

September 15, 2022

Dear Shearith Israel family and Touro Synagogue Affiliates,

*Oh Just Come on Back Already.* Covid-19 positivity rates are slightly up since last week. So was Shabbat service attendance. Hmm. Please don't make us have pray for *increasing* disease spread numbers just to get more of us back at services (!). But please do heed the recommendations to get the new booster, reformulated to protect against Omicron, if you are eligible and haven't already. Most of us can get it along with the flu shot.

This Shabbat, we will be back inside for morning services, as we celebrate the Bar Mitzvah of Avi Friedman, son of our trustee Zoya Raynes and one of minyan Keepers of the Flame, Naftali Friedman. The choir will be back for the season, Rabbi Soloveichik will be speaking, and Kiddush promises to be bountiful and yummy. Our now familiar, tolerant, but effective safety protocols remain in place. Please join us.

*Giving Charity, In Verb and Adjective.* My question here is what the ubiquitous phrase, "giving charity", is actually saying? Does "giving charity" refer to the fact that one giving charity is *giving* (a verb)? Or does it refer to the well-being that the act of giving charity actually gives the giver (an adjective modifying "charity", as in *The Giving Tree*)? Tractate Ketubot pages 66-67, which we learn this week as part of the Daf Yomi cycle, helps with the answer.

The timing is propitious. We are approaching the High Holidays, the Days of Awe. We all know we are instructed to give 10% of our earnings to charity. It is usually a manageable amount that we should joyfully part with. (It may be easier to part with 10% when we understand it to mean that we are usually permitted to *keep* 90%. And even 10%, often seen as a mighty good deed, is not wholly exceptional. The Talmud often doubles the number to 20% when discussing celebrated instances of giving charity.)

In the Tractate's pages this week, we learn that it is not just the amount of giving but the "how" that counts as well. An example is seen in the discussion of the once fabulously wealthy Nakdimon ben Guryon. The Talmud here relates that he actually lost his wealth; his daughter was reduced to acts of poverty to make ends meet. We will remember that Nakdimon was a person of extraordinary generosity. We discussed him before ([email of Dec. 2, 2021](#)) in the context of some of the fantabulous acts of charity he was doing then, which merited miracles. Indeed, isn't he only the third person in all of Jewish history and lore for whom the Almighty stopped the sun (am I right? Who are the other two?)

So how could Nakdimon ben Guryon, a person of such super-human generosity, lose his wealth? The Talmud itself is incredulous: How did it happen? So strong is the Almighty's promise that charitable giving will not just be its own reward *but will be rewarded* that the Talmud insists on an answer.

To find it, the Talmud describes one of Nakdimon's acts of *hesed*: He would walk down the road and basically drop money behind him for the poor to retrieve without being seen. The problem, says the Talmud, is that, for a person of his stature, apparently more was expected. As the Talmud memorably puts it:

לְפוּם גַּמְלָא שִׁחְנָא

*The stronger the camel, the heavier the load it must bear.*

The Talmud then describes several other acts of charity by others. In each case, the Talmud observes that the “how” of the giving counts at least as much as the “how much”. So for example we hear learn the famous case of Mar Ukva and his wife. They both jumped into a hot furnace so as not to be detected by a pauper as to the source of the charity. Yet the feet of Mar Ukva, as expected, were being burned by the furnace while his wife's were not. So Mar Ukva needed to stand on his wife's feet, explains the Talmud. Why? The wife explained that she gave charity in the form of actual food directly to the poor people in need of it rather than giving them money, which would then need to be used to buy food. The Talmud is emphasizing the “how” of giving.

In reality, when it comes to “how”, we today can't even begin to shine the sandals of our Sages. But we must do the best we can - in both the “how much” and the “how” departments. We need the “giving” of charity to be both verb and adjective.

*Hatikvah, Smetana's Moldau, Tefilat Tal, AND NOW TWINKLE TWINKLE!* It is easy to reject Henry Watkin's suggestion (in response to my email [last week](#)) that the relationship among Hatikvah, Smetana's Molau, and our Tefilat Tal are “purely fortuitous.” What's he thinking!? Way harder is to ignore Henry's observation that Version VIII of Mozart's [Ah vous dirais-je, maman](#), which you will recognize as the children's song *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star*, starting at about minute 6:55 has exactly the same first seven notes as the other three tunes. This, in the learning business, is called a “bomb kasha.” The observation cries out for an answer. Is it that 5-7 notes do not a melody make? But we know they do! Is it that, in a theme and variation, and in moving from major to minor keys, you are bound to hear more overlap with other tunes? Team, a little help here! (And, oh, by the way, on the subject of funny, if irreverent, incongruities, who remembers the movie *Beat the Devil* and the “Mussolini, Hitler, and now Peterson” [scene](#).)

*The Ever-Young Rabbi Akiva.* Aura Bijou, astute reader that she is, questions when, and how, Rabbi Akiva had any children. She assumes that he and his wife, whose name is given elsewhere as Rachel, did not have children until R. Akiva returned from his 24 years of learning and so was at least 64 (he was 40 when they met, and he then spent the 24 years away learning). It will not surprise that others over the centuries have asked the same question. I have seen many answers as to when and how R Akiva could have sired three children, which is the number we are told he had. Answers vary and include that he visited home once or twice

during a year, that he had children by an earlier marriage, and that, living to 120, he had time even after he returned at 64.

*Building Back Better.*

*The 1% Solution.* I guess I don't see a burning need to end this subpart. However, as we approach Rosh Hashana, it would be nice if we had more congregants willing to let me share their small but crucial undertakings to help the Synagogue and Congregation in the coming year. Send in your descriptions, please. In the meantime, congrats to Hannah Vorchheimer who has devoted more than her 1% to help put together the interesting (especially to our Greek heritage congregants, and timely, given the Daf Yomi) show at Columbia titled, [Virgins And Unicorns: Decorated Ketubbot From Corfu.](#)

*5783's Great Word Challenge: Final List.* Here is the final set of candidates for the word that will capture the positive, optimistic thinking that will characterize our collective commitment in the New Year:

- ***Here, as in Hineni***
- ***Home***
- ***Hashivenu,***
- ***Emerge***
- ***Give (a new entry)***
- ***RejuvNation!***
- ***ReJewvenation***
- ***Now!***
- ***Shulebration! Time to Shulebrate!***
- ***SuPport***
- ***Yo!***

Top two preferences please.

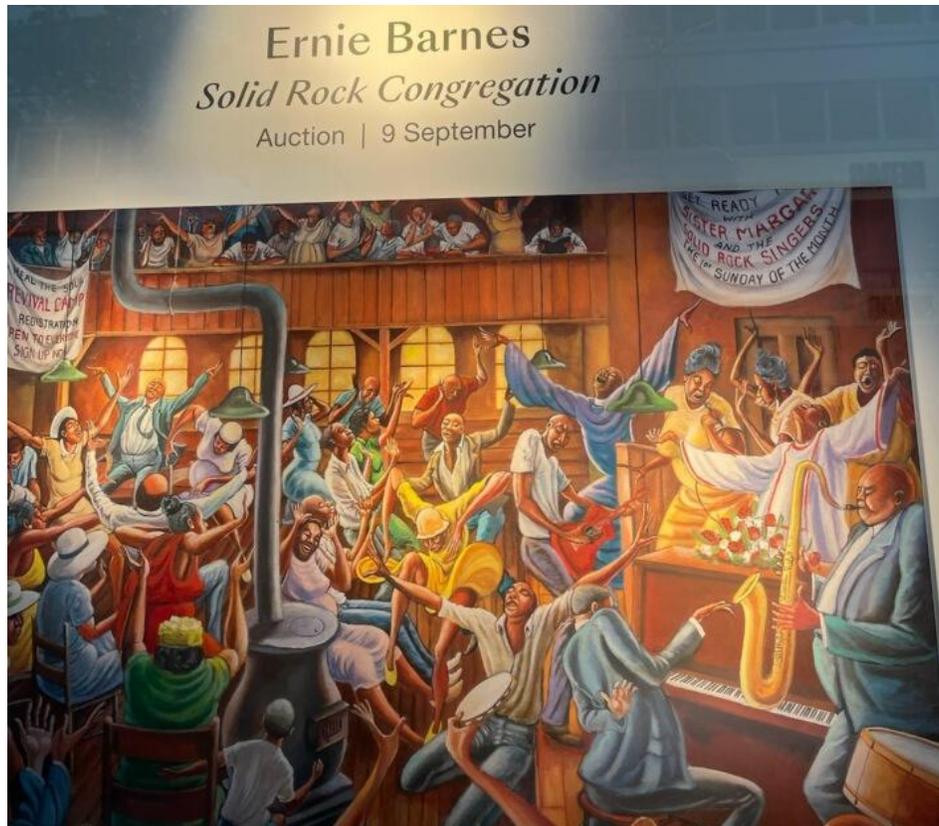
*5783's Great Phrase Challenge: Final List.* And here are the finalists for a phrase:

- ***Congregation Shuva Israel***
- ***How much longer?***
- ***Kaminando kon Buenos [let's walk with good]***
- ***Onward and upward to 5783***
- ***Pastoral rectorial*** (I never liked the imagery of this one, but the judges give all submissions fair consideration)
- ***Step up!***
- ***Shuva, shuva, ami (return, return, my nation)***
- ***Whatever the Lord does is for the best***

- **חַדָּשׁ יָמֵינוּ כְּקֶדֶם** [let us return to our days, as of old]

Send in your top two choices from the list – unless you have a really good addition, and then send that in, too.

*Our Rock Solid Congregation.* I couldn't resist sharing this with you. As you will see, I think the artist, intent on describing Shearith Israel, inverted the "rock" and the "solid." Maybe he was reading from left to right:



Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas