

November 3, 2022

Dear friends,

***Managing the Miasma.*** To describe Covid-19, why hasn't the metaphor of a "miasma" not been used more often? Verily, Covid-19 really *is* a miasma – "a highly unpleasant or unhealthy smell or vapor."

At the beginning of the pandemic, community organizations were less effective in managing this miasma. Now, with knowledge of how the virus spreads, with vaccines effective for a great many of us to avoid catastrophic illness, and with the herd immunity (or nearly so) that has developed in many places, we are basically managing our way through this pandemic (for now). I want to nominate Shearith Israel, and especially our Working Group, as among those who made the management feasible and thus far effective (and unobtrusively to anyone who is no longer interested in adopting or even noticing Covid-19 precautions anymore).

Take last Shabbat. We had larger than normal crowds both Friday night and Shabbat morning. Both occasions were special moments for our Congregation. On Friday night, with our three pairs of Myer Myers *rimonim* on display, Rabbi Soloveichik gave a special *Friday Night Lights* presentation on the sacredness of the *rimonim* and the talents of their creator. The program occurred on what I want to call our Shabbat of Hope, both because hope is a key theme in *Parashat Noah* and because these *rimonim* in particular are the embodiment of hope. Then, on Shabbat morning we had a large crowd in part to celebrate the Bar Mitzvah of Ness Sasson-Gelman with his family.

The Covid-19 protocols we have in place are simple, straightforward, easy to implement, and flexible. At *Friday Night Lights*, the mask-only section was virtually empty. On Shabbat morning, it was virtually full. Congregants can choose where they prefer to sit, and no one fussed. There was an ease of movement up at the Teba also – and we welcomed back Rabbi Soloveichik to his rightful perch.

No one long forgot the need for precautions – the open windows and whirring air filters made forgetting impossible. Kiddush on Paved Paradise was another reminder, since it was marvelous but a tad chilly. All in all, however, it felt like we were back to a normal that would be able to adjust handily to whatever ups and downs the colder weather brings us in terms of our miasma. We will manage. With the milder forecast for this weekend, we plan on another outdoor kiddush this Shabbat.

***It's a Great Tractate, I Swear!*** The new Tractate that the Daf Yomi cycle started last week is Tractate Nedarim. It's about swearing, or oaths. In both format and substance, it is really quite interesting.

The format of the Tractate is interesting because of its *differences* from other tractates. Several differences are noteworthy:

First, it is generally agreed that the preeminent (and indispensable) medieval commentator Rashi did not publish a commentary on Tractate Nedarim, not that we have, anyway. I know, the page of the printed Talmud (I think universally) says, at the top, "Rashi." It's not.

Second, the other side of the page, usually reserved for the Tosafot, is not Tosafot, but is the Ran, a late medieval Sephardic commentator.

Third, Nedarim uses nomenclature and modes of explanation different from other Tractates. For example, when other tractates can't come to an answer to a question of law, they typically say "*tayku*," which is an acronym in Hebrew for Eliyahu Hanavi (a/k/a Tishbi) will answer our questions - meaning in messianic times. Tractate Nedarim doesn't use that phraseology.

Fourth, the exegeses of the commentator formally known as Rashi as well as the Ran's commentary are typically much longer than the real Rashi and Tosafot; as a result, the words of Talmud on each page are fewer. For the time constrained learning a page a day, it's worth trading more pages of the Tractate for fewer words per page.

Our former Distinguished Rabbinic Fellow and current friend Rabbi Dr. Richard Hidary has a succinct and intelligible discussion of these phenomena [here](#). He offers some plausible reasons for the differences, all interesting but none demonstrably proven. What is interesting is to study Nedarim observing these different formats.

In substance, I am finding Tractate Nedarim interesting because of the *similarities* to other Talmudic tractates in its approach to legal analysis as applied to new subject matter. Three modes of learning go on simultaneously:

First, there is an almost implicit set of assumptions about the fundamental basis for the Jewish laws being discussed;

Second, there is a dizzying if not withering exposure to details by examples and scenarios; and

Third, there is always a large dollop of points more profound than the examples and scenarios. These use the points of law being debated to initiate deeper discussions of how what is being taught is relevant to a life of meaning and maybe even a life of virtue, a life in harmony with Jewish values and principles.

Do you want to see how those three principles exhibit themselves in the first few pages of Tractate Nedarim?

- 1) There are serious consequences from making an oath and not honoring it. Yet the Tractate does not start with that discussion. Instead, it begins with what is and what is not an oath. We do learn, but almost in passing, what the consequences are and what the

Biblical derivation is for the rules of oaths. But as in so many other Tractates, the key premises are either assumed or dispatched quickly.

- 2) Then the Talmud becomes, well, Talmudic. That's when it becomes challenging. To speak an oath, what formulations are needed? What about thinking and not speaking? What about imperfectly understood or ambiguous speech? We are treated to minute details. The only way it makes sense to struggle through that level of minutiae is to consider that what the Talmud is looking to do is to create a system of rules so that people know how to act in new situations in the future, meaning once the rules are adumbrated. This is such an important principle, one that it took the common law many centuries to learn. It is a different and far more challenging endeavor than just signifying how you would treat the particular example being bruited.
- 3) And, as with other tractates, one is never far from deeper meanings. So for example, on pages 3-4, the discussion cannot be complete without digressing to explain that oaths, once taken, should be carried out immediately. Procrastination is the tool of the Devil (In *Chariots of Fire*, Eric Liddell's Pastor father was wrong – compromise is not the tool of the Devil; procrastination is.) The principle is discussed here in its universality.

As another example, by page 7 we learn that in general oaths must be spoken to be effective. We also learn that statements, even if spoken, containing ambiguities as well as spoken abbreviated phrases can sometimes get you to the same place as having to carry out an oath. Then, in the middle of all this, the Talmud asks, well, what about oaths to give charity? What kind of ambiguities are tolerated there? And must oaths to give charity be spoken, or is thought alone enough? The singular importance of charity to our religion leads to a ruling that thought alone is sufficient to constitute a binding oath to give charity. That is not something anyone would have thought likely given the emphasis on the need for utterance in oath taking.

I fear that by now you are hoping that Tractate Nedarim is a short one. It's not (91 pages). I'm really excited about going through it with you.

### ***Built Back Better.***

***The Shearith Israel Autumn Song Book.*** This fun task would be even more fun if more of us sent in suggestions for great Autumn songs. Here is the current list including last week's terrific suggestions:

- [\*Do You Remember September\*](#), by Earth Wind and Fire
- [\*Autumn Leaves\*](#), by Nat King Cole
- [\*Wake Me Up When September Ends\*](#), by Green Day

- [Harvest Moon](#), by Neil Young
- [Leaves that Are Green](#), by Simon and Garfunkel
- [Try to Remember the Kind of September](#), from *The Fantastiks*
- [Autumn in New York](#), this version sung by Frank Sinatra
- [September Song](#), also sung by Frank Sinatra
- [Autumn Song](#), by Van Morrison
- [Will I See You in September](#), by The Happenings; and
- [We Fell In Love In October](#), by Girl in Red
- [If Ever I Would Leave You](#), from *Camelot*
- [You've Got a Friend](#), by the incomparable Carole King (this version with James Taylor)
- [Mother Earth's Routine](#), by Tom Chapin

For this week, we begin by thanking Rabbi Moshe Edelman for having a little fun with our songs – wondering why some songs *try* to remember Autumn whereas others actually succeed in remembering it. *Taka* he asks a good question, no? Is there more remembering in the Autumn than in other seasons? Is it because our Days of Remembrance occur in or close to Autumn? A little help please.

For new suggestions, thank you to Esther Ingber, who offers

- [Summer Song](#), the timeless keeper by Chad & Jeremy. True, the song has in it the lyrics, “Autumn leaves must fall.” But were it not for the fact that the song truly is one of my all-life favorites, suggesting that it should go on an Autumn song list would have met with swift rejection. Now it’s on both our Summer and Autumn lists.

Now is the time for us to consider another heady issue. David Vorchheimer questions why we do not have any pieces of classical music in our list. The simple answer is that no one suggested any until now. But is that the only answer? Might it also be because so many more of us know R&R than know classical music? Or because, if you don’t like a particular R&R song, it’s a 3-minute ordeal, whereas, if you don’t like a piece of classical music, it’s a greater time waste. Is that a fair distinction when you can just click-skip in either case?

I've concluded that the omission of classical favorites is due solely to my own failure of imagination, which we will rectify now.

- First, I offer [Autumn](#) from Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*. David voted against that one, as being "obvious and overdone." David is right on both counts, but the piece is gorgeous. So on the list it goes.
- David then suggests one of the Autumn months in the pieces by
  - Tchaikovsky, [here](#), and
  - Mendelssohn, [here](#) (High School seniors, no less!)

David asserts that the Mendelssohn piece (actually composed, he says, by famous Felix's sister, Fanny) should be of particular interest since the Mendelssohn siblings' mother was named Lea Salomon. Wrong spelling of both first and last names but, if David was trying to bribe me, it worked.

- David also suggests [Autumn](#) from Glazunov's *Seasons* and observes the remarkable, uncanny similarity between the main theme there and John Williams' *Star Wars* theme. For gorgeous Autumn colors, check out the video.

These are terrific additions to the list. But we need more. Many more. Think people, and help both yourself and others.

***Shemita and the Royal Pam.*** It's been a while since we've heard from RavDoc (see my email of [3/24/2022](#)). He rightly corrected my spelling of Rav Pam (not Palm). Better, he tells the story of his own songwriting effort. When trying to capture the essence of the Shemita year, he put the following words in the right place in [Try to Remember the Kind of September](#): "fallow fallow fallow fallow fallow." If you are not laughing right now, listen to the song.

***Catch-22, of course.*** Only Aura Bijou got my oblique reference to "major major." It is, of course, to Major Major Major Major in *Catch-22*, one of the enduringly great books of the Twentieth Century. (Say, is anyone up for a great books challenge?)

Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom. Here here! *Kaminando kon Buenos.*

Louis Solomon, Parnas