

December 15, 2022

Dear friends,

Covid-19 Jumps! We Stay Put. The positivity rate for Covid-19 transmission increased about 55% in the past two weeks in New York City. Flu rates are up, too. New York City officials are “strongly recommending” that people mask in indoor public settings (among other places). I think we would have preferred our government officials to, well, govern, not recommend. In the absence of governmental edict, we will continue to maintain our thus-far-tried-and-true protocols. We will continue to offer mask-only and mask optional sections of our Sanctuary for indoor services. We will continue to employ our air filters in conjunction with some open windows. We will continue to provide spaced seating for those who have concerns.

One of the beauties of our sanctuary – in addition to the obvious one that it is strikingly beautiful space – is that we can expand or contract mask-only sections as needed to accommodate congregants and other visitors. I sympathize with those in the mask-only section who love their seats but would like to sit unmasked. I see a rotation of the mask-only section coming, but not when there is a possibly needed expansion of the section to deal with the “triple threat” of Covid, flu, and respiratory syncytial virus, or R.S.V. (which I wrote about in my [email of November 10, 2022](#)). For this Shabbat, we will keep things as they have been, but we may re-designate a larger mask-only section if there is a need.

From Great Humility Came Even Greater Greatness. It was just three months ago that we summarized the beautiful story told in Tractate Ketubot (page 63a) of Rabbi Akiva and his wife, with the famous final line by R Akiva:

שְׁבָחוּה, שְׁלִי וְשַׁלְקָם — שְׁלָה הֵא

*Leave her alone, as my Torah knowledge and yours are actually hers
(see my email of Sept. 8, 2022)*

We were then talking about love and marriage (actually the discussion was an excuse to link to the great [Sinatra song](#)). In the Daf Yomi cycle of this week, which includes Tractate Nedarim page 50a, we see basically the same story, with one crucial addition: We learn the immediately precipitating event for Rabbi Akiva’s wife sending him off to learn for 12 and then another 12 years.

בָּסִיתָא הָנוּ גָּנוּ בֵּי תִּיבְנָא, הָנוּ קָא מַנְקִיט לִיהְ תִּיבְנָא מִן מַזְיָה. אָמַר לְהָ: אֵי הָוָא לִי, רַמְינָא לִי וְרוֹשְׁלִים דְּדָפֶבָא. אֲתָא אֶלְ'הוּ אָדָם לְהָוָן כְּאַנְשָׁא וְקָא קָרְבָּא אֶבֶבָא. אָמַר לְהָוָן: חֲבוּ לִי פּוֹרְתָא דְתִיבְנָא דְלִידָת אַתָּה, וְלִית לִי מִידָעָם לְאַגְנִינהָ. אָמַר לְהָ רַבִּי עֲקִיבָא לְאַנְתָמִיהָ: חַד גְּבָרָא דְאַפְילָוּ תִּיבְנָא לֹא אִית לְיהָ

In the winter they [Rabbi Akiva and his wife] would sleep in a storehouse of straw, and Rabbi Akiva would gather strands of straw from her hair. He said to her: If I had the means I would place on your head a Jerusalem of Gold, a type of crown. Elijah the prophet came and appeared to them as a regular person and started calling and knocking on the door. He said to them: Give me a bit of straw, as my wife gave birth and I do not have anything on which to lay her. Rabbi

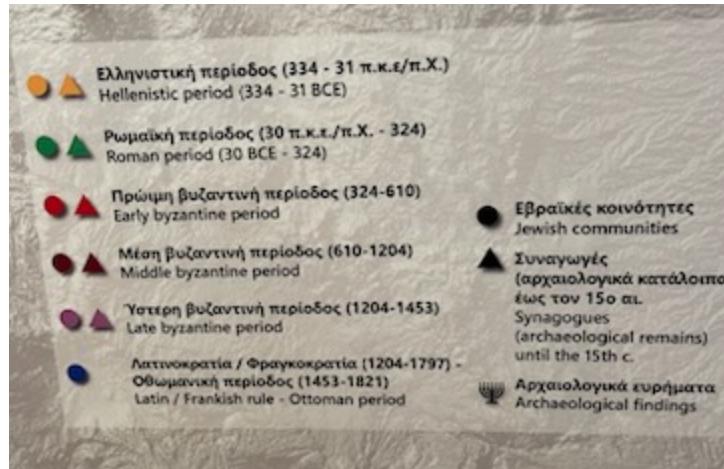
Akiva said to his wife: See this man, who does not even have straw. We should be happy with our lot, as we at least have straw to sleep on.

At this time in their lives, Rabbi Akiva and his wife are dirt poor. Yet when they see someone suffering or in greater need than they, they do not hesitate not just to sympathize but to share what they have. It is this greatness, stemming from humility, that explains the rest of the story of two of our greatest personalities in the Talmud.

Greetings from Greece. Our brief trip to this ancient/modern city was mostly for business. Being there over Shabbat a week before Hanukkah prompts eight brief observations (eight, get it) that I at least had not known and so may be of interest to others:

1. The Romaniote Jews that populated Greece millennia ago, some of whom still live in Greece, are neither Ashkenazi nor Sephardi (pre-Sephardi as they resided there prior to the Spanish Inquisition). There were Romaniote communities in dozens of cities and towns comprising modern Greece. They are the oldest Jewish community of Europe. Most living during WWII were killed in the Holocaust.
2. There is a small but fascinating exhibit in a small but fascinating museum in Athens. The museum is called in English the Epigraphic Museum. The exhibit, cosponsored by the Jewish Museum of Greece, contains inscriptions beginning about the Fourth Century B.C.E. From then on, the inscriptions on display cover each major epoch when Jews were settled in this part of the world, as shown in the following legend and on the incredible map:





3. The inscriptions are amazing. They are largely on Synagogues and grave markers, such as these:



4. Proposed slogan or tag-line for Shearith Israel, inspired by the slogan/tag-line of the Greece Museum of Archeology:

THE PAST IS NOW

5. From the Department of “Boy I really hope this doesn’t happen to us”, there is a large and visible sign as you approach the mountain area holding the Acropolis and Parthenon, saying:

The serious structural problems caused by the previous restoration of the [area] (1909-1917) led to the imperative need for a new intervention, which began in 1990.

6. The streets of Athens were packed. Two languages predominated: 70% Hebrew and 30% Greek. Athens has become a popular spot for Israeli tourists. First, it's only two hours by plane from Tel Aviv. Second, it is one of the very few places two hours away welcoming to Israelis.
7. Friday night the Chabad of Athens fed well over 100 people wanting a taste of Shabbat. The Rabbi, Rabbi Hendel, is marvelous. If you get to Athens, have dinner at the restaurant owned and operated by the Chabad there, wonderfully named *Gostijo*, which of course is Ladino for what?
8. Among the greatest treats of all was going to the synagogue Shabbat morning, where a bar mitzvah was being celebrated by over 100 locals. The nusach is reminiscent of ours, but there are Romaniote tonalities as well. What a joy seeing the remnants of the community virtually destroyed by the Holocaust fanning its embers to reignite a growing, and glowing, community.

Built Back Better. We had lots of clever participation this week:

Our Local Prayer for Rain and Dew. For those of us who tend to run through the *Amida* so fast that we forget to change at Succot time from our summer prayer for dew to our winter prayer for rain, there is a custom among some to say the new words 100 times. The custom, for some, puts the reader in a different halachik category. On this reasoning, if you say the new verbiage 100 times, then, if you later are unsure whether or not you recited the prayer correctly, you can assume you said it right and not repeat the entire *Amida*. This is way too labored an explanation for the cute cartoon sent in by RavDoc, which relates to what Ashkenazim say commencing Dec. 4, as we discussed last week:



RavDoc also amplified that some Ashkenazim following nusach Sepharad say barchenu (the other side of the page in the *siddur* from “barech alenu”) during the summer. The liturgy of “nusach Sephard” for Ashkenazim is so interesting that it deserves a separate, short explanation. Anyone got one?

Haiku Heaven. I made up “Haiku Heaven”. It’s eh, right. Sarah Meira Rosenberg implicitly suggested “parasha poetry”, which is better than mine but still doesn’t quite capture the brass ring. Anyway, this week we have several great Haikus:

Hugely talented Susan Vorhand, who is doing a Haiku a week on the parshiot, sent in the following for last week’s, parashat *Vayishlach*:

*Yaakov and Esau
The cosmic battle prevails
Merge righteous and raw*

It is close to what I offered last week – except better.

Susan also offers one this week, Parashat *Vayeishev*:

*A father's fav'ring
Caused heartache and betrayal
For Joe, it's the pits.*

Cantor Jay Harwitt, who sent in that brilliant Haiku a couple weeks ago, suggests this one for *Vayeishev*:

*Mrs. Potiphar
Chased Joseph around the house
But never caught him.*

Name that Book Section.

I have begged enough so that, finally, we have some smart and talented people rescuing me from the hated “Cornubookia”.

Cantor Jay Harwitt suggests:

Good Odds from the Bookies

Aura Bijou suggests:

Book-A-Raba

Laura Fleischmann suggests:

BiblioFile

Susan Vorhand propounds a plethora of plenty:

So Many Books...
Between the Pages
BookShelf
Coming of Page
Novel Novels & More
Hooked on Books
One for the Books

Finally an inspired list. Vote for your choice – see your candidate WIN!

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

Louis Solomon, Parnas