

April 21, 2022

Dear Shearith Israel family,

Mule Between Bales of Hay. And the mule turns left... No right... No left. And it does that for so long that it eats from neither bale of hay and starves. Is that an apt analogy? A smart, educated, practiced physician emailed me this past week to say that the “chance of becoming ill (or infecting others) while coming to [Shearith Israel for services] is approximately equivalent to the chance of me 'playing out' six times in a row on my iPhone Solitaire game” (he later explained that his beef had to do with the marginal benefit of our robust air purifying system). At nearly the same time, a smart, educated, practiced physician also told me this week that the disease spread numbers are getting sufficiently high that serious consideration needs to be given to reverting to masking up indoors, fully – just as several highly renowned health care facilities and institutions are doing. The positivity rate in our neighborhood is approximately 12.5% and has risen 50% since last week.

We had a really wonderful turnout for services over Pesah. Congregants whom we have not seen, literally, in two years, were back with us. It was wonderful. It was warmer on Shabbat, so we had Kiddush outside on Paved Paradise. We will do so again for the end of the chag on Friday and on Shabbat if the weather cooperates. In other respects we will stay with our status quo, with both mask-only and mask-optional sections, with the air purifiers quietly whirring and scrubbing. And in the peace and calm that only our sanctuary can give, think about the mule – and try to calculate in our heads the actual odds of playing out a Solitaire game six times in a row.

Metaphor Moment. I recently mentioned how interesting it would be to collect the extraordinary metaphors used in the Talmud (see [my email of 2.24.22](#)). I am still feeling cramped for space to do that here. But how could I pass up the comment on page 45a of Tractate Yevamot, read as part of this week's Daf Yomi cycle. In answer to a question, the great sage Rav was trying to show that the offspring of a particular union (between certain Jewish and non-Jewish participants) was unobjectionable. The individual who asked Rav this question, and who in fact was such an offspring, then said, well, ok, then let me marry your daughter. Rav declined. At that point the Rav Shimi bar Hiyah, who was Rav's grandson, said, sure, people say that a camel in Medes can dance around in a tiny circle – until you actually go to Medes and never see it. His point was that it is sometimes easier to maintain a legal position in the absence of actually having to test it in actual practice. It's a great metaphor.

Contest: Two points for memorable Talmudic metaphors. Come on; this could be very fun.

Stranger Than Truth. In a periodical called *Religions* as recently as 2021, James Watts, apparently in the Religion Department at Syracuse University, published an article titled, *The Historical Role of Leviticus 25 in Naturalizing Anti-Black Racism*. The author's thesis is typical of the genre:

Leviticus 25:39–46 describes a two-tier model of slavery that distinguishes Israelites from *foreign* slaves. It requires that Israelites be indentured only temporarily while *foreigners* can be enslaved as chattel (*permanent property*). This model resembles the distinction between White indentured slaves and Black chattel slaves in the American colonies. . . . Demonstrating this awareness shows with high probability that colonial cultures presupposed the two-tier model of slavery in Leviticus 25:39–46 to naturalize and justify their different treatment of White indentured slaves and Black chattel slaves. (emphasis supplied)

To refute this thesis, we don't have to reach for the actual laws of servitude in Judaism, or for Judaism's rules for the redemption of slaves, or to the Talmud's dictum that, in Judaism, to gain a servant is to gain a master (citation please, without looking). All of these are sound bases for the view expressed – eloquently by Rabbi Sacks – that Judaism set in motion a system of rules with the inevitable consequence of creating freedom and equality of all people under law.

Nor do we have to dwell on the immediately suspect proposition that Jews treat strangers poorly. How many times does the Almighty remind us that we were strangers in a strange land (see my discussion of some crazy stuff on [11.12.20](#))? Doesn't it seem, well, strange that with all that remonstrance we would institutionalize the disparate treatment of strangers? The assertion is as wrongheaded as it is wrong.

Actually, all we need to consider is the confluence of three readings, two Biblical and one Talmudic. They are all this week's fare. And, at least to me, they thoroughly undermine Watts's errant thesis, as popular as it has been over the ages. On the first day of Passover, at the end of the Torah reading (Shemot 12:47), we read the verse – astonishing in any epoch, but especially today – that

תִּנְרָה אֶחָת יְהִי לְאֶזְרָח וְלִגֵּר הֹגֵר בְּתוֹכְכֶם:

There shall be one law for the citizen and for the *stranger* who dwells among you.

Then, on the second day of Passover, we read the verse (Vayikra 23:22) – equally astonishing in any epoch, and again especially today – that

וּבְקִצְרְכֶם אֶת־קִצִּיר אֲרָצְכֶם לֹא־תִכְלֶה פֶּאֶת שְׂדֵךְ בְּקִצְרְךָ וְלִקַּט קִצִּירָהּ לֹא תִלְקַט לְעַנִּי וְלִגֵּר תַּעֲזֹב אֹתָם אָנֹכִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:

And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap all the way to the edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor *and the stranger*: I יהוה am your God.

In each of the readings on these two important days, the Torah could hardly be clearer that the stranger is to be treated with the same legal protections, the same dignity and respect, as the home born.

Highly relevant to this is the third reading this week: it is the discussion on pages 45b-46a of Tractate Yevamot, which we read as part of the Daf Yomi cycle. (My personal blessing is that I was able to learn these pages with our son Yosef, who, like so many of our magnificent congregational children, is home for the holidays.) The discussion there is precisely about the issue of whether slaves are chattel, or personal property. The back-and-forth interprets the same verses as Watts quotes plus the very next one, Vayikra 25:47.

The upshot of the Talmudic discourse (with complications ignored) is that 1) non-Jews, who may not acknowledge the same constraints in their treatment of indentured persons as Judaism imposes, may never transfer to a Jew dominion over the person of another (as opposed to the fruits of that person's labor) because non-Jews do not have that dominion in the first place, and 2) absent actual freedom of choice by a person selling *himself* or *herself* into servitude, Jews too may not possess dominion over the person of another (again in contradistinction to dominion over the work product of another). This distinction, between dominion over the person and dominion over the fruits of the labor of a person, is fundamental. Each of us who is employed by another consents to the fruits of our labor being owned by another. Few of us believe that that is ethically questionable. On the contrary, many of us believe it is the fundamental building block of a free society. It is the genius of the Torah and its interpretation in the Talmud that, absent the protections amply accorded a worker by Jewish law, one cannot exercise dominion over the person himself/herself.

The thesis that Jews disfavor the stranger – the lynchpin of the Biblical slavery misunderstanding – seems about as popular and overused a myth as the most vital of libels against Jews over the centuries. (Who has other examples? I do, but you go first.) There is nothing like our Festival of Freedom, and the uncanny timing of the discussion of the topic in the Daf Yomi, to debunk it.

Half-Full Report.

A New Contest. Congregant Bruce Cohen wondered if my use two weeks ago of Sisyphus and dead cats (as in a dead cat bounce) in the same phrase was a first for humanity. His funny comment prompts a thought. I used both images to describe movement over time, but in each case the metaphor carried a secondary meaning (Sisyphus, that of the monotonous drudgery of never getting over the Covid cycle of disease mutation; Dead Cat Bounce as a momentary blip after a steep fall.) These temporal metaphors are deeply embedded in our language and culture (though maybe dead cats bouncing is better known to traders and stock market analysts – and now you). So how about a new contest, this one for *two* inflation-adjusted points each, since it's tricky. Quote (or make up) the best descriptors or metaphors for the following phenomena:

- The renewal of Spring
- Hearing the same joke one time too many
- The reaction we have to the sanctimony of, say, a reformed smoker

Great Signs and Wonders. Our friend for many decades now, Lisa Wurtele, sent in the following. She describes it as a “timely mathematical illustration at Hebrew U. depicting our journey from calculating how to reach the heavens at the Tower of Babel, to taking a 40-year rest in our desert trek from Egypt, till we reached the Promised Land of high tech!” It’s fabulous:



Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom. Moadim L’simha. And may the violence end soon.

Louis Solomon, Parnas