

June 30, 2022

Dear Shearith Israel family,

Back on Terra Fruma. Over the past two weeks, Beth and I have been to many synagogues in Israel and London. They've all been marvelous (though to paraphrase who in what movie, "some were more marvelous than others"?). Obviously, you are expecting me to say that there is no place like home. It's true. We have a special privilege to pray as a community at Shearith Israel.

Three other short points are worth noting: First, many of the synagogues whose services we attended are struggling to maintain in-person participation in communal prayer. In part that appears to be due to its being the summer. In part it is certainly due to the continued presence of Covid-19, which in different places is in different permutations of the pandemic's evolution but is still keeping some people away. Knowing that many other synagogues are experiencing the same challenge as we are is reason for us to double-down to make our minyanim work. Please be a part of that.

Second, those who have returned to communal services exhibit the same variations as we and our neighborhood synagogues do in adherence to Covid-19 precautions. Given the self-evident self-selection process of returning to synagogue for communal prayer, those who have returned skew heavily towards those who prefer reduced precautions.

Third, unlike all the places visited, Shearith Israel is unique in the two respects now animating our own summer Covid-19 protocols: i) we have a very large indoor space that is easy to bifurcate into mask-only and mask-optional sections, and ii) we have *Paved Paradise*, extensive outdoor space that, during these warmer months, makes it easy to offer maximum protection with maximum enjoyment. We have very special blessings here.

This Shabbat, we will continue our summer protocols for Covid-19 precautions. If you are around over the July 4th weekend, please join us.

Spit In Your Eye! Oh Thank You. We recently finished the 12th Chapter of Tractate Yevamot as part of the Daf Yomi learning cycle. The Chapter concerns the ceremony of *halitzah*. We have discussed the importance of *halitza* in earlier emails. *Halitzah* is the failsafe mechanism created by the Torah and expanded upon by our Sages in cases where the brother of the dead husband might otherwise need to do levirate marriage but cannot or will not. *Halitzah* is the mechanism that nonetheless permits the wife of the dead husband to marry someone else. In literally hundreds of instances, Tractate Yevamot turns to *halitzah* as a sensitive, humane response for either when the brother of the dead husband does not wish to do *yibum* or when, for reasons good and sufficient, *yibum* is not an available halakhic option.

The Talmud teaches that there are three main parts to the *halitzah* ritual: the wife's removing the brother-in-law's shoe; the public recitation of several statements; and, in between, a

spitting ceremony. The Chapter opens with an interesting opinion that a greater-than-normal number of judges should oversee the *halitzah* ceremony (five rather than the typical three). The Chapter goes on to discuss the importance of establishing a place certain for the ceremony so that the public can (and should) observe it. It will not surprise you to learn that the discussion even addresses details like the kind and style of shoe that should be worn by the dead husband's brother and removed by the wife.

With a buildup worthy of the key question of deep irony in Arlo Guthrie's *Alice's Restaurant* ("KID, HAVE YOU REHABILITATED YOURSELF?"), the Talmud then turns its attention to the spitting part of the ceremony. The Torah prescribes spitting. It does not explain why. Nor does the Talmud. Nor apparently do many subsequent commentators. Those with modern sensibilities bristle and might fairly ask why, in such a positive and humane ceremony, something "dirty" and "rude" like spitting is an integral, indeed indispensable part.

First let's clarify what is going on. Some [Jewish learning sources](#) seem to get it wrong, saying that the wife spits into the face of the brother-in-law. I could find no basis for that statement. The wife spits on the ground, which seems pretty clear from the Torah's description and from the Talmud's discussion of what happens when wind carries the spit in the wrong direction.

Ok, so it's not as bad as it could be. But is it good? The statements made after the spitting give a little guidance. They are based on the Torah's statement:

"So shall it be done unto that man who will not build up his brother's house, and his name shall be called in Israel, 'the house of him that hath his shoe loosed.'"

Still, can we say anything positive about spitting? Two things are worth noting: First, for much of history, spitting did not have the same negative connotation that it has today. The New Testament, for example, cites putting spit on the eyes of a blind person to help him see (Mark 8:23). And until quite recently, the therapeutic value of saliva was well- and widely-believed. See Professor Frank Gonzalez-Crussi's fun article [here](#). Actually, some cultures considered spitting a good omen. It was not considered gross for much of history, through time and geographically. Spitting was not outlawed in public in New York until 1896.)

Second, we might also mention that notions of hygiene weren't as well developed "then" as they are "now". For this you might read excerpts from the Seventeenth Century diary of Samuel Pepys in Kyle Harper's *Plagues Upon the Earth*. CAUTION: Those with squeamish stomachs should skip this part: Pepys's diary shows, in Harper's words, that what passed for civilized approaches to living exhibited not so much "an indifference to living in filth" but rather, as I would say, occupied a distant part of the curve for what was considered unsafe or unsanitary. Pepys himself is a good example. He was a graduate of Cambridge, a Member of Parliament, and President of the Royal Society. He lived and moved in the "highest" and thus cleanest of circles. Yet his diary is full of references, for example, of leaking chamber pots, knowing his neighbors by the stench of their feces, cutting into fish that was crawling with worms, nonchalantly declaring: "While I was at dinner with my wife I was sick, and was forced to vomit

up my oysters again, and then I was well.” Pepys’s minutely detailed diary offers no evidence of his ever bathing (showers didn’t exist).

Does any of this help with understanding why the former wife spits during a *halitzah* ceremony? Not really, if you ask me. At the end of the day, our being satisfied or dissatisfied with an explanation is of little moment. The institution is one of the great examples of positive law, first adumbrated in the Torah and applied brilliantly by our Sages. Perhaps all we can say is that spitting indicates a less-than-ideal state of affairs. (Another hint of this comes in the Thirteenth Chapter of the tractate, which discusses the reluctance of a son to perform *halitzah* in the presence of a parent.). *Halitzah* is not as desirable as the preferred approach of *yibum* but is still way better than the alternative. In a world of necessary compromises, is that such a bad lesson.

NOTE: I’m open to better answers. Indeed, we’ll give the largest reward thus far promised -- three inflation adjusted points -- for any good explanations, whether your own or others.

Built Back Better. Kudos again to Rabbi Shaul Robinson of Lincoln Square Synagogue. His locution of *Built Back Better* captures so well the forward-looking, communally oriented drive towards optimism and unity that this (hopefully) growing part of our email tries to convey. At least for a while, *BBB* has officially supplanted our earlier title of *Half-Full Report*, though by the way that was an excellent name for the report when our communal glass was indeed half-full.

Do Tell About Tel Aviv. Three of our most treasured commenters – David Sable, Peter Neustadter, and Jack Schenker – independently reacted to my encomia last week about Tel Aviv. Each feels, as Peter put it, that I described at most the tip of the iceberg. Jack says that secular Tel Avivers are “enjoying a religious renaissance” and that they are filling synagogues Friday night and frequenting the abundance of new kosher restaurants (including on Friday night). The traditional and tradition-adjacent population in Tel Aviv, they all say, is growing fast and is quite optimistic. So, as we head into summer, send in your Tel Aviv photos, news items, and vignettes. Let’s all enjoy them.

Summertime in Song. Nothing in these emails has inspired more or better reactions than my request for fun summer songs. In a true summer fashion of informality, let’s not even vote on which is best (yet – oh the competition will come!). Let’s get the list to 100 first (ok, how about 25)! I know we can. Here are starters, but the number of great summer songs is endless. So click and enjoy these – and then send in more:

· More than any other, this week’s first responders suggest [Summertime](#), from George Gershwin’s *Porgy & Bess*. Barbara Reiss feels it says it all. David Sable reminds us of the real connection that our Congregation has to songwriter (more precisely, music writer extraordinaire) George Gershwin -- the piano organ we have was his – for that great story, see my emails of [7/9/20](#) and [7/16/20](#). I didn’t begin with *Summertime* last week because it’s not

what you'd call a *fun* summer song. But, as Ruth Moser Reimer perfectly put it, "as long as the season Summer time exists, so will the classic *Summertime*."

- Establishing a decisive early lead, David Sable also suggests the great hit from Grease, [Summer Nights](#), which David says, "is not about Arbit". Dig the dance routine!
- David also nominates the even greater, R&R earworm, the timeless wonder by The Lovin' Spoonful, [Summer in the City](#). The piano chords between the verses vie for among the coolest and most recognizable in R&R music, a contest we judged a while ago when no one suggested this!
- Showing his true genre-genius, David also proposes [In the Good Old Summertime](#), both the movie and song, especially since its Judy Garland's 100th birthday. Wowa!
- Moving from fun to funky (and being out of breath from so many exclamation marks!), Billy Schulder, and independently, Billy and Michael's sister Lynnette Gruenhut, riffs with the great "[In the Summertime](#)," by Mungo Jerry. Oh yeah.
- To which Billy adds the equally great "[Hot Fun in the Summertime](#)," by Sly and the Family Stone.
- Michael Schulder, Billy's brother, offers Nat King Cole's [Lazy, Hazy, Crazy Days of Summer](#). Michael adds, trenchantly, "mailed in by Nat King Cole, who was so great he made even this seeming throwaway into a classic."
- Henry Watkin agrees with Michael about the Nat King Cole classic and adds a sleeper, since as Henry notes it doesn't have "summer" in the title, [Brian Hyland's](#) or [Bobby Vinton's Sealed with a Kiss](#) -- an entry also proposed Ruth Moser Reimer and Esther Ingber.
- Henry adds two more, pretty obscure ones: The Brothers Four singing [Green Leaves of Summer](#), and [Summertime Summertime](#) by the Jamies, which I think Esther Ingber also suggests (Henry, Esther, really? Even when you listen to the rest of this list?).
- Andrew Lipton's contribution has an end-of-summer theme, as were my initial suggestions last week. Listen to the harmonics of The Happenings sing the great [See You In September](#).

Team, these are stupendous. We can get to 100 (ok, so 25), but it's my prediction that it will take some doing to eclipse the above summer greats. Click and listen to them all, and you'll see Nirvana! Let's get more in before the Three Weeks (at which time we may move on to summer dirges)!

Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom. And Happy Fourth to all.

Louis Solomon, Parnas