

June 23, 2022

Dear Shearith Israel family,

Settling In, or Out, for the Summer. Summer officially began this week. It is a time when Shabbat attendance thins out a bit, as some congregants enjoy summer homes and others travel for vacation. The choir is off until the holidays in September.

There are so many songs about summer that I dare not offer any big point rewards for naming great ones. Actually, I think I could charge a little for sharing your favorites, but maybe that would sound churlish. So let's try it this way. I will happily share some of mine and hope that you will reciprocate and share some of yours for no points at all. For starters, I offer you the Chairman of the Board singing [Summer Wind](#), and the Chad and Jeremy singing the timeless [Summer Song](#). I don't know why I'm starting with basically end-of-summer melancholies. Help me with some fun ones.

On the topic that no one wants to hear much about anymore, the Covid-19 protections that we have been observing will remain in place for this Shabbat as well. Unless the weather has other ideas (as it did during last week's gusty Shabbat), we will hold Shabbat morning services and kiddush outside, with Friday and Shabbat afternoon services indoors. The Rabbi's Shabbat afternoon class will be outside. Mask-only and mask-optional sections are working perfectly well when we are indoors, and we will continue with that.

Riddle Me This Rabbis. At their best, riddles test our ability to think critically, applying our knowledge to new and unstudied areas. Let's call these logic riddles.

At their less-than-best, riddles play on words. Language-based riddles have a place in the world, but not on the vaunted, elevated pedestal reserved for logic riddles. (You disagree? Tell me why.)

Riddles have been with us for a long time. Riddle books like to date the earliest riddle back to Sumer, about 4,000 years ago:

"There is a house. One enters it blind and comes out seeing. What is it?"

The answer is a school. Get it? It's a language riddle, not a logic riddle. It's ok, but just.

Recently, we read a haftarah (Naso) about Sampson. Rabbi Soloveichik gave a wonderful lecture on one of Rembrandt's *Samson* paintings that same day. Sampson was a jokester, really a prankster (anyone got some good examples? Ok, one point each.) He was also a riddler. He asks his dinner guests (Judges, Ch. 14):

"Out of the eater, something to eat; out of the strong, something sweet."

The answer is the bees building a hive inside the carcass of the lion that Sampson killed with his bare hands. This is a sort of logic riddle. It does however rely on word play and is marred by Samson's apparent killing of 30 innocent people to make good on the promise he made to his dinner guests. So let's call this riddle something less than our best example of shrewd logic in action.

If we have seen anything in our episodic travel through the Talmud in these emails, it is that Judaism highly prizes true logic. Logic animates every page of Talmudic text. Logic *riddles*, however, are less frequent, though Talmudic discourse often features them. The Talmud for example frequently asks what single act can cause x number of sins at the same time. This is a true logic riddle.

Logic riddles are on full display in the Tractate Yevamot pages we are learning as part of the Daf Yomi cycle. Indeed, there are seven in a row on page 97b, with another several on page 99a. And unlike annoying friends, the Talmud actually supplies the answers right there in the text; you don't have to come back next week, or look at endnotes, or click through irrelevant and unwanted ads.

The logic riddles here are amazing. Let me share a couple to give you the flavor:

First, let's take a simple one. The Talmud says:

אָח הוּא, וּבָרִי הוּא, אֶחָתִיָּה אֲנִי דְהָא דְדַרְיָנָא אֶכְתָּפָא

A woman says: He is my brother and he is my son; I am the sister of this one, whom I carry on my shoulders.

As the Talmud teaches, the answer arises in a case where someone has a child by his own daughter, who bears him a son, and who is therefore both brother and son. The scenario was borrowed – brilliantly, but still borrowed – by one of the Twentieth Century's great American novelists (novelist and name of novel for two points, though everyone should know it; it's barely worth one) and inspiring a lower brow ditty, [I'm My Own Grandpa](#):

Second, the Talmud ramps up the complexity:

אֲנִי וְאַתָּה — בְּנֵי אַחִי, אֲנִי וְאַבּוֹהַּ — בְּנֵי אַחִי, אֲנִי וְאִמִּי — בְּנֵי אַחִי

You and I are children of siblings; your father and I are children of siblings; your mother and I are the children of siblings.

Oh take a minute, and at least *try* to figure it out. . . .

Ok, I'll tell you. The Talmud emphasizes that this can occur in entirely permissible circumstances. (I'm using the Sefaria translation – the Schottenstein translation, which I used

for the text of the riddle itself, gets to the same place.) Reuven has two daughters. His brother Shimon married one of them, and the son of Levi, a third brother, married the other one of them. The son of Shimon makes this statement to the grandson of Levi. They are cousins from their mothers' side, Shimon's son and Levi's son are cousins from their fathers' sides, and Shimon's son and the mother of Levi's grandson are cousins from their fathers' sides.

The world's great philosophers, scientists, and mathematicians are always offering riddles (one point for each great riddle by a famous person). When homage is paid to the past for the benefits of riddles, we hear all about Greece – and, to be sure, the Greeks boasted some fairly decent logicians. But they could field no one like our Talmudic Sages. When are the Sages of the Talmud recognized for their logical brilliance?

Half-Full Report/Built Back Better. This week, your correspondent is far-flung. The typical report (*what* typical report?) is being replaced with a dispatch from the Holy Land.

Beth and I came for a short trip to visit Joseph, who has been learning here for two years. Covid-19 restrictions and concerns kept us away until now. (So, of course, Israel is currently experiencing a spike in Covid-19 cases worse than ever.) But come we did, and I would like to share four vignettes, with photos:

First, we spent a day in Tel Aviv, something we rarely do. O-M-G!

- What strikes you immediately is the language. Everyone is speaking Hebrew. With English being so ubiquitous elsewhere, you would expect to hear a little. But you hear essentially none. No more do you hear even the smattering of English words with a thick Israeli accent. The population trends young, and their Hebrew is beautiful. You won't be so impressed until you yourself see and hear it. (The one exception, the back of a T-shirt in English, was so "high-tech Israel" that I had to capture it):



- The gentrification and urbanization are amazing. Talk about Built Back Better! Skyscrapers along with converted Templar buildings.



- You come upon Sarona Market, a food court rivaling anything I've seen anywhere. Just look at the listings of the food stalls. Some are even kosher!



- For the annual book fair (one location in Tel Aviv, one at the old train station, or *tachana*, in Jerusalem), hundreds of stalls were devoted to Hebrew language books from mainly Israeli publishers.



Second, while in Tel Aviv, we visited “ANU”, the “Museum of the Jewish People” a/k/a the Heritage Museum, located on the campus of Tel Aviv University.



At many points it’s hard to believe you are in a museum, rather than, say, a terrific visitors/welcome center. There are two highlights that you must experience, and for these alone, the museum is worth a detour:

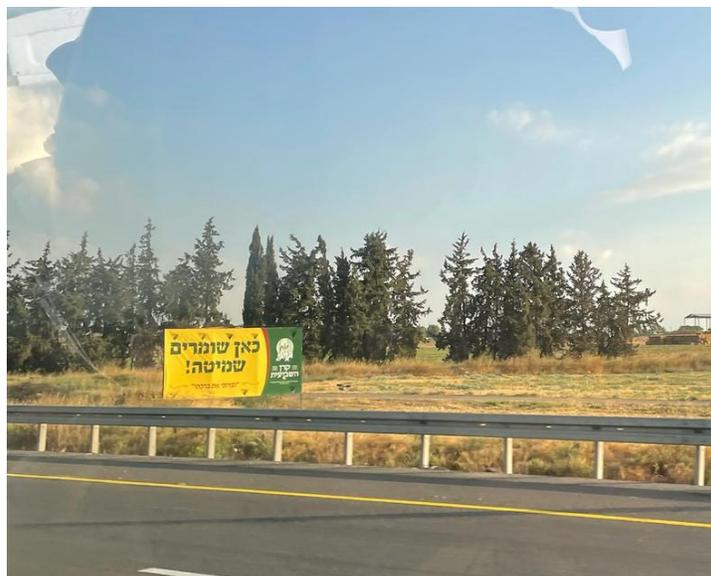
- On the second floor, loosely dedicated to tracing the path of where Jews lived throughout history, there is a small booth with an animated video depicting *Anusim*, or the many of our ancestors who practiced Jewish rituals in secrecy rather than being persecuted or

killed. The video cannot capture the importance of the story it is telling. The sound-track, however, features our Congregation's version of *Bendigamos*. It is beautiful and sublime.

- In the Hall of Synagogues on the first floor, you will find two true highlights. One is a miniature of Touro Synagogue. Right next to it is a large candlestick, used at Shearith Israel before 1730. I've tried to photograph each. It will not be lost on anyone how marvelous it is that these two objects sit right next to each other, in a museum called "ANU", translated as the collective, unified "we."



Third, on the way back to Jerusalem, you see signs declaring that the fields of grain you are passing are observing the *Shemita* year – the last in the seven-year cycle of years when, as the Torah teaches, the land is to be given a rest. The signs, and the concept that Israel today would be observing *Shemita*, are thrilling:



Fourth, we return to Jerusalem. Jerusalem remains magnificent, magical, miraculous. I can't pen words remotely adequate to describe it anywhere like it deserves. So I share a single photo overlooking the Old City, at sunset. The sky colors have been untouched, that is, by human hands. [Hallelujah](#) (as sung by Milk & Honey, which won Eurovision in 1979).



Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas