

April 7, 2022

Dear Shearith Israel family,

Sisyphus and Dead Cats. As everyone knows, Sisyphus was a Greek mythological character who annoyed Zeus by cheating death twice. Zeus punished Sisyphus by making him roll a heavy boulder up a hill, getting it nearly to the top, whereupon it rolled back to the bottom. Sisyphus must go back down, retrieve the boulder and trudge back up the hill again, avec boulder, nearly reaching the top, only for the boulder to roll back down again. Shlep, slide, repeat. Over and over and over again. This went on, well, forever. “Forever” is only slightly longer than what it *feels* like to many of us, having to experience and take precautions against successive Covid-19 waves of disease, as they wash over our city and neighborhoods. We experienced the disease itself, then Delta, then Omicron, and now the BA.2 subvariant of Omicron. And there were a bunch of micro-blips along the way.

This analogy, poor to begin with, is even less compelling when you consider that Sisyphus’s effort did not seem to lessen over time. Millennia into his hapless task he is still exerting the same effort – and, alas, getting the same poor result. With the miracle of vaccines coupled with the genius of modern epidemiological and disease prevention techniques, the perils posed by Covid are lessening for most of us in each successive wave. Pandemic becomes endemic, we hope. And we can move forward with our lives, not repeat the shlep up the hill over and over forever. What we are facing is more akin to a dead cat bounce, or maybe a successive number of dead cat bounces (the description is from stock market analysis – though the visual image seems immediately available to even those who don’t follow the stock market).

Here at Shearith Israel, your Covid-19 Working Group is keeping a watchful eye on neighborhood disease spread metrics. Covid infection rates are up again this week, with hospitalizations and deaths again down. We will maintain our status quo. It is working marvelously well. That means that you can return this Shabbat – and it’s a BIG one – and choose to sit in a fully masked area or in a mask-optional area. You can join us for a great Kiddush. And you can see our beautiful tent on Paved Paradise, which we reinstalled this week (and is pictured below). There is lots to come for. Please do.

Shabbat HaGadol. This Shabbat we observe Shabbat HaGadol, which occurs the Shabbat before Pesah. There are many well-known reasons why it is called Shabbat HaGadol, including because of stirring words to that effect in the haftarah. It is a Shabbat when religious leaders of communities typically give lengthy or BIG lectures or *drashot*. Rabbi Soloveichik will deliver his at 6p Shabbat afternoon. His title is *The Perpetual Passover of Private Schulman: A Tale of World War II and Eternity*. Please join us.

I’m going to open another contest, offering one point each for other reasons, *with sources*, explaining why this Shabbat is called Shabbat HaGadol. This year, what strikes me is that it is surely a Great Shabbat that so many of our Congregational young adults have returned or are returning. These are our native sons and daughters. They are (finally) getting back to a

semblance of normalcy (now what passes for normal for some of them is itself a mighty interesting question). It is GREAT that they are back, even if for only a few days, a few weeks, or just for the first days of Pesah. Their presence among us entertains us, enlivens us, enriches us. We are all blessed to have them back, even briefly.

The Glory of Oy! I wonder if others think, as I do, that “oy” is a modern term, maybe taken from the Yiddish. How many of us would claim that the term was well known by the time of the Mishna, so +/- 2,000 years ago. (Are there even pre-Mishnaic references? One point for each citation.) The term “oy” is used twice on page 29a of Tractate Yevamot, which we studied this week as part of the Daf Yomi cycle. It is worth considering when and why the Talmud uses the concept of “oy”.

The Talmudic discussion centers on the complex interplay between sometimes inconsistent categories of doing *yibum* (levirate marriage) vs doing a normal divorce through a *get*; when *halitzah* can cure a problem and when it can't; and when the order in which a husband betroths one woman or another actually matters. To boot, there is a dispute between Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel. So, to dummy this down a little, the Talmud works through many permutations of these cases. They get very complicated. And there are many, almost countless permutations. In virtually every one, the brilliance of the discourse finds its way to a state of affairs where parties can go about their lives as they wish OR, if they can't, it's because of something one of the parties did. Our sense of justice is satisfied when, well, at least the participants did something to bring an undesirable state of affairs upon themselves.

The final case – the one begetting the “oy” – concerns a man who really does nothing “wrong” yet winds up with neither of the brides he wishes to wed (and who wish to wed him). The case is surely rare: There are three brothers, two of whom are married to two sisters, and one who was single. The husband of one of the sisters dies childless, leaving behind his wife, and the single brother performs *ma'amar* (a formal step just before *yibum*) to the wife. Before consummation, the second brother dies, and therefore the second brother's wife, the sister of the betrothed, is unmarried and available to the single brother for *yibum* as well. Now in this plainly rare case, and now focusing on Beit Hillel's view, which becomes the law, since the brother has not yet entered into formal marriage with the first woman (remember he came close, performing the step right before it), he is required to perform levirate marriage with *both* women. To do that, however, he needs to divorce the first woman both via a *get* and by *halitza*, and he needs to perform *halitza* to the second would-be spouse as well. But having done that, he can now be with neither of them.

It is about this scenario that the Talmud bemoans:

זו היא נשְׂאֵמְרָה: אוֹי לוֹ עַל אִשְׁתּוֹ, וְאוֹי לוֹ עַל אִשְׁתּוֹ אֶחָיו

This is the case that was referred to when the Sages said: Woe unto him for his wife, and woe unto him for the wife of his brother. (Sefaria Tr.)

The genius of our Sages is that the no-way-out declaration of defeat – the “oy” – is as rare as it is. But, alas, it is still there, at least theoretically. The point is that there *is* irreducible pain that our people, or at least some of us, must endure. When it occurs, our Sages didn’t break the rules or “enlighten” or “reform” their way around them. It is surely left to future generations to see if there is a way *within the framework of halacha* to work out of the irreducible stringencies, to eliminate the pain. *Koach d’hetera adif* -- it is much harder, and much more meritworthy, to find ways to ameliorate the stringencies than to succumb to them. The goal, however, is not to water down the system but to work within it. These concepts were fully formed by the time of the Mishna and are seen repeatedly in the discourse of the Gemarra. At the same time, there is a rude honesty that, at some times and in some places, we have no choice but sadly to intone, “oy”.

Half-Full Report.

A-N-I. We have two runner-up finalists behind our daughter Lia, who knew that the three most challenging Talmudic Tractates are Eruvin, Niddah, and Yevamot, or עני. Both of our other winners were just shagging grounders in responding, since they both know immense amounts of and about Talmud: Guy Reiss and Fred Ehrman (and btw, Fred has a great weekly(?) email of divrai torah that you should sign up for). Guy earned his second point on this – not just the right answer but a source for who said these three were the most challenging – by citing indirectly Rav Yaakov Emden. Fred earned his second point by a citation to the Zohar 3:276a (which I read and found unfully comprehensible).

Song and Album Titles. SM Rosenberg picks up two points for her interesting entry. SM, a/k/a Sarah Meira, not only ably assists us in the office but does podcasts! (She sent me a couple of episodes – they are good! Check out “[Nice Jewish Fangirls](#)” wherever you get your podcasts). Her song/album combo – to compete with Paul McCartney’s *Ever Present Past* and *Memory Almost Full* – are from the artist Jason Mraz, “a singer-songwriter who was known for his rapid-fire lyrics and love of words (which in that sense makes his music similar to rap, but he’s generally a lot more melodic).”

His second album is called *Mr. A-Z*, which Sarah Meira points out is a play on the artist’s name, Mraz. She couples that with the first single from the album, titled “[Wordplay](#).” So I get it, and really like not just how clever Mraz is but how clever Sarah Meira is. I will leave to you to decide between this and *Ever Present Past* and *Memory Almost Full*.

Miracles, Signs, and Wonders. I used a variant of this subtitle for months to introduce cool pics from around the ‘hood and the world. No one – other than Beth – got my Paul Simon allusion. Today, a week before Pesah, I trust the references to miracles, signs, and wonders will not elude the rest of you any further. Our Paved Paradise is back in business! Our tent was reinstalled this week. Look how beautiful is this miracle, sign, and wonder:



On Paved Paradise this Spring and Summer, we have a lot planned for our lot. Congregational events. Events for smaller groups. Movies. Barbeques. Soccer. Services. Everything. Lots of fun! Make it your outdoor home (well, to a point). Everyone is welcome.

Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom. May the violence end soon.

Louis Solomon, Parnas