

September 1, 2022

Dear Shearith Israel family and Touro Synagogue Affiliates,

*Quantum Improvement.* The Covid-19 news since last week remains essentially unchanged in our area. You cannot say the same for our congregation's return to normalcy. This past Shabbat, nearly 250 of us attended Shabbat morning services and celebrated the bat mitzvah of one of our native children, Neta Penina Wiznia, daughter of our members Rivka Shoulson and Marc Wiznia. It was great in all respects. My personal favorites were two-fold: (i) Neta's debar Torah, urging unity within diversity, and (ii) observing our congregants and guests respecting the masking/social distancing preferences of others without rancor or protest – indeed, as seen from my perch, with understanding and good cheer.

We are now observing the month of Elul. During evening services, we say about four minutes of *selihot* and hear a single shofar blast. It's just the right dose to remind us of the upcoming Days of Awe. Come on a weekday evening. It's uplifting and worth a detour.

*Deaf, Dumb, and Blind – But Without the Mean [Pinball](#).* This week's Daf Yomi Talmud cycle includes page 57a of Tractate Ketubot. The Daf presents an inspiring example of not just the tolerance, but the actual celebration, of diversity of opinion within Jewish thought. As a society we have become all but deaf, dumb, and blind to this profoundly central goal. Come back with me to this Talmudic episode – and help renew the Importance of Being Human.

The Talmudic debate concerns when a woman needs a written memorialization of an agreement to take a reduced dowry amount in her Jewish marriage contract, or Ketubah. You think the subject small, banal, picayune? Actually, there is a lot at stake, and not just for the wife; witness the tons of litigation, worth billions of dollars, that occurs each year in cases where our common law statute of frauds does not require writings to prove facts or the existence or waiver of contractual obligations. Our Talmudic Sages thought hard and fought hard to get to the right answer.

In the Talmudic discussion, one major point of contention concerned when and at what point in time did the wife need the waiver to be *in writing* in order for it to be effective. There are three options of the time threshold: after betrothal, after the actual wedding ceremony (which usually occurred a year after the betrothal), or after consummation of the marriage. You can intuit the issues that would arise from choosing an earlier or later date. One of the Rabbis, Rav Huna, cleverly shows that, given slight emendations of what the original disputants said or meant, there is no actual conflict among the three opinions. That works logically, as is done innumerable times in the Talmud, but it requires changing the words or meaning of what the prior generation of disputants meant by their words. Rav Pappa then chimes in. He says, well actually, he would prefer it if we did not have a debate about what the earlier generation said or meant. Rav Pappa instead urges not to change the locution or meaning of the earlier statements but simply to live with different answers to the *substantive* point and address the merits of the differences and come to a conclusion.

Behold the levels of mutual respect in the Talmudic discussion! First, everyone is entitled to express a view, and does so. Second, others listen. Third, everyone is entitled – indeed required – to justify their views with calm, rational argument, including proof texts. Fourth, alternative explanations are given, not just to what the rule should be, but what the original disputants actually said or meant. Changing the initial conditions is fair game, but it comes with an obvious cost. Finally, one of our great Talmudic Sages actually prefers substantive disagreement to locutional word-play. We can tolerate differences of opinions, says he. Indeed we should celebrate the differences, analyze them calmly, and come to a decision.

To me, this interchange is stunning given where we have devolved socially today. Students at a well-known American law school (a law school no less) have pledged not to invite as speakers anyone who has expressed and continues to hold views in support of Zionism. More generally, so many of us are so resistant to hearing both sides of an issue that search engines across the internet employ algorithms to find news and other information for us to read or listen to just like what we were already reading or listening to. When the first sign of discordance or dissonance appears, we, like Miracle Max in *The Princess Bride*, plug our ears and shout “I’m not listening”. All these tactics do is reinforce our thinking, in whatever direction it was already going. The fidelity of sound in an echo chamber can be excellent. In the end, however, all we are hearing is ourselves.

Ketubot 57a ranks with Eruvin 13b, which tells the story of a three-year debate between Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai, each deeply and passionately but respectfully believing that they had truth on their side, but each being willing to listen to the position of the other side. There the Talmud quotes The Almighty saying that in such company both opinions are the words of the Living G-d:

אמֵר אֱלֹהִים נָאלוּ דְבָרָיו אֶלְהִים חַיִם הֵן,

It is only with such open and respectful debate that the Almighty wishes to live in our midst.

*Built Back Better.* Loads to share this week.

*Songs Happy and Sad.* Our Communications Associate and Programs Coordinator, Sarah Meira Rosenberg, is one of my favorite sources of currently popular musicians and music. Her musical insights seem to be shared by her brother, Yair Rosenberg, who recently released a [Jewish music album](#) and also runs a newsletter for The Atlantic called [Deep Shtetl](#). A recent posting addresses why nearly universally – meaning in nearly every synagogue except ours – the Friday night song of *Lecha Dodi* switches tempo and music about two-thirds of the way through. Rosenberg doesn’t come up with an answer. He does, though, share a thought on how melody and tempo can turn the exact same lyrics from sad to happy. His post is a beautiful reminiscence of his (and Sarah Meira’s) grandfather, nearly a lone Holocaust survivor within his family who escaped through Shanghai. The piece is worth a read, [here](#).

*Remembering Usha.* Usually, for Bentsi Cohen to write in with some of his insights, I need to err, whether in didactics, diction, or *dikduk*. What a happy surprise this week that our erudite scholar and editor just wanted to supplement my comments last week about Usha, one of the places in Northern Israel where the Great Sanhedrin sat after the destruction of the Second Temple. Bentsi too is intrigued by the character of the residents of Northern Galil, their political affiliations and social behavior. For further reading and reflection, Bentsi recommends Josephus's description of the people in nearby ינשׁתָן. He also recommends learning more about the life and times of Rabbi Yossi Hagelili, who along with his fellow northerners were praised for their zealotry but also their humanity, as in their "equitable thinking about water rationing". Says Bentsi, in a speculation that only he can get away with:

*I can easily conjecture that one of the migrations of the great Sanhedrin to Usha came as a result of the admiration the rabbis had for those people there.*

*The 1% Solution.* I have pleaded with you to find a better name for our *Tithing the Tithe Project*. But would you listen? I was just trying to be nice, you know, in asking for improvements. I can do it myself. A tenth of a tenth – just an hour a week of new Synagogue or communal help – is just 1% of our waking hours. Our Sherlock Holmes take-off is SO clever. Now with that inspiration, can you please come up with a better name – or, even better than a better name, send in your 1% undertaking?

*The Great Word Challenge.* In last week's email, the list of winning one-word descriptors of the positive and collective attitude we all need to move into 5783 included:

- *RejuveNation!*
- *Shulebration!* Time to *Shulebrate!*
- *Now!*
- *Emerge*
- *Yo!*
- *Here*

This power list has kept many of even our most intrepid commenters on the sidelines. Many, but not all. Albert Lewitinn, currently in Cool Copenhagen, mailed in a great one: "home." Says Albert:

*People return home to feel comfort, rejuvenate... it's called a spiritual home for a reason. African-American communities don't say funerals, they say "homecoming". Even for Thanksgiving, people always ask, "Are you going home for Thanksgiving?" – [in the] sense of gathering with families.*

Ruth Lazar also makes another great contribution: *hashivenu*, or in English, "return."

Finally, Alan Zwiebel sent in the single word “support”, which is a great suggestion. In Alan’s inimitable way, his suggestion came with the following clever play-off on our congregation’s nickname, S&P:

# Support

These are great words. There are great words still to come. Who can supply them?

*The Great Phrase Challenge.* The best entry this week was more than a phrase. It was a funny New Year’s card. Created again by Alan Zwiebel, it uses one of Rabbi Soloveichick’s most beloved (certainly one of his most used, non-Rembrandt) paintings – with a slogan redolent with entendres. Enjoy it:



*Tel Aviv Tells.* Avery and Susan Neumark, answering the call for more photos from this fabulous city, sent in the following gorgeous one of [some enchanted evening](#), in Tel Aviv:



Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom. Happy Labor Day.

Louis Solomon, Parnas