

December 1, 2022

Dear friends,

So Do Three Yesses Make A No? Professor Sidney Morgenbesser was a leading light at Columbia University during much of the Twentieth Century. His wit was supposedly unsurpassed. The story goes that Morgenbesser heard the great philosopher/linguist J.L. Austin state that, although a double negative often implies a positive meaning (e.g., "he is not unlike his sister"), there is no language in which a double positive implies a negative. Morgenbesser retorted: "Yeah, yeah."

So we know that two positives can, if you will, cancel each other out and amount to a negative. How about three? Well, I'm thinking they can, too. And my proof is an article last week in a reliable science publication. The article discussed the three viruses now invading our breathing space: a bad flu bug, respiratory syncytial virus, or R.S.V. (which I wrote about in [my email of November 10, 2022](#)), and of course the several newer variants of Covid-19. The article hypothesized that the confluence this winter of all three of these nasty bugs might lead them to compete for attachment points on our cells and wind up at least partially canceling each other out. So yes, indeed, three positives might in fact create a negative (and when it comes to viruses, negatives are positive).

Mind you, even if I'm wrong about the linguistics/philology, I'm pretty confident that "triple-demic" is not the right way to refer to the three diseases. To be sure, the word was used by a paper that formerly aspired to the motto *All the News that's Fit To Print*. But it's not a word, and it's not a thing.

This is all we need to know. At the Synagogue, we are maintaining our usual precautions. Come in, be safe.

Thanksgiving at Shearith Israel - now. Not only did the triple respiratory virus threat not keep nearly three million people away from enjoying the Thanksgiving Day parade in NYC; Shearith Israel was itself wonderfully full, inside and out. Morning services gave us a rare Thanksgiving/Rosh Hodesh combination, and over 100 of us enjoyed being part of one of the oldest traditions celebrating the blessing of America. About as many of us heard Rabbi Soloveichik's short, interesting, and uplifting talk. Parade viewing from our portico was packed (well managed thanks to our stalwart volunteers, Ari Sherizen and Marc Wiznia), and so was our eighth annual pack-a-thon. Deepest thanks to our partners, The Jewish Center, Church of Latter-day Saints, and West End Church, and abiding thanks to our Deputy Executive Director and boots on the ground, Bonnie Barest, for her organization and execution skills extraordinaire.

Thanksgiving at Shearith Israel – then. For some diehards, my email last week was insufficiently detailed about our community's role in Thanksgiving celebrations since the first official one in 1789. That we have shared in the national commemoration with our own ritual participation every year should have said it all. But one can always say more. Thank you to Avery Neumark for sending [this](#). It is a nice piece, by a Rabbi from the West Coast, summarizing a few bits of history in the Thanksgivings of yesteryear.

Also thanks to Irving Ruderman, who scolds me (nicely) and says:

[D]on't forget that S&P was very involved in the first Thanksgiving in 1789. When George Washington called on all churches throughout the land to observe this day the first to respond was Shearith Israel. About 30-40 years ago I published the text of that first Thanksgiving sermon and special tefilah lishlom hamedinah [for the peace of the State] by Rev. Gershon Mendes Seixas.

Nedarim Digressions. In the global community's Daf Yomi Talmud study, we are nearing the end of the fourth Chapter of Tractate Nedarim. The intellectual travel of the Tractate is astonishing. It is unerringly logical. From a discussion of what utterances constitute an oath or a legally enforceable vow, the Tractate moves to utterances that might mean something but don't, then to utterances that shouldn't mean something but do, and now, in the fourth Chapter, to how speech can be interpreted to save, or foil, the basic law of oaths.

We are a speaking species. Our religion places maximum reliance on words. (Read the difficult book *Exile of the Word: From the Silence of the Bible to the Silence of Auschwitz*, by André Neher.) So did our culture, though it is being eclipsed by videos. Since our modern common law (and civil law) legal systems also are word based, the journey through the Tractate is wonderfully interesting to those of us who, in a quote I recall being attributed to Justice Joseph Story, have regrettably had our minds sharpened by being narrowed (i.e., lawyers).

There is another way to assess the Tractate, and that is by the kinds of digressions it features. Digressions in Talmud are not casual or unthinking; they are crucial to the learning process, and the learning the digressions engender, make the whole enterprise of Talmudic learning infinitely richer. Before I digress into digressions too deeply, I want to share just two that appear in this week's pages.

- The first is on page 38b, beginning in a Mishna, and the issue relates to whether someone who took a vow not to get any benefit from another human being can nonetheless still visit that other human being when the latter is sick. There then ensues one of the most extensive discussions of "*bikur cholim*", or visiting the sick, in the Talmud. To me, the money point in the discussion is when the Talmud rejects the view that even a solemn vow not to have anything to do with another person includes a refusal to be visited by another during illness; the Talmud refuses to think that someone would do such violence to himself (ok, I'm taking some tiny liberties in the exegesis).
- Second, we have in these pages one of the two times in the Talmud that we learn of the seven phenomena that the Almighty created before our world came into existence: Torah; repentance; the Garden of Eden; *Gehinom* (Hell or purgatory); the Almighty's Heavenly throne; the Holy Temple; and the Messiah's name. Oh we could spend forever discussing every item on this list, especially what are our Sages trying to teach us by making the list at all? All I am competent to observe is that all seven creations exist by and unto themselves, and do not inhere in human beings, except

one: repentance, which stands alone and apart. Surely repentance is the single greatest gift to, and faculty of, a human being. And it's right here on page 39b of Tractate Nedarim.

Built Back Better.

Corrections First. Trusted friend and Synagogue Trustee Stan Towne apologizes for correcting my typo – the “long century” did not run from 1870 to 1910 but of course from 1870 to 2010. The Brothers Schulder (Michael and Billy) were less gentle. They independently bashed me for saying that *Alice's Restaurant Masacre* can now be heard on WNEW, 104.3, not WBAI, which both brothers think a good deal less of. The fact remains that Arlo himself thanks WBAI for its role in popularizing the ballad 55 years ago.

Parsha Haiku. It is hard to fathom how kooky my ask was – capture in a haiku an essence of our weekly Torah readings. Dr. Susan Vorhand got the ball rolling. And Cantor Jay Harwitt from L.A. answered the call with the following haiku for parashat *Toldot Yitzchak*:

*Rebecca took steps
To make absolutely sure
Everything was Jake.*

The haiku is brilliant. Do you see the double entendre of “Jake”, one referring to our forefather Jacob (whom Rebecca saw as the true leader of what became Israel), and one being the slang for “just right”. OMG people are clever!

Now the bar is set high. Who can meet or top this for *next week's* parasha? Bring on the haikus for Parashat Vayishlah.

The Definitive Shearith Israel Autumn Song List. Thanks again to Lia Solomon for putting together and Spotifying *The Shearith Israel Autumn Song List 2022*. [HERE](#) is a link to Spotify, and [HERE](#) is a link to the list of YouTube versions.

Cornubookia. Sergio Wolkovisky, minyan-maker and really always willing to help, suggests *Arc of the Covenant*, by Wall Street Journal columnist Professor Walter Russell Mead. Sergio gets highest marks for “highly recommending” the book. Why? Just look at the cogency and insights in his summary, which I've edited nonsubstantively:

The book says that the special relationship between the U.S. and Israel hasn't always been special and that it has come about because of several structural reasons that fit the interest of the U.S.

Some of the interesting things [Mead] covers is how Israel's birth probably owes more to Stalin than Truman. Stalin allowed the Czechs to sell weapons to Israel during the war of independence

(to cause trouble between the U.S. and U.K.) while the U.S. had imposed an embargo on both sides (the Arabs were already armed).

[The book] also covers the fact that Eleanor Roosevelt (and her influential column) wanted Israel to come about to a large extent to see the United Nations succeed. Eddy Jacobson did get Weizmann to see Truman, but that probably wasn't why Truman recognized Israel, though it probably helped.

The U.S. didn't become Israel's main arms supplier until Israel decisively won the '67 war. He says that the U.S. didn't decisively support Israel until Israel became powerful. This is the opposite of the assumption that Israel is powerful because of U.S. help.

Another interesting part is how the concept of a successful Israel helped galvanize the evangelicals in the U.S. by showing that G'd is helping his chosen people against the odds. The author spends a long time detailing the religious affinity of the U.S. with Judaism since the origins of the U.S.

Now THAT's a review! If you have a book you can recommend, then send it in with a thoughtful (even if briefer) analysis. Let all the rest of us benefit.

And we still need a better name than Cornubookia. Please?

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

Louis Solomon, Parnas