

January 19, 2023

Dear Shearith Israel family,

***At Least We Don't Fight About the Windows!*** I was going to skip the Covid-19 report this week; positivity rates are falling, and I fear I'm tiring those who want to put "paid" to the whole pandemic business. (Of course, those who remain concerned that, for example, an entire wedding party, including guests, got sick just recently because of the absence of any precautions would like a brief update.) Then, David Cohen sent me [this](#). The piece discusses an ill-fated moment in our Congregation's otherwise august history. The time was 1756. We were already 102 years old. The elders of our Congregation fined and excommunicated one of our prominent families, Solomon Hays. The incident involved a fight over whether to keep a window in the women's section open or closed. Oy. It's embarrassing, true, but it's not all bad; David and I both think this is the same Hays family whose descendants, over 100 years later, donated a gorgeous pair of Myer Myers *rimonim* to our Congregation.

As a Covid precaution, we will continue to keep some windows open in our Sanctuary, assuming it doesn't get too cold. For extra good measure, does anyone else have an embarrassing story about our Congregation that you want to share?

***When "Just Kidding!" Doesn't Cut It.*** I remember "just kidding" from old Saturday Night Live skits. That was well before a TV series by the same name and countless other knock-offs. I would happily part with two points for the earliest popular sighting of the phrase in action, which humorously tries to excuse some gaffe or other intentional distortion to make an ironic point.

We live in a world that is too-serious, where humor is misjudged and condemned as being insensitive. We also live in a world where humor can get out of hand, where deliberate slights and insults can get so nasty that no one really feels they are funny – and where the offense and humiliation felt by the object of the savagery is magnified by social media.

Our Sages thought about all this. And in thinking about this they brought to bear the wisdom of ages even 1600-2000 years ago. That wisdom has vitality today. In the worldwide Daf Yomi cycle, we are just a few pages from the end of Tractate Nedarim. These pages are as short in Talmudic text as they are rich in fundamental legal and philosophical insights. The bottom of page 87a contains a can't-miss discussion of the principle of law called תוֹךְ כְּדַי דְּבוּר, *toch k'day dibur*, badly translated as "within the time it takes to say".

The principle of *toch k'day dibur* as applied here in Tractate Nedarim is the equivalent of a verbal "do over". If you correct yourself or try to undo an oath during the time it takes to greet someone to whom respect is given, then the law usually permits you to take back the statement, to say, -in effect, "just kidding". Opinions differ concerning how long is the time interval for retraction. Many opinions put the time at about four seconds. New Yorkers can

think of the quip about how long is the famous “New York Minute” -- defined as the time it takes for the car behind you to start honking after the light in front of you turns green.

For those of us who start talking before fully thinking through what we are going to say (I spent the last couple weeks in depositions, where I saw the phenomena first-hand), the ability quickly to retract and reframe is indispensable. But what is so enlightening about the Talmudic discussion is not just that we are encouraged to correct our verbal assaults and errors in most cases. As important, the Talmud lays out categories of statements where even instant retraction is ineffective, where “just kidding” just doesn’t work.

The Mishna on 87a lists four statements that really need to be thought about in advance. They cannot be undone with a “just kidding”. These are: blasphemy, idol worship, words to create a marriage, and words to dissolve a marriage. There are other places in the Talmud, adumbrated by later commentators, that add one or two more utterances that can’t be taken back. These types of statements are too fundamental to the operation of a well-ordered society to permit casual retraction. THINK about what you are saying. When you make light of utterances in these categories there are consequences.

The Talmudic text does not say this, but I wonder if the categories on the list are somewhat contextual. I don’t mean that what is not or should not be tolerated in one milieu might be just fine in another. Instead, I mean that there doesn’t seem to be anything wrong with insisting that new categories of speech are deserving of special treatment because of the societal context in which a generation finds itself.

We all have our list of slights, those insensitive, offensive remarks that should not only be off-limits but should also be unavailable for a “just-kidding” retraction. I want to offer one. I’m not talking about just plain, everyday stupid remarks – like saying “[I love you](#)” to the wrong person or at the wrong time, as Frank Sinatra warns against (just kidding!). I’m rather thinking of Robert Frost’s masterful poem *Fire and Ice* and in particular the viciousness of hate:

*Some say the world will end in fire,  
Some say in ice.  
From what I’ve tasted of desire  
I hold with those who favor fire.  
But if it had to perish twice,  
I think I know enough of hate  
To say that for destruction ice  
Is also great  
And would suffice.*

Hateful speech destroys the world. There should be no “just kidding” for such speech. Just don’t do it.

**Built Back Better.** We have a few follow-ups and a few newer-ups:

**Shemot Limericks.** Limericks are a challenge to compose. Limericks that capture a parasha are way harder. But a bunch of our best and brightest couldn't resist showing up the mediocre AI program mentioned last week and trying their hand on a Parashat/Sefer Shemot limerick.

Faith Fogelman's limerick for Parashat Shemot:

*But HaShem, I stammer and stutter  
No words can I perfectly utter  
So Moshe said "no"  
But HaShem said you'll go  
And hurry, there is no time to putter*

Steve Beispiel offers his self-styled "biblimerick", also for Parashat Shemot:

*While taking a bath in the Nile,  
Bat-Pharaoh discovered a child,  
She later proposes,  
To name the lad Moses,  
He sure drove her cruel father wild.*

Steve didn't stop there. I begged him to try a parasha limerick in Ladino. Amazingly, out came:

*La ija de Faraon s'estava baniando,  
Salvo un chicale de ahogando,  
Se crecio para ser Moshe Rabbeinu,  
Por l'armada de Faraon fue dayeinu.*

*Pharaoh's daughter was giving herself a bath,  
She saved a small child from drowning,  
He grew up to be Moshe Rabbeinu,  
For Pharaoh's army it was dayeinu.*

And Jay Harwitt, who actually following the directions about which parasha to limerick (now a transitive verb), offers this for Parashat Vaera:

*When at last Moses learned how to speak  
There was blood in each river and creek.  
Next came frogs and then lice,  
Flies, plague, boils, hail (not nice!)  
We will finish the last three next week.*

These are all great, and each submitter has been awarded THREE inflation-adjusted points, the equivalent of a 9.8 in Olympic diving.

**Sounds of Silence.** Thank you to Laury Frieber for a great song about/including silence, as requested in last week's email. It's in Yiddish. We won't exclude it for that reason, now, will we? The song is *Sha, Shtil*, and here are two recordings of it: [here](#) and [here](#).

Laury adds the Herman's Hermits' [There's a Kind of Hush](#), which I remember the Carpenters singing. *Warning*: the song's an ear worm.

Faith Fogelman (who reminds me of the savants on Jeopardy who hang back until they get a category they have mastered – and then clean the column handily) also offers a great “silence” song: Cole Porter's *Night and Day* (“in the silence of my lonely room”), [here](#) sung by the incomparable Ella Fitzgerald.

**Quote of the Week: A Response.** Our quote last week was:

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

*- Dr. Wayne Dyer*

Aura Bijou loved the quote. Aura knew Dr. Dyer personally – she says they called him by the nickname “weenie.” AWKWARD!

At the same time, the quote prompted a response from my unerring math editor, Rebecca Frankel. Says Rebecca:

*You can change your perspective, but the thing is what it is - how you look at it will not affect what it actually is.*

Rebecca is concerned about papering over what a thing really is by “perspectiving” it away. If I err or fail I should own up to it, fix it, try harder, or try another approach; hiding behind a band aid of “perspective” by looking at the error or failure in a different way doesn't change the error or failure.

I'm ok with the original quote. But I'm also ok with Rebecca's reaction. Who's got a good quote, though, for Rebecca's perspective? Two points.

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

Louis Solomon, Parnas