

April 4, 2023

Dear Shearith Israel family,

Covid-19 Update:

Negócios Como Sempre
(business as usual, in Portuguese)

Negócios Como Siempre
(business as usual, in Spanish)



Last week, we invited write-ins of “business as usual” in languages of our congregants in addition to Portuguese and Spanish (thanks to Philip Shapiro for correcting my use of the *accent* in the Spanish “negocios”). Alexzander Grinberg, of *Kisvei HaKodesh Research*, sends in another great one, from the Russian:

БИЗНЕС КАК НОРМАЛЬНО, read (phonetically) as 'beezness kak normal'no'
(business as usual, in Russian)

Thirteen years ago, our daughter Tess researched the countries from which our members hailed. The number was 54. So, we have 51 to go!

Dayenu, Itself Sufficient. Long before I heard Rabbi Soloveichik poke friendly fun at *Dayenu* as the Hagaddah’s “must skip” song, I thought it a candidate for one of the Seder’s central pillars. And sorry, despite one of our Heritage’s most frequent responses, we are *not* both right.

I will leave the jokes and the erudition to the Rabbi and explain instead why I respectfully believe that, from the perspective of community, *Dayenu* is not just correctly translated as “it would be sufficient”. I go further: Imho, if all we did on Pesah is sing *Dayenu* – meaning no endless cleaning, no getting rid of chametz, no gorgeous melodies, no beautiful Sanctuary, no Seders (which we call Hagaddahs, by the way), no matzoh, no visits with family and friends – if all we did was sing *Dayenu*, *that* in itself would be sufficient to capture and continue to pass on the true essence of our holiday of freedom.

Dayenu is a series of approximately 13 stanzas, each one describing something the Almighty did for the Jewish people at a certain point in time. For each stanza the song says that, if that is all the Almighty did for the Jewish people, it would have been sufficient. *Dayenu*. Why is this not just an old-fashioned song of thanksgiving? Why is it so central to the story of the Jews that it rightly (imho) secures a central position in our central event of the entire Jewish calendar?

My thinking is that Pesah does not just celebrate our freedom. It celebrates our *collective memory* of achieving freedom *from* bondage and freedom *to* worship as a people. More specifically, we celebrate our collective remembrance of the *thankfulness* that each of the approximately 175 generations since Egypt has exhibited for being given that freedom.

If that is right, then what becomes immediately evident is that not all generations along the continuum have been equally free or equally without peril or travail or even disasters. For us as a people, it is the collective direction not speed that counts. And it is only when we see ourselves as part of the great “J-Chain of Being” that the deep purpose of Judaism becomes manifest. As it relates to where we are along the J-Chain, many of us, singularly and as a community, occupy different parts of that Chain. But when the direction is positive – positive in terms of fulfilling our role as *Keepers of the Values of the J-Chain* – then speed or distance covered matters very little, if at all.

When we sing *Dayenu* on Pesah, we observe that, for each stage of the journey there described, each generation did its part to keep the J-Chain vital. In that respect each generation was essential – indeed indispensable – for without each and every link in the Chain there would be no Chain. Keeping the J-Chain strong is infinitely more important than personal traversal on the Chain itself. Sustaining the J-Chain is what is both necessary and sufficient, or *dayenu*; being part of the J-Chain is what is meaningful, not where on the J-Chain we happen to be. This metaphor applies to our individual lives as well, but for today we just need to realize that each of us determines how solid the bond is within the Chain. *Dayenu* celebrates the meaning given to our lives and to the life of our generation. *Dayenu* means not only being happy with our lot. It means believing that it almost doesn't matter where on the Chain we find ourselves. Sustaining and fortifying the J-Chain is the essence.

Sing *Dayenu*. Feel what it means to be eternally grateful that we as a community have merited to be a minuscule but mighty important part of the J-Chain.

Tractate Sotah: Studies in Benevolence. The worldwide Daf Yom Talmud learning cycle is about a week into Tractate Sotah. The Tractate develops the law on the Biblical injunction to administer to a woman suspected of adultery a drinkable admixture containing the erased shavings of the ineffable name of the Almighty. The ceremony occurs only when the woman continues to profess her innocence even after (i) being warned not to be secluded with another man and (ii) then being witnessed in that compromised liaison (seclusion). To clear her name, she drinks the potion. If she is innocent, nothing happens to her. She can return to her husband and household. If she is guilty of adultery, her stomach expands and explodes – as does that of the man with whom she had the tryst, wherever in the world he happens to be at the time.

There are manifold lessons awaiting us in this Tractate, which is filled with wonderful stories with morals (*agadata*). The law and lore of the Tractate benefit from the reappearance of Rashi's commentary, which has been absent from the prior two Tractates (Nedarim and Nazir).

What literally leaps off the first few pages of the Tractate is a main theme of the Tractate: Just how fundamental to our religion are acts of benevolence. Consider the benevolence animating

the principal roles played by the Almighty in a Sotah story. You begin with a wife who deliberately disregards what doesn't seem like an unreasonable request from the husband, but then again maybe he is being a bit paranoid to suspect his wife. Then, despite an astonishingly long list of reasons not to put the wife through the Sotah ordeal, husband and wife both stubbornly insist on carrying through with it. The importunings of wise sages and judges to desist are all ignored. This is a relationship headed for the shoals of Scylla and Charybdis – or, if you are a New Yorker, Spuyten Duyvil (two points for the origin story or at least the etymology of that name). Yet there is in the husband a spark of love remaining, as there is in the wife. They want to patch up a tattered relationship. Only a miracle will save them.

And, indeed, that is exactly what the Sotah procedure is: a miracle – actually a series of them. In Judaism, we are prohibited from relying on miracles. And we virtually never rely on miracles in deciding legal issues. Sotah is *the* exception (at least that I know of – anyone want to correct me?). So important is it that couples remain together, that families remain intact, that the Almighty is willing to intercede in nature to quiet the fears of the husband and to re-ignite seriousness, faithfulness, and loyalty in the wife. In other circumstances, we are absolutely prohibited from erasing the ineffable Name of the Almighty. Yet the Almighty is willing to have the Name erased so that the sorry, sad, and possibly sordid episode can be put in the past by the parties. Benevolence is being exhibited and therefore taught in the most visible way imaginable.

Built Back Better.

Quotes Galore. I'm happy to report that I didn't receive any Churchill quotes to add to our growing list of great quotes. (I've mentioned before that including Churchill quotes in the list is the equivalent of permitting Beatles songs on a list of greatest R&R songs. There is little room for anything else.) At the same time, it seems that the press of Pesah preparations has distracted many of you from writing in. Take a minute now or over the chag; send in a great quote so that others will enjoy them too.

In the meantime, thank you to Dr. Meyer Solny, who quotes a physician colleague of his, Dr. Peter Green:

It's hard to improve on the wrong therapy.

What a great quote; simultaneously clever, subtle, and memorable.

Thanks, too, to Jack Schenker for reminding us of the great Sam Levenson line (it's attributed to others as well):

Insanity is hereditary. You get it from your children.

Thanks, finally, to Bentsi Cohen, whose quote from another, given to me as *musar* or admonition (for which I'm sincerely grateful), is still a great quote:

אל תלבין פני חברך בהאצילך לו שבחים מנדבת כיוך

Do not insult your friend by bestowing on him compliments from the charity of your pocket

And A Sobering Note. Ruth Moser Riemer, who always has an interesting take on things, reacted to our banter about Manchester, England. We quoted Twain saying that he liked visiting Manchester, since:

The transition between Manchester and death would be unnoticeable.

Says Ruth:

Not so to my family. Aunt Hilda, my mother's sister, her husband and her 5-year-old daughter, my cousin Inga, were on the St. Louis, sailing toward England [from Germany]. The ship was refused entry from every port she entered. Every country that said, "No we do not want you here", knew full well that a return from whence the Saint Louis came meant concentration camp and probably murder by gas.

England said, "Welcome." And so the family resided in Manchester.

Death would have indeed been noticeable.

Dayenu. We have so much to be thankful for.

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

Louis Solomon, Parnas