

January 12, 2023

Dear friends,

The Eternal Golden Mean. Last week I said farewell (for now, anyway) to our discussion of masking. Several of our doctors, however, thought that one more treatment would be salubrious. I will be brief (special apologies to Michael Lustig, who, too, has had enough).

Our [October 20, 2022 email](#) reminded us of Professor Douglas Hofstadter's fabulous book, *Gödel, Escher, Bach*, the subtitle to which is *An Eternal Golden Braid*. Here I borrow "eternal" and "golden" to rejoice in the fact that physicians on all sides of the masking analysis have now weighed-in praising our Congregation's approach to continuing to pursue what Dr. Michael Schuller describes as the "*shvil hazahav*". For example, Dr. Arnold Rosen, who has rightly insisted on more scientific rigor in my discussions of the issue than I'm capable of giving, does in the end recognize:

I think your decision proceeds along the wise 'golden path'

With everyone now in this kumbaya moment, and to make sure we don't take ourselves too seriously, Ruth Moser Reimer tells the funny story that:

My once Israeli hairdresser asked, "Afoh rotsah hash'vil [where would you like the part of your hair]? On the left or the right?" I answered, "On the sh'vil hazahav." So, he placed the part in the middle.

Campy C-A-M-P. Some people seem to have gotten something out of last week's discussion of our early morning prayers, four significant parts of which I think of as C-A-M-P. Steve Smith dubs the discussion "campy". Steve does agree that most of us speed through these profound passages too speedily. Says Steve:

No doubt our Sages put lots of thought into their choice of words and the cadence of every line that we speed read. I have often thought that if Shakespeare's Sonnets were read with the same attentiveness to detail and nuance, they would either be forgotten or buried in a book of ancient poetry.

When Silence Isn't Golden. The last time I spoke about the British playwright and Nobel Laureate Harold Pinter was on [9/24/20](#), in the middle of Covid's forced silencing of our indoor communal prayer (remember when even masked utterances were discouraged in order to prevent the expression of the aerosols?). Then, the Harold Pinter-like silences, the silences between the lines, could only sadden, and did. With deepest thanks to the Almighty, et seq., that is behind us now.

The study of silence, however, is alive and well. We are now in the last Chapter (11) of Tractate Nedarim in the world-wide Daf Yomi cycle. I have noticed before that one of the remarkable aspects of Tractate Nedarim is the sophisticated analysis employed to discern the meaning of the opposite of silence, that is, the use of words and phrases, and how those meanings have important legal implications. Speech is king and queen in our religion, certainly in our legal rubrics.

Toward the end of the Tenth Chapter, however, the Talmud addresses the issue whether silence can have legal effects on the annulment or cancelation of vows. The discussion appears on page 79a, but we are given a hint of the Talmud's approach two pages earlier. On page 77b, the Talmud describes a case where one person annuls another's vow by instructing the vow-taker to act inconsistently with the vow. So for example if a wife vows that she will not eat or drink x or y, the husband, in limited and defined circumstances, can annul the vow by giving the wife the otherwise forbidden food or drink and, in the words of R' Yochanan, canceling the vow "in his heart" (that is, silently). Here it seems like conduct is the driving force supporting the cancellation, not the "in his heart".

Then, on page 79a, the Talmud again asks whether silence, but this time without conduct, is sufficient for vow cancellation or annulment. We are not surprised that the Talmud doesn't permit it. Halacha does have a concept of an act of being quiet acting as acquiescence, or *shtika k'hodaah*. But in the general case, the Talmud finds it too muddy to have to figure out what was intended by the silence – for example, did it mean acquiescence or its opposite. In American law, by the way, a similar conundrum is recognized, and there the challenge is ameliorated by requiring someone to speak *when they have a duty to act*. Then, the absence of speech, well, speaks volumes. But in the ordinary case, where there is no duty to speak, the Talmud isn't able to set a rule favoring silence; the party wishing to annul or cancel is just going to have to speak up.

So [Silence is Golden](#), but it's not legally sufficient in the cases addressed. And the [Sounds of Silence](#) is one of the great songs of the great Simon & Garfunkel. I'm sure you can think of at least five other "silence" songs (for two points each, and no *Silent Night*).

Built Back Better.

Friends Revisited. Aura Bijou, one of our treasured congregants, friends, and email correspondents, disagrees with CS Lewis's statement about friendship in *Four Loves*, which I quoted [on December 29, 2022](#) ("*Friendship is unnecessary, like philosophy, like art, like the universe itself... It has no survival value; rather it is one of those things which give value to survival*"). Aura cites solid scientific evidence that social isolation negatively affects all of us, contributing to sleeplessness and even to reduced immune function. Social isolation is associated with a significant increase of risk of premature death from all causes.

Here I totally agree with Aura – but then so does CS Lewis. His discussion of friendship is one of the greatest and most positive expositions of the topic. I go a step further, as it relates to our Congregation. Many of us are single. Many of us do not have families. Yet every one of us can have friends and be part of our (or another) community. We are a *kehillah* for just that reason. And it is in the *kehillah* that we all have a place. Our community is our greatest strength, and I thank Aura for making me clarify that.

AI's Limerick Limits. We decided last week to turn from *Parashat* haikus to *Parashat* limericks. I say “we” advisedly, since many of intrepid and disciplined colleagues are still writing haikus and are not going to be deterred by anything an AI “machine” puts out.

I asked a question of our new, favorite, brilliant, scary, nonplussing Artificial Intelligence website (link [here](#) again for your convenience). It is easy to use. Given the worrisome reactions of some to how well the program did on *parashat* haikus, I asked the simplest of questions: Please compose a limerick for *Parashat Shemot*. It took under a second -- and appeared with an apology that they were very busy just now, so please be patient. The output is as follows:

*Parashat Shemot, oh so hot
A tale of people in trouble, a lot
Moses was both to Pharaoh forlorn
But he led them to freedom, not just a shot in the pot*

I sense the sharks circling. You smell blood in the water. This is an awful limerick! In fact, so that can we pile on appropriately, I'll give one point for each error and fair observation about the many ways this “thing” fails as a limerick.

To make matters worse, I queried the program again, with the same polite question. Instead of the same bad limerick, out came the following:

*In Parashat Shemot we see
A people in bondage, oppressed and in misery
But a leader did rise
To free them from lies
Moses, with bravery and tenacity*

Now, in fairness, one couldn't ask or answer clarifying questions, so it is not even clear we have common definitions of what a limerick is. In fact, it looks like there are different formal definitions being used in the two outputs, no? But passing that, whatever the definition, this second limerick is no better than the first. It's just no good. One point per error or fair observation.

AND, calling all limerickists. Next Shabbat is *Parashat Vaera*. Let's limerick it to LIFE! Send 'em in, but as you do, please watch the formal requirements for limericks.

Quote of the Week. I don't always love the quotes some of us put at the foot of our emails. I do love the one Debbie Sondheim (a teacher at SAR and a fan of both Rabbi Soloveichik and our next-gen editor Sarah Meira Rosenberg) appends to hers:

"Change the way you look at things, the things you look at change."

- Dr. Wayne Dyer

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

Louis Solomon, Parnas