," they say.

"So you want me to drive to the end, turn around, and count eight houses?" you ask.

"No, silly," they tell you. "It's a one-way street!"

But is your house any better? Has anybody ever mentioned to you that they had some trouble finding your house, only you glossed them over because you weren't exactly looking for an actual answer when you asked how the drive was? Do you excuse this by saying, "Anyone who knows me knows where I live?" What about Hatzalah? Do they know where you live? Is sixteen percent of your shul in Hatzalah too?

When you have a simcha, you put out balloons so that the mechutanim can find your house. Do you also put out balloons when you're having a heart attack?

“But I don’t plan to have a heart attack,” you might be saying to yourself. “I take good care of my body. I gave up fried foods, and trans fats, and soda, and carbs, and sautéed foods, and anything else that tastes halfway decent, and I have a treadmill buried under that big pile of clothes somewhere, and no one ever jumps out of closets and yells, “Boo!” at me and almost gives me a heart attack. And I never get into accidents either, because I don’t leave roller skates on the stairs, and I keep my pot handles pointed at the inside of my cabinets, and I wear a seat belt and a bike helmet, often at the same time. Plus, I’m going to live forever.”

To that we say: We hope you’re right (although we don’t want to eat at your house on Shabbos). But if anyone else on your block requires the services of Hatzalah, from, say, trying to avoid you on the street and running into a mailbox, then don’t you think that Hatzalah will find this guy faster if everyone on your block had a visible house number? Probably not, because he’s laying right there in the middle of the sidewalk. But you see our point.

And then there are the people who think they have adequate house numbers, and can’t imagine why they have to peer out their window every other morning to see their carpool honking in front of someone else’s house. If you are one of these people, you have to ask yourself: Are your numbers big enough? Are they blocked from certain angles by tree branches, or shadows, or tall grass, or that big honking SUV that has been squatting in front of your house ever since you moved in? Do you have black numbers on a navy blue house? Do you have numbers on your front door, so that they disappear when you open it? Do you have numbers on your back door, because that’s the one you always use? Do you have your numbers on your garbage can, and if so, are you always aware of when they’re rolling down the block?

And what kind of print do you have? Do you have the kind where the number one looks like a seven, and the six looks like an eight, and the two looks like a script “Q”? And speaking of script, are your numbers written in script? Why? Do you think it makes you look educated, so that people will say, “Wow, he actually went to Third grade”? Hatzalah is supposed to be able to read your numbers in their sleep, but it takes actual brainpower to read words. Imagine if your alarm clock said “six thirty-two” in script. You would never get out of bed. In fact, just look at the Ancient Romans. They all thought it was a great idea to put up Roman Numerals on their houses, until the time came when EMS found themselves zooming around town on their little rickshaws, trying to remember which number “L” stood for. This could be why we tend to see so few Romans around today.

Here’s a good way to tell if you need to do something about your house numbers. Stand on the sidewalk in front of your house and make sure that you can see your numbers. Can you see them? Good. Now back up a couple of steps until you’re almost in the street and try again. Can you still see them? Keep backing up until you’re standing smack dab in the middle of the street. Do you see all of the cars swerving to avoid hitting you? At this rate, you should definitely do something about your house numbers.

Of course, after all this, there are still people who are not going to do anything about it. They're going to read this article, laugh at the jokes, and then go back to being oblivious to the fact that this article was directed at them. So what should Hatzalah do about these people? Sure, they can impose thousand-dollar fines, like the police do in certain parts of Maryland, and then use the proceeds to pay for some of their major expenses, such as fueling the trucks. But what if people don't want to pay? Hatzalah is not just going to refuse care; they're Hatzalah - they'd never do that.

Our suggestion, of course, is that Hatzalah do the exact opposite - they should give these people care. If someone refuses to pay the fine, Hatzalah should smash into his house in the middle of the night and load him onto a stretcher, and then bring him to the hospital, and say the following words, which are not entirely untrue: "There is something wrong with this person, and we are not sure what it is." Then they can stand back and watch the doctors perform exploratory tests until his insides look like mayonnaise.

But then, that is just our suggestion. And that's why we're not in Hatzalah.