

May 11, 2023

Our Post-Lag La'Omer Music-is-allowed-for-most-of-us Edition

Dear Shearith Israel family,

Covid-19 Update. The good suggestions for “business as usual” keep rollin’ in (here is the great Mandy Patinkin singing the stupendous song from *Evita*, [And the Money Keeps Rolling In](#)).

Vivien Eisenmann and our Honorary Trustee Esme Berg both share, in French:

Des affaires comme d’habitude

Jale Turcihin says that, in Istanbul, the Ladino for “business as usual” is

Komo Siempre

I wasn’t sure that Jale had any street cred on the subject – until I saw her email handle, which includes “eskenazi”. So on the list it goes. (Jim Rudolph had also suggested a Ladino variant. Apologies for misspelling Jim’s last name last week.)

Charlie Helinski goes in a different but deeply appreciated direction. He reminds us that returning to business as usual can at the same time present a moment of opportunity. So he suggests the Hebrew, **נָשׁוּב לְשׁוּב**, or let us return to the effort of returning (in the sense of improving).

Our senior active *kohen*, Bentsi Cohen, supports the Hebrew **עסקים כרגיל**, which we had on the list. Bentsi as usual gives an erudite explanation for the choice of idiom – and since he did it from The Netherlands (!), he deserves our thanks.

Billy Schulder, who is funny, offers in highfalutin “Brooklynese”:

COVID? Fugedaboutit!

Finally for this week, and truly my favorite, Paula Van Gelder suggests our effort at universal applicability include “business as usual” in Esperanto, which is touted as the world’s most widely spoken constructed international auxiliary language. What a marvelous suggestion:

Komerco kiel kutime

With these additions, our list is has grown to the following:

- ***COVID? Fugedaboutit! (Brooklynese)***
- ***normale gang van zaken (Dutch)***

- *Komerco Kiel Kutime (Esperanto)*
- *Des affaires comme d'habitude (French)*
- *normale gesheft (German)*
- 'o ia mau nō (Hawaiian)
- עסקים כרגיל or חוזרים לשגרה (Hebrew)
- *com' siempre or komo siempre (Ladino)*
- *Negócios Como Sempre (Portuguese)*
- *бизнес как нормально (Russian)*
- *Negocios Como Siempre (Spanish)*
- געשעפט ווי געוויינטלעך (Yiddish)

We are nearing the end of the solicitation period. Write in now, or forever regret that your country or language is omitted from the final list.



Completing Sotah on High Notes. We are nearing the end of Tractate Sotah. With less than a week left, by this time next week we will be introducing ourselves to Tractate *Gittin*, or the Tractate *Of and Concerning Divorce*. I am excited to explore with you this new tractate, which is the second to last in this large Seder, or Order, of the Mishna and accompanying Talmud.

To finish Tractate Sotah, I would like to reflect briefly on two Talmudic dialogues:

- On page 43a of the Tractate, we find a lively discussion concerning Pinchas. In the Torah, Pinchas was given both the duty and honor to wage war against the Midianites. Pinchas's mother's father was Yitro, who, here in the Tractate, is described as an idol worshipper. (Pinchas's paternal grandfather seems to have been Joseph.) The Talmudic text reports that some in the congregation asked why was the grandchild of an idol worshipper worthy of the great honor of leading the fight against the Midianites? The text at least does not extol Pinchas for his earlier act of zealotry, in killing Zimri. Indeed, we know from elsewhere that the Talmud is ambivalent about the zealotry of Pinchas. What is interesting is that the Talmudic text listens to the question that Pinchas's grandfather worshipped idols without reminding us that at some point in time *all* our ancestors worshipped idols (including the father of the father of our nation).

The episode reminds me of us, a little. We have congregants whose families have been in the Congregation for generations. I have yet to see an instance of those families acting with arrogance or haughtiness about their pedigree. I do sometimes run across fellow congregants who are relatively recent vintage but have been in the Congregation for a tiny bit longer than others. *They* are the ones who sometimes need to be reminded that Pinchas was chosen to lead because of his *own* acts of bravery, because of his *own* good deeds, irrespective of his spotted lineage. We *all* descend from idol worshippers.

- Second, at pages 44b/45a to the end of the Tractate at 49b, we meet a fascinating study of communal responsibility, the *Eglah Arufah*. The discussion's genesis is the Torah, Devarim 21:1-9. There we learn that, if someone is found dead between two cities, murdered in certain ways, several (five) of the appointed Judges of the city closest to the murder site (assuming it's the largest city) actually go to the site and there kill a calf and pronounce that they, and their city, were not responsible for the death of the person. The pages of the Talmud here – say, isn't this the most extensive discussion of the topic in the entire corpus? – go into the details as you might imagine the Talmud doing. How can we not admire a people who feel so responsible not only for their own citizens but for strangers, including strangers who may not even have been in their locality but just passing nearby? The ritual is an homage to the inestimable value of life and enduring benefits and obligation of community.

This past Shabbat we celebrated our Congregation's Burial Society. Called Hebra Hased Va'Amet, the Society has been in existence for 220 years. It is reputed to be New York City's oldest relief agency, and has been the inspiration for similar Societies throughout the Jewish world, typically called Hevra Kadishas. There is a tradition brought down in our nominal official history (Dr. De Sola Pool's tome), with no documented proof, that the Society was begun by two Shearith Israel elders who saw the funeral procession of a Jew, not from New York but who died here, about to be buried in a potter's field (two points for the origin of that phrase – no cheating). Whether true or not, the story is uncannily like the story of the *Eglah Arufah*. Let's not take excessive pride in the story; instead, let's think what acts of selfless kindness we can perform today that will be helpful to the less fortunate and displaced, both now and in 220 years from now. And insofar as I have used these virtual pages as an opportunity to encourage tzedakah, I can hardly think of a more worthy cause than our Hebra. You can contribute directly to them [here](#).

You might think that these two teachings are unrelated both to each other and to the theme of the Tractate itself. Respectfully, I disagree. Like the major discussions of the Sotah in earlier weeks, I think these two topics similarly reflect the ingrained humanity of the Tractate and of the Jewish community itself, at least a humanity we aspire to achieve. The stories remind me of our community at our best.

Built Back Better.

Two Mountains. Claude Nadaf picked up two quick points for correctly knowing that the two mountains in the great scene in the Torah, where the Jews were between and on the two mountains as a unified people, were *Har Ebal* and *Har Gerizzim*.

A Little (Night) Music (the Stephen Sondheim song [You Must Meet My Wife](#) comes to mind). Anyway, lots of great suggestions for how to greet this year's post-Lag La'Omer reintroduction to music. Billy Schulder is right that, in memory of Gordon Lightfoot, who passed away last week, we should definitely listen to [Sundown](#). My favorite Lightfoot is [If You Could Read My Mind](#).

We also cited Bon Jovi, [Livin' on a Prayer](#), which is a good song notwithstanding the inane video.

Dr. Zachary Gorden then basically wiped out the competition (and least David Sable, me, and other fans of The Doors) by suggesting [Light My Fire](#).

Now we too are on fire. And because of that I'm advancing our seasonal song challenge. Beginning now, we are accepting recommendations for the Shearith Israel *Spring* Songbook, the fourth seasonal collection that we can build together as a community. I'm thinking of, well, a ton of Spring songs. Write in your favorites.

Quote/Unquote. Reacting to my correctly guessing the Churchill quote ("*A lie gets halfway around the world before the truth has a chance to get its pants on*"), Trustee David Sable makes the fair point that Mark Twain is misquoted about as often as is Churchill. For two points, send in a misattributed Twain quote – I have a great one, but I bet you all know it.

Further on the misattribution front, a lively dialogue has been going on with two new friends from New England, Jim Tobak and Martin Rosenthal, both lawyers and both major word-smiths. One pointed out an impressive quote attributed to Gandhi:

First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win.

Who doesn't like the sentiment? Still, it doesn't matter how many times you see the Internet attribute the quote to Gandhi, you can't responsibly believe it until you see it yourself, first-hand, in some original and reliable text source (not everyone holds by Rabbi Soloveichik's "too good to check"). Lo and behold it can't be found. Jim and Martin have a stack of quotes, by the way, if anyone wants to see them.

Turning to real quotes: The baseball question in last week's email was evidently too easy. I asked who among the four pitchers, Jim Bouton, Jacob deGrom, Sandy Koufax, and Babe Ruth, said

You see, you spend a good piece of your life gripping a baseball, and in the end it turns out that it was the other way around all the time.

Allan Cohen, Billy Schulder, and Beth nearly instantly got it right: Jim Bouton.

We are having less luck with

Quantity has a quality all its own

Meyer Solny thinks it's Stalin. Several online sources back Meyer's recollection. Still, I can't find an actual original source from him, and [this piece](#) thinks the attribution to Stalin apocryphal. So we are still in [limbo](#) (and another great song).

Protecting Paved Paradise. Faith Fogelman rightly complains about the blatant theft of our borrowing of a line from the Joni Mitchell song [Big Yellow Taxi](#), in naming our very own Paved Paradise. Faith is referring to the Wall Street Journal's review of a book entitled *Paved Paradise - How Parking Explains the World*, by Henry Grabar. I'm not sure I'm putting the book on the to-be-read list. Has anyone read it? What I *am* sure of is that no author or newspaper is going to steal what we rightfully borrowed.

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

Louis Solomon, Parnas