

Dear Shearith Israel family,

**Covid-19 Update.** Happy first full day of summer! In our City, Shabbat is over as late as it gets this coming Shabbat and the Shabbat after that (they tie for the dubious distinction, just as two Shabbatot tie for the honor of “earliest” in December). Then slowly, after *next* Shabbat, Shabbat begins to end earlier – until it’s just about balanced, in October, when, whoosh, we will go off daylight savings time and lurch to an hour+ earlier.

In terms of how we are doing with Covid-19 risks, protocols, etc., it’s, you guessed it:



Morning and evening weekday services have met comfortably this past week in the Small Synagogue. This gem, a more-or-less replica of our Congregation’s place of worship 200 years ago, is adjacent to our magnificent Sanctuary.

This time of year requires more vigilance than usual to make sure we have minyan for each service. We also need someone to lead. Our melodies and liturgy are just enough different, and as tolerant as we are, we brook just little enough variation that we were all so pleased

when Rafe Sasson led services last Thursday evening. Rafe deserves our great thanks. He is being encouraged to take a regular place in the weekly lineup. It is hard work to learn and lead one of our services, even for those fully proficient in the liturgy generally. Anyone wishing to undertake the rigors and discipline of learning and leading should please let our hazzan, Rabbi Rohde, or our sexton, Reverend Edinger, know. It would be wonderful were there more of us who could lead our services.

***Real Tikun Olam, No Seriously!*** Sensing some of the difficulty we are having with the pages of Gittin now being learned as part of the worldwide Daf Yomi learning cycle, Chapter 4 of the Tractate moves a bit away, briefly, to what seems to be quite different but, at bottom, similar and important topics. This week we are learning pages 33-39 of the Tractate. These and a few subsequent pages announce perhaps a dozen instances where, in the Mishnaot themselves, our Sages seem to be altering legal rules or expectations. In this week's pages, in one case the Rabbis dictated that every name used by Husband and Wife should be used in the *get*, in case they use different names in different cities. In a second case, the Rabbis dictated that witnesses to the *get* sign their names, even though the *get* is valid without their signatures. A third case is the famous rule of Hillel permitting lenders to deposit into court a written legal instrument called a *prozbul* and, with that, not be required to give back land by reason of the Sabbatical Year. There are perhaps nine or ten others in these pages.

The Talmud determines that in each case the Rabbis have the authority to enact the modifications at issue. That's interesting in and of itself. But what may be more interesting is that in each of the roughly twelve cases the same basis is given for that authority: *tikun olam*, which can be translated as bettering or repairing or improving the world.

I briefly addressed *tikun olam* in my email of [9/9/21](#), when I was reminded of Rabbi Soloveichik's joke (it's not his, by the way, but nobody tells it better) of the person asking for the Hebrew translation of "*tikun olam*". The phrase is thoroughly overused in English today; everyone thinks they know what it means, and it is pressed into service to explain just about anything anyone wants to support as being "a good thing to do".

With respect to the 12 or so examples of *tikun olam* addressed here in Tractate Gittin, that is not how the Talmud uses the concept. In each of the cases under Talmudic study, rules or a law of Halacha exists, and in many cases the question is whether a law is (or still is) Biblical or Rabbinic in nature. That determination has a lot to do with how much leeway the Rabbis feel they have to modify it. Also in each case the Rabbis determine that they do indeed have the authority to modify if not the law itself then some aspect of it that might unintentionally be causing hardship. Finally, in each case, due to concerns about the negative impact of the laws, the Rabbis find justification to modify them, but in each case the Rabbis don't throw the issue open for public debate or seek some nebulous social, economic, ecologic alternative. Rather, the Rabbis articulate a very clear rule that also must be followed but that doesn't have the deleterious effects that the pre-change law was perceived to have.

Our son Yosef learned these Mishnaot with me and says that what ties the disparate subject matters together is that our Sages are using *tikun olam* as a means of reducing unintended

consequences. Right he is. Can we learn something powerful from these many examples in relation to the hard issue of *agunot* that the Tractate has been discussing and that we cannot seem to solve? Is that why these laws are studied right here, smack in the middle of Gittin?

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

***A Good Book to Skip.*** One benefit of a book recommendation is the act of sharing. That is a highly desirable end in itself. Another benefit is to narrow a tiny bit the vast, essentially endless number of must-reads; at least someone we know read and liked the book. But isn't there a little value as well in a negative recommendation; if you credit it, you won't have another book to read; at least there is one you can skip?

I'm not trying to seem churlish, but Jonathan Kennedy's *Pathogenesis: A History of the World in Eight Plagues*, is a good one to skip. At least it's one that I didn't get a lot out of. Unlike me, the author has credentials; he has a Ph.D. in Sociology from University of Cambridge and is Reader in Politics and Global Health in the Centre for Public Health and Policy at Queen Mary, University of London. (And, by the way, his treatment of British health policy issues of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries [toward the end of the book] seems sound enough. There he seems to be in his lane – though his penchant for moralizing is evident even here.)

The book tries to persuade us that human pathogens and infectious disease have powerful force in explaining just about every significant event in pre-history, history, and since. As the review in *The Economist* says, the book

*goes on to rewrite much of the history of life, with microbes at the forefront. "It's a bacterial world," [Kennedy] writes, "and we're just squatting here."*

So why didn't I like it – or at least why do I hope you get more out of it? Multiple reasons:

- First, although it promised to, it taught me little that isn't in major treatments of the same issues, which the author quotes from generously, including *Plagues and People* (McNeil, 1976), *Guns, Germs and Steel* (Diamond, 1999), and *The Fate of Rome* (Harper 2019), all of which were excellent (see my emails of [10/29/20](#) and [5/12/22](#), where I discuss the last two of these).
- Second, Kennedy takes reliance on secondary sources to an extreme, rather than doing the hard work or finding, interpreting, and offering an expert view on primary sources and statistics.
- Third, the author never actually proves causation, constantly confusing it with correlation. The speculation is overwhelming. Coupled with references to one statistic or another without proper analysis of reliability seems about the worst sin an expert in Sociology can commit.

- Fourth, he strays from areas that maybe he knows something about (public health) to social commentaries of a partisan, biased, woke variety that are neither in his expertise wheelhouse nor frankly in anyone else's, since they are unabashed political opinions, not science and not even facts. His political commentary seems eh; his economic analysis, pedestrian.

The book was well reviewed in *The Economist*, a publication I value highly for a somewhat less imbalanced approach to information. Regrettably, that fine publication now joins a growing list of publications that I can't trust for book recommendations. I can trust you, however, so send in your good reads and bad, with explanations.

***The Shearith Israel Spring Song Book.*** I'm so glad we gave one more week for Spring song recommendations. Our "last call" prompted several additional greats:

Aura Bijou likes the double entendre of

- [Spring in My Step](#), by Silent Partner. Clever.

And Aura likes:

- [You've Got a Friend](#), by Carole King, and its reference to each of the seasons, which the Judges are allowing

Lena Haber suggests the great Lovin' Spoonful song, *Daydream*, which is already on the list but is still a terrific suggestion.

And how about this? Cantor Jay Harwitt, who has graced us with haikus, limericks, and other interesting whatnots, was the original pianist for the New York Gilbert & Sullivan Players in 1974. So of course it makes sense for him to suggest [The Flowers That Bloom in the Spring](#), from *The Mikado*. What a great finale to our Spring list!

With these, and with our usual deep thanks to Lia Solomon for Spotifying the list, I am pleased to present [The Shearith Israel Spring Song Book](#). The list has close to 50 titles, contributed by a great many congregants and friends. We can find [other ways](#) to link to the songs, for anyone who doesn't have Spotify. Like our three other Song Books, Spring pulled us together and was great fun. Enjoy all of them.

What next, team?

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

Louis Solomon, Parnas