

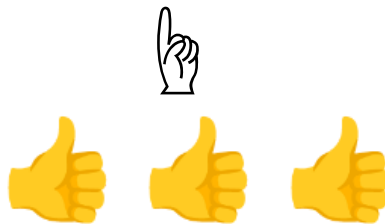
April 10, 2023

Dear Shearith Israel family,

Covid-19 Update:

Business as usual in Portuguese, Spanish, and Russian.

Negócios Como Sempre
Negocios Como Siempre
бизнес как нормально, read (phonetically) as 'beezness kak normal'no'



(Positivity rates in NYC are back down to 3%, btw, which is wonderful, for us.)

The first days of Pesah were wonderful at our Esnoga. We missed the many people who were away, but then many young adults were home for the holiday. The Sanctuary felt abundant on many dimensions. We had a large crowd on Day 1 to hear the magnificent prayer Rabbi Rohde sings with the Choir for *tal*, or dew (on the provenance of the Hatikvah-sounding theme melody, see my [emails of 9/8/22, 9/15/22, and 9/29/22](#)). Rabbi Soloveichik cheered us with sermons on both Yom Tov days and on Shabbat. We made a slight change in the mask-only rows in the men's section to make more room for mask-optionals. Everyone was fine with the modification.

Regrettably, we did not have enough women to sing Shir Hashirim at the Synagogue this year. Rabbi and Lisa Rohde improvised with a zoom chanting of the short and beautiful song. Deep thanks to those who participated, beginning with the women from our Sister Congregation in Philadelphia, Mikveh Israel. From the Shearith Israel community we want to thank: Shoshana Goldfarb, Daphna Vega, Annette Gourgey, Neta Wiznia, Barbara Haimowitz, and Lisa Rohde. It is nice that we can zoom and have a broader participation. Still, it would be disappointing (at least to me) if we let the nascent custom of young women reading Shir Hashirim in the Sanctuary lapse.

Wednesday and Thursday this week we will celebrate the closing days of Pesah. Come be a part of the parting of the sea.

A Dayenu Post-script. There were many supportive reactions siding with me (and not Rabbi Soloveichik) on the central importance of the song *Dayenu* to our Seder (which, remember, we call a Haggadah). Since I did the tallying of votes, guess who won?

Two reactions suggesting that I was myself singing a little off-key are worth a nod:

First, Barbara Reiss wants to make sure that I wasn't limiting continuity over time on the J-Chain to familial transmission. I really wasn't. Lasting appearance on the J-Chain is a function of the effort that each individual makes to preserving and, if you will, praying forward the benefits that we received from others. It is a religious or social or communal transmission, not a biological one. Our Congregation, like others, endures in part because of families but in just as large a measure because of individuals, all of whom are indispensable to our continuity.

Second, Bob Rifkind, my mentor, reacted:

A skeptic put it to me: "If [the Almighty] had parted the sea for us but not led us through it dry shod", would that have been sufficient, or would we all have drowned?

*"If [the Almighty] had brought us to Mt Sinai but not given us the Torah" what was the point?
Etc.*

Which brings to mind the definition of catastrophe: crossing a chasm in two leaps.

I have an answer to this. Does anyone else want to try?

Sotah on Pesah; Pesah in Sotah! Let's begin by forthrightly giving two points to Dr. Michael Schulder, who immediately knew that Spuyten Duyvil means "Devil's Spout, because of the rough waters there". ("In spite of the devil" would also have been accepted, by the way – losers). There is a great book touching upon that geography just north of our Island, Russell Shorto's *The Island at the Center of the World* (2005), which I discussed in [my email of 12/30/2021](#). It is also discussed in an ok-to-skip book, Joshua Jelly-Schapiro's *Names of New York*.

Claude Nadaf disagrees with my suggestion that the Tractate we are now holding in, *Sotah*, is at least in part about the benevolence of the Almighty towards well-meaning if weak spouses and the difficulties they sometimes encounter in a marriage. Says Claude:

The Sotah's nonfatal ordeal was designed to protect the innocent woman from her possibly irrational, violent husband similar to the law concerning ben sorer umoreh, the wayward and rebellious son, who might be living in a dysfunctional and potentially violent family.

Remember I'm just the piano player here, not composer or lyricist or creative talent in any way (two points for the origin of the phrase). I'm just reading the texts with neither experience nor expertise to support my musings. Claude's view is entitled to consideration. But is Claude right? There *does* seem to be some textual support for Claude's view concerning the wayward son. We learn from the Talmud itself, for example, that punishing the wayward son is something that may *never* have happened under Jewish law.

At the same time, I'm not finding Claude's lopsided approach in the discussion thus far of the *Sotah*. With respect to the wife, we know that she was asked not to find herself in seclusion with a particular man, and we know she was then witnessed in that compromised position. We

do not know how illicit was the seclusion. We know that the wife is escorted to Jerusalem for the Sotah ceremony by Sages who try to have her confess so as to avoid the fate of a Sotah who is guilty and drinks the potion. That avuncular suasion continues when she arrives in Jerusalem and the ordeal begins. We learn that Jewish law gives her every chance to confess – the downside for confessing is that she loses her marriage dowry, which many would prefer to not confessing, being guilty, and having one’s stomach blow up.

I respectfully disagree with Claude because, as I see it, the Talmud seems to be an equal opportunity blame-avoider. Both parties to the marriage could stop the escalation. Both are essentially begged to find a path back to love and affection and mutual respect – it is only when all else fails that the miracle of the Almighty’s intervention is required and evident.

Please take special note that pages 12a/b of Tractate Sotah, which we learn during Pesah this year, is all about the Pesah story in the Torah and includes exegeses of some of the very passages we read in our Haggadah. I have asked this before in another context. I got some very clever reactions, so let me try again. Can you calculate how likely it is that we would have, in the same week, Talmudic discussion of the very same passages we are reading in a once-a-year event like the Haggadah? Do you think the order of magnitude is at least as improbable as the once-in-a-thousand years occurrence we spoke about a couple of years ago, in my [email of 3/25/21](#)?

Built Back Better.

Team Jewish. My better half has recently been quietly, gently muttering against the current past-time of turning too much into “And Jews did this well,” or “Jews invented that,” or “didn’t you know she was Jewish, or her grandmother was,” and the like. Of course Beth has a point.

But like every good rule there need to be exceptions. Let’s suppose we learned, for example, that Paul McCartney was not only married to a Jew but was one himself? Would that be noteworthy? Or if that example doesn’t boat your float, how about if we raised the stakes? We can’t use Einstein – already in the fold.

I’ve got one, and I’m sure you all saw it, too. For some decades there have been speculations that one of the greatest polymaths of the Fifteenth Century, if not of all time, Leonardo da Vinci, was Jewish. Last week, a spate of articles surfaced in English suggesting the same thing. They are discussing the findings of a new book by an Italian historian, Carlo Vecce, titled *Il Sorriso di Caterina: La Madre di Leonardo* (apparently translated as *Catherine’s smile: Leonard’s mother*).

If any of our Italian-reading congregants can give the book a read, please do, and please pass on some thoughts for us to share. Otherwise, I volunteer to read the English, if the book is ever translated. As the poster that has been hanging in my office for, oh, 40 years attests (see below), da Vinci is one of those great figures of history that can serve as inspirations to us all.



I try to resist buying into the Team Jewish mania. Leonardo would still be on my short list of exceptions. Who is on yours? Two points for the funny and exceptional.

Other Books for the Holiday. Perry and Margy Ruth Davis are great friends of our Congregation; as fundraising consultants, they helped us immeasurably during our Year of Years Campaign a few years ago. As friends in the 'hood, they are also among the best read couple we know. Recommendations from them are worth a lot a lot.

Perry and Margy recommend *Becoming Elijah – Prophet of Transformation*, by Daniel Matt (part of the Jewish Lives series published by Yale University Press). As to why they recommend it highly, Perry says that the author “explains why and how the immortal and ubiquitous Elijah can inspire our daily lives and give special meaning to our smachot, moadim, and tefilot” (happy occasions, holidays, and prayers).

I’m in; it’s now on the list. Thank you both. Is no else reading particularly good or bad books these days?

More Quotes. I'm changing this challenge to make it more interesting. We are hereby soliciting quotes that you would not think are from the person quoted. Send in both the quote and 3-4 possible names (don't forget to tell me who actually said it). To get the ball rolling, for one point, who said:

"the universe is not the result of chance"

- a. Yogi Berra
- b. Charles Darwin
- c. Thomas Mann
- d. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveichik

Thank you all. Bless us all. Moadim L'simcha. Here! *Kaminando kon Buenos.*

Louis Solomon, Parnas