

Dear Shearith Israel family,

**Covid-19 Update.** I continue to marvel at next-gen editor SM Rosenberg’s collage of “business as usual,” signifying where we are in our Covid-19 risks, protocols, etc.:



We were away this past Shabbat, at the Great Synagogue in Paris (visiting Lia, there on an arduous summer-course schedule with classes twice a week and endless visits to among the world’s greatest museums and other attractions). I have it on good authority that at Shearith Israel we held Shabbat morning services downstairs in the Levy Auditorium, our “Summer Sanctuary.” Reverend Edinger reports that it finally felt like back to a pre-Covid normal. Wow!

Our main Sanctuary is incomparable (a comment more easily made before experiencing Paris’s Great Synagogue). But praying downstairs, in the Levy Auditorium, has a community feel and even an intimacy that should be experienced, too. In all of our three principal places for services (I’m including the Small Synagogue but not Paved Paradise and not the portico – who remembers that challenge, when we as a community re-began services in June 2020 but could not be indoors), the beauty and impact of the services are, without doubt, made as much by others being there as by our liturgy and traditions. If you are in town, please join us.

In the meantime, if anyone has a photograph of the Paris Great Synagogue, please send it in. And while I think of it, send in photos that you took (or might take this summer) of other gorgeous synagogues anywhere. Let's all enjoy them.

**Two New Approaches to the Challenge of Agunot.** We took a break last week from the thorny problems caused by the collision of the Talmud's insistence that a *get* be given with voluntary intentionality, and actions of a husband motivated by spite or ill-will. We took a break. The estimated thousands of living *agunot* got no such respite. This is not the place for halachik decisions, of course, but two more ingenious approaches have presented themselves, one from the Talmudic texts in Tractate Gittin being studied this week and one from a congregant with a different communal upbringing from Amsterdam.

First, on page 40a/b of the Tractate, we learn about what the Sages did with a person engaging in deception to avoid doing the right thing. The context is master-servant, which these pages spend a lot of time on. When there are two co-owners of a servant, and one frees his share, typically the Beit Din finds a way to free the other half. The Talmud posits the case where the owner not wanting to free his half gives his share of ownership to a child, thus removing it from the Beit Din's authority. The Talmud explains:

*כְּאִשְׁרַ עָשָׂה כֵּן יַעֲשֶׂה לוֹ, גְּמוּלוֹ יָשִׁיב לוֹ בְּרֵאשׁוֹ" – אֶנָּן קִיָּם לֵן בִּיְנוּקָא דְמִקְרָבָא דְעֵתִיָּה לְגַבֵּי זִזְדִּי; מוֹקְמִינן לִיה אַפּוֹטְרוֹפּוֹס, וּמִקְרָקִישׁ לִיה זִזְדִּי, וְכֹתֵב לִיה גִּיטָא דְחִירוּתָא עַל שְׁמִיָּה.*

*As he has done, so shall it be done to him, his dealing shall return upon his own head (see Leviticus 24:19 and Obadiah 1:15). In other words, since the master acted deceitfully to circumvent the ruling of the Sages, one should deal with him deceitfully. We know that a child is attracted to money. We will appoint a steward for the child, who will clarify the [servant's] market value, and the [servant] should jingle the dinars before him. The child will want the money and he will decide to emancipate him, and they should write him a bill of emancipation in his name.*

The Talmud is literally saying that two can play at that game. If the co-owner is less than forthright, then the Beit Din can find ways to a good and just end. Exactly!

Second, Salomon Vaz Dias strikes out in an entirely different direction. He says:

*What you are writing about decisions within the framework of Judaism is an alien system to our kind of people. No minister, no rabbi mixes in deciding these matters. That's all exclusively your and your trustees' fiduciary responsibility. In our communities the ministers and rabbis express their advice and consent if so requested. The Mahamad (trustees) and in particular the Parnas Presidente has the final word.*

Salomon is saying that we should stop inveighing against the limitations imposed by halacha; it is not a halachik issue! The thought is akin to what Judge Hellerstein, Claude Nadaf, and especially Larry Kobrin were saying a few weeks ago. But it is bold and courageous and really needs to be given thought. Of course, the outer bound of our conduct must be approved by our ritual authority. But why aren't we as a community presenting a unified and unbending approach to this problem? Kudos Salomon!

**Half-Full Report.**

***Tikun Olam Visited and Revisited.*** I began a discussion last week of the Talmud's use of *tikun olam* in the pages of Tractate Gittin then being learned as part of worldwide Daf Yomi learning cycle. The Tractate continues its discussion of *tikun olam* prescriptions this week, with more examples of our Sages making changes in the halacha to prevent or ameliorate unintended hardships and difficulties. Not only did we get to *revisit tikun olam* in this week's Daf Yomi pages; we also got to *visit* a splendid kosher restaurant in Paris named, you guessed it:



Coincidence? Oh I don't think so. And don't quibble about the spelling. I told the owner of the place to fix it.

***Too Many Rimonim in Too Many Museums.*** I wouldn't describe Paris's Jewish Museum as among the great museums of the world. Still, Beth and I visited it, and you should, too, mostly for the photograph collection of French Jews before the Holocaust. During our visit, we were treated to what seemed like innumerable pairs of Torah finials, or *rimonim*, placed throughout the exhibits, with a large stash of them on the upper floor display cases. Here are a few pics:





There doesn't seem to be a Jewish Museum anywhere that fails to display an overabundance of *rimonim*. Yet I find *rimonim* in museums depressing. In that setting they are still, silent, moribund, in each respect exactly **not** their purpose in being forged. They were noisy, kinetic, living objects adorning a very living Torah. The communities in which these museum pieces were used are mostly gone.

We at Shearith Israel have many pairs of *rimonim*. We adorn our Torahs with them. We use them. They are all priceless. I don't think we could use very many more pairs, but I wonder if living and thriving Jewish communities

around the world could undertake a project of trying to rescue *rimonim* from the museums in which they now so sadly, and silently, repose.

**Back to Must Reads.** Several people were grateful for our book non-recommendation last week. Affirmative book recommendations have been coming in, confirming my view that our friends are the best sources of the books we should be devoting our too-limited reading time to.

Let me start with another French connection (whoever doesn't get the reference should let me know – *you* need some points). Francine Alfandary recommends Anne Berest's *The Postcard* as one of the best books Francine has read recently. Says Francine:

*Anne Berest is the rare author who can both write a compelling novel, and has a compelling personal story to tell. She presents her family's story as a novel since she had to invent much of the dialogue. But the story is entirely factual. As she said, every fact must be accurate so as not to give fuel to the Holocaust deniers.*

*It is a real page-turner (not usually the case with Shoah books). It was a popular best-seller in France and won many prizes. It tells hard truths about the role of the French government, and the French population, in the Shoah.*

We are all enriched by recommendations like Francine's - and we are grateful for the time, care, and attention given to sharing them with us. Thank you thank you. I'm putting *The Postcard* on my to-be-read. Also, word has it that people have more time to read over the Summer. Send in your recommendations, with explanations, and benefit all of us.

**Shearith Israel's Spring Song Book.** Here again is the link to [the Spotified collection of our Spring song book](#). Steve Spira lodged a belated objection to including Carole King's *You've Got a Friend*. The Judges have reconsidered the objection – and have OVERRULED it. The song stays. On the other hand, Steve offers this beautiful interpretation of the song:

*When Carole begins with the phrase ... "when you're down and troubled ... need some lovin care ... just call out to me..."*

*I believe that She is invoking the power of the phrase ... SHEMA YISROEL HASHEM ELOKANU HASHEM ECHOD  
I'll be there if you call out my name! Wherever I am ... I am also at your door... and at your side!  
I will heal your soul ... I will be your friend...*

Beautiful, no? Equally happy is the note I got from Rabbi Martin Edelman, who is doing a gig up near the Massachusetts border, doesn't have good internet reception, was able to link to our song list, and blessed us all with the following:

*Kol Hakavod to the kehilah for their contributions to the listening opportunity.*

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

Louis Solomon, Parnas