

February 9, 2023

Dear Shearith Israel family,

**Magevet time.** What a magnificent, magical Kabbalat Shabbat we had to celebrate Shabbat *Shira*. So it was cold outside (like the song says, below). No one cared. Over 150 of us enjoyed *Friday Night Lights* and then Friday night dinner with Magevet, Yale's a cappella singing group. The group was marvelous. Their singing, timing, cooperation, spirit, and joy were infectious (ok, bad word – but you know what I mean). It was our Congregation's inestimable privilege to host them. Here is a [link](#) to them on Spotify. They also sell CDs. We hope we can entice them to return next year. It was a very special Shabbat because of them.

Magevet performed a number of songs that other parts of the Jewish world sing every Friday night. One particularly beautiful one, *Kah Echsof*, is one Beth and I love and sing and learned when our various children returned from study in Israel. [Here is a video](#) of R' Aharon Lichtenstein joining his students in singing the song before Shabbat on the occasion of the anniversary of the death of R' Amital. You too will weep when you see and hear it.

On the Covid-19 diligence front, I have not heard even one report of a Covid-positive or Covid spread from our Friday evening together. Likely we would have heard by now (certainly by next week's email). During services, we will maintain our protocols of safety. I think it is helping many and bothering no one.

**Nezirut Time.** In our movement through Tractate Nazir, as part of the global-community Daf Yomi cycle, the Chapters (I and II) of the Tractate treat the temporal periods during which one is a *nazir*. The Tractate adumbrates a series of rules that are usually tied to the announcement made by the person becoming a *nazir* when he or she initiates the process with a vow or oath.

The minimum period is 30 days, so a simple declaration of *nezirut* without a time specified requires a *nezirut* period of 30 days, as does a declaration that the oath-taker is assuming *nezirut* for any period under 30 days. Complex rules attend declarations such as, I will be a *nazir* for as long it takes me to travel to place x (in general, the time is the longer of 30 days and time it takes to travel to x); or time periods keyed to the number of hairs on one's head, or the amount of dust on the earth, or the number of sands in the sea (one opinion is that there are successive 30-day or longer periods, with a momentary break in the middle for a haircut). More extended *nezirut* observances, again depending on the utterances used at the start of the process, are also part of the law, extending as long as one's entire life.

The particular details are not going to be on the test. What does matter is that there are rules that flow from usages of speech, so once people know the rules they can adjust their speech to get the desired result.

**Cosmic Time: Blessing of the Moon.** As we just saw in our discussion of the Daf Yomi pages we are now learning, as with virtually everything that occurs in reality, the time dimension is of defining or elemental importance. Prove me wrong – for two points. In the next ten “things”

you read or think about, stop to think how fundamental the temporal aspect is of the “thing”. For us as a people, what initiated the whole enterprise is the verse in the Parashat *Bo* a few weeks ago (which, by the way, Rabbi Soloveichik gave a wonderful Shabbat afternoon class on):

*"Hachodesh hazeh lachem rosh chadashim; rishon hu lachem lechodshei hashanah."*

*"This month shall be for you the beginning of the months; it shall be for you the first of the months of the year."*

So much has been written on Judaism's creation of human-directed time that you don't need more of that from me. Rather, what is worth a brief detour is to consider what we Jews do with the monthly observance of the new moon.

Even new Jewish month includes a hopefully-communal prayer, said at the conclusion of services on Shabbat, called:

ברכת הלבנה

Or the blessing of the [new] moon. I'm no Hebrew grammarian, but I think the studied ambiguity in English is the same as in the Hebrew: is the blessing by us of the new moon (as in blessing *of* the new moon), or is the new moon blessing us (as in blessing *by* the new moon). In either case, each month a quorum of us traipse outside, find the moon peering through the trees or between the buildings, and recite several passages and psalms. We end with the wonderful greeting to each other,

*Shalom alechem,*

And the answer back,

*Alechem shalom.*

That's the background. What I wanted to observe is not that I have never seen a [blue moon](#), though it's one of the great songs. And I also did not want to admit that it's, well, a bit awkward to be standing around the subway entrance on West 70<sup>th</sup> Street, prayer books in hand, chanting a prayer to the moon. Of course I shouldn't be embarrassed, but I do feel like saying to passersby, no really, we aren't praying *to* the moon.

I wanted to make two observations:

First, it is remarkable that I (we?) almost never look up to the Heavens to see the moon. There is so much light pollution in New York City that one can rarely see more than a few stars. So we get out of the habit, in the City, of looking up. Seeing the moon remains moving even to oldies like myself. Thankfully, once a month, in blessing the new moon, we remember to “look up!”

Second, there is something satisfying about thinking about the blessing and the whole scene. There are 300 billion suns in our minuscule galaxy, which is tucked in nondescriptly at the tail end of a spiral in cosmic space. Yet how many of those 300 billion stars have a rock with life on

it, with only one moon, and with rotation systems of rock around sun and moon around rock that renews its cycle every 29-30 “days”? (Who remembers the mesmerizing calculation of life’s possibilities and potential for self-destruction made by the great Carl Sagan in *Cosmos*?) I’m totally fine with there being countless other places with life forms on them. I only wish we could experience them. My own faith is deepened, not shaken by the prospect. Yet however many there are, it is in ours where we have this particular concatenation of objects and forms that leads to a renewal every four weeks or so. It is that combination that gives us the world as we see it. It gives us a moon to say Good Night to. It is a blessing to be able to experience that renewal, that monthly do-over. And if we share it with other star-rock-moon combinations, so much the better. Maybe they too bless their new moon.

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

***The Shearith Israel Winter Song List.*** We are starting this list long enough after the Gregorian-calendar year-end holiday season that I’m hopeful we will receive suggestions other than to Christmas songs. There are so many great winter songs. My initial entries are among my favorites:

- [California Dreamin’](#), of course, The Mamas and the Papas (you *must* view the video).
- [Wintertime Love](#), by The Doors.
- [Here Comes the Sun](#), the incomparable George Harrison creation sung by the Beatles.
- [Baby It’s Cold Outside](#), here sung by Dean Martin.

Send in your favorites.

***Parasha Poetry.*** It seems like our West Coast contingent owns this space. Here is Parashat *Yitro* limerick from Dr. Susan Vorhand:

*Yithro told Moshe, there’s too much on your plate  
Your caseload you must facilitate  
In fact you can shirk  
Much of the work  
All you have to do is delegate*

Susan threw in a grand haiku as well, just to show us she hasn’t lost the touch:

*To help us live right  
The Instruction Manual  
Contains all answers*

Jay Harwitt sent in another winning limerick on Parashat *Yitro* as well:

*All the Israelites stood there, afraid,  
As the power of G-d was displayed.  
Ten Commandments He gave*

*Moses had to be brave  
And his father-in-law should have stayed.*

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

Louis Solomon, Parnas