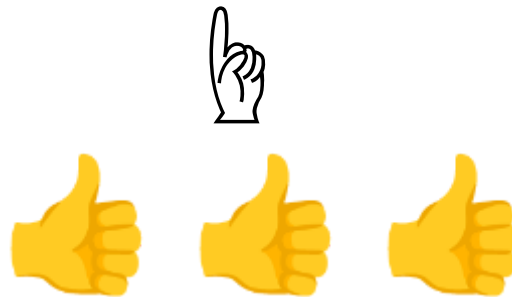


May 18, 2023

Dear Shearith Israel family,

**Covid-19 Update.** Question: Why do we continue with our subtitle, “Covid-19 Update”? After all, in our tiny corner of reality, the disease spread is calculated at about 2%, and several of our governments and even some of our health care facilities have declared the pandemic over and done with. The answer remains the same as when several congregants raised the same question 3-4 weeks ago: Because many congregants are still interested in hearing what we are doing. And what we are doing is, business as usual, iconographed as the following:



Sending in suggestions for “business as usual” in lots of different languages has been informative and fun – at least for me. Our new additions are great:

Aura Bijou offers Standard Pig Latin:

*usiness-bay asay sual-uay*

And, for this week’s favorite, Rabbi Robinson, leader of Lincoln Square Synagogue, reports that a rough translation of “business as usual” in Old Scots would be:

*"same auld hech-how."!!*

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

- **COVID? Fugedaboutit! (Brooklynese)**
- **normale gang van zaken (Dutch)**
- **Komerco Kiel Kutime (Esperanto)**
- **Des affaires comme d’habitude (French)**
- **normale geschäft (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)**
- **same auld hech-how (Old Scots)**

- **usiness-bay asay sual-uay (Pig)**
- ***Negocios Como Siempre (Spanish)***
- ***געשעפט ווי געוויינטלעך (Yiddish)***

Ok, last call!

***Da Vinci and Da Talmud.*** Some weeks ago I declared my unqualified admiration for Leonardo da Vinci (see my [email of 4/10/23](#)). No one has yet translated the Italian book I mentioned in that email; the book apparently asserts that there is real evidence that da Vinci's mother was Jewish.

Since I lack patience to wait for the translation, I read Walter Isaacson's fat opus best-seller, *Leonardo da Vinci*. In reading it, I bent two guidelines I try to follow: First, I usually try to stay away from overstuffed biographies; generally there is way too much information about a person in them; and, second, I prefer books written by experts in the subject matter. Isaacson is not an expert in any field da Vinci worked in. He does seem to possess, however, a rare expertise in being an expert on other people, as indicated by the number of his biographies attaining best-seller status.

So I read it. It's a great book. Isaacson relies on too many secondary sources, but one does seem to get a real sense of da Vinci the person. Whether it is a flattering sense is a different question. Da Vinci finished a tiny fraction of the projects he began. And for sure he was a polymath – which is an interesting description since da Vinci couldn't do algebra (his feel for geometry, however, was matchless).

Isaacson's book is built around the notebooks that da Vinci kept throughout his adult life. Over 7,000 pages of his famous backward writing and drawings remain. Of the notebooks, Isaacson quotes another secondary source, the popularizing historian Toby Lester, in *Da Vinci's Ghost*, that Da Vinci's

*notebooks have been rightly called 'the most astonishing testament to the powers of human observation and imagination ever set down on paper'*

This is high praise indeed. And a certain amount of awe is surely warranted. Isaacson is persuasive that da Vinci was ahead of his time in many areas of knowledge, including painting (of course), anatomy, biology, water-analysis, and certain sub-fields of the manufacture of war materiel and engineering. But before we confer the title of "*the most astonishing testament to the powers of human observation and imagination ever set down on paper*" on anything, I would respectfully (and briefly) like to observe a few things, in each case comparing the da Vinci notebooks to *my* nomination for *the most astonishing testament to the powers of human observation and imagination ever set down on paper*: The Talmud.

Da Vinci not only didn't finish the overwhelming percentage of projects he started; he neither taught nor barely published anything at all. We look today at his genius – and it was genius of the colorful, flamboyant, almost Liberace type – but not really what he taught the world. Da Vinci was a genius in his time – not unlike Noah, whom the Torah tells us was a righteous person in the context of his generation.

Da Vinci was so ahead of his time that at several places in the Isaacson book we are told that this or that untested and unbuilt sketch wasn't actualized for two or three centuries. Is that genius? What, a genius-for-one? Moreover, since so much of the notebooks never saw the light of day, or was seen by only a tiny number of researchers looking for curios, it is hard to say that the notebooks had significant impact on humanity. Even today, there are only about 15+/- paintings attributed with confidence to the great master. And there have been spectacular failures actually to build functioning versions of almost everything he dreamt of and sketched.

Contrast these characteristics with the Talmud. The Talmud does nothing if not teach. It is the teaching tool for the ages. It is published for all to see and ponder and challenge and learn from. It covers a breadth of disciplines that put even da Vinci's scope to shame. Da Vinci's brilliant scribbles are 500 years old. The Talmud's, three times that. And in terms of impact, hundreds of thousands of people learn Talmud every day. Roughly 40,000 *daily* learn through the OU website alone.

I do not overlook the fact that the da Vinci notebooks are the genius of one man, while the Talmud is the genius of one people. If that's a significant difference for you, then so be it. To me it's not all that meaningful. We are one people. For me, as for so many others, the Talmud is the J-Continuum's Codex, our people's map of and for our religious reality, tradition, and transmission. It has what we need on everything worth pondering in the disciplines it touches – especially when adumbrated by later sages and thinkers and jurists.

I do not feel any compulsion to read another da Vinci book (except that Italian one, if it's ever translated), let alone reread this one. But many many of us will continue to be enriched by the Talmud every day, and over and over again.

**Tractate Gittin.** This week, the worldwide Daf Yomi learning cycle completed Tractate Sotah and today begins Tractate Gittin, which I described last week as *Of and Concerning Jewish Divorce*. For next week, please send in your thoughts and observations supporting or challenging the following Resolve, pro or con:

*The Jewish approach to divorce is about as enlightened and fair-minded a system as any operating within the constraints of dealing with fallible human beings could be.*

Let's see who has what to say on the topic.

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

***Shearith Israel Spring Songbook.*** I'm so pleased we gave a little warning to the opening of our Spring Songbook collection. Faith Fogelman began with among the most hauntingly beautiful songs I know,

- [Younger than Springtime](#) from *South Pacific* by Rodgers and Hammerstein

That sets the bar appropriately high. But get this: Robert Starkand suggested the same song. Faith also suggests:

- [April in Paris](#) by Count Basie
- [April Showers](#) by Frank Sinatra
- [June is Bustin' Out All Over](#) by Rodgers & Hammerstein from *Carousel*

Robert Starkand not only suggested the great *Younger than Springtime*; like Faith, he didn't stop there. He seems to want to populate the Songbook himself, which would be fine given his knowledge and good taste. Look at these terrific additional suggestions (he also echoed Faith's suggestions of *April in Paris* and *April Showers*):

- [Spring is Here](#) by Ella Fitzgerald
- [Spring Can Really Hang You Up The Most](#) by Ella Fitzgerald
- [It Might As Well Be Spring](#) by Rodgers & Hammerstein from *State Fair*
- [Appalachian Spring](#) by NY Philharmonic, conducted by Leonard Bernstein
- [Can't Stop the Spring](#) by the Flaming Lips
- [Some Other Spring](#) by Billie Holiday
- [Waters of March](#) by Art Garfunkel

Nextgen editor Sarah Meira Rosenberg offers two great ones with baseball themes:

- [It's A Beautiful Day For A Ballgame](#)
- [Did You See Jackie Robinson Hit That Ball](#)

Dr. Zachary Gorden offers a one-and-done-great-one:

- [April Come She Will](#) by Simon & Garfunkel

Barbara Reiss started her bidding with, frankly, a downer. But it's worth a minute of somber reflection. Barbara offers the *Comedian Harmonists* with the explanation that

*while they were an internationally famous, all-male German close harmony ensemble that performed between 1928 and 1934 as one of the most successful musical groups in Europe*

*before World War II, they eventually ran into trouble with the Nazi regime [given the number of Jews in the ensemble].*

Here is a modern re-version of them, in German, titled

- [Veronika It's Springtime](#), by André Rieu & The Berlin Comedian Harmonists

There are many great Spring songs. Enjoy these, get inspired, and send in your favorites.

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

Louis Solomon, Parnas