

July 13, 2023

Dear Shearith Israel family,

**Random Rambles; Choosing Life.** In place of our *Covid-19 Update* for this top section of our emails, last week I solicited a new name and suggestions for content. Cantor Jay Harwitt, still haikuing even until the last parshiot of Bemidbar, suggests:

### ובחרת בחיים (Choose Life)

We could then “use your top space to cover [a] subject that is most important to the life of [our] Kehillah [or Congregation] that week”. The thought is wonderful, and wonderfully stated.

Steve Smith takes another approach. Steve, remember, is the famous first-place winner of our challenge years ago to name this decade – he won with *The Mulligan Years* – which is turning out to be both spot on and prescient. Steve now recommends:

### **Random Rambles or a variant such as Somewhat Random Rambles**

This, Steve says, is descriptive of what usually appears in the email. I have to admit that, as deeply as Steve’s unfeeling comment cuts, it does have the virtue of being accurate. And who doesn’t love the alliteration!

Both suggestions sing. Both put me in awe of how clever these people are. Send your votes in between these two; make your voices count.

I’ve got a great ramble, congregational life note – but we need a title, or we go nowhere.

**Here Is One To Read, and Reread, Always.** Some of our liturgy and literature is, like that of other people, day- or week- or season-specific. There are things we read or learn on this day or that, for example. But there is only one set of stories as to which there is no “wrong day” to study and learn them. For a people of the Book, for a people so deeply suffused with learning and knowledge for its own sake, don’t you find it remarkable that there is only one (ok, at most a few) pages of the entire corpus of the Tanach and Talmud that our Sages decreed was fitting to read and learn *any* day of the year, from our happiest to our saddest days and every day in between?

It is our good fortune that one of those very few pages occurs in the worldwide Daf Yomi learning cycle this week, page 56a/b of Tractate Gittin (it actually starts at foot of 55b). There the Rabbis tell us three stories in succession, in each case declaring that because of some unexpected occurrence Jerusalem, “The King’s Mountain”, and the populous city of Beitar were respectively destroyed. I want to focus on why our People merited the loss of Jerusalem and our Second Temple – a loss from which we have never fully recovered and which we are still mourning nearly 2,000 years later. The story is the famous one of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza and of the gratuitous hatred (or *sinat hinam*) that animates it. The Talmud tells the story:

*[T]here was a certain man whose friend was named Kamtza and whose enemy was named bar Kamtza. He once made a large feast and said to his servant: Go bring me my friend Kamtza. The servant went and mistakenly brought him his enemy bar Kamtza. The man who was hosting the feast came and found bar Kamtza sitting at the feast. The host said to bar Kamtza. That man is the enemy [ba’al devava] of that man, that is, you are my enemy. What then do you want here? Arise and leave. Bar Kamtza said to him: Since I*

*have already come, let me stay and I will give you money for whatever I eat and drink. Just do not embarrass me by sending me out. The host said to him: No, you must leave. Bar Kamtza said to him: I will give you money for half of the feast; just do not send me away. The host said to him: No, you must leave. Bar Kamtza then said to him: I will give you money for the entire feast; just let me stay. The host said to him: No, you must leave. Finally, the host took bar Kamtza by his hand, stood him up, and took him out.*

The true money point in the story comes in the very next line, where the Talmud recites that the offended bar Kamtza

*said to himself: Since the Sages were sitting there and did not protest the actions of the host, although they saw how he humiliated me, learn from it that they were content with what he did.*

Bar Kamtza thereafter went to the Roman authorities, where one mishap led to another and ultimately to the total destruction of Jerusalem. We are approaching our saddest day of the year: Tisha B'Ab. This is a fitting story to learn and ponder on even that saddest day. If this year we could as a community take away just one thing from Tisha B'Ab, surely might it be avoiding baseless hatred and community apathy towards it?

***Yet the Problems of Agunot Remain With Us.*** I was thinking that Kamtza/Bar Kamtza would permit a breather from this most difficult subject. Nothing doing! I mentioned last week that Bensti Cohen asserted that marrying under Jewish law, done by means of a *shtar kinyan*, or acquisition contract, creates an inequitable relationship so that, by the time we come to inequities in divorce, we should not be surprised. I personally am not convinced. Yet both Bentsi and Claude Nadaf each, independently, cite last week's parasha, Pinechas, and in particular the story of the daughters of Zelophehad in support of a judicial system capable of post-enactment alteration and repair.

Recall that the daughters had lost their father (some four decades earlier), had not married, and complained to Moshe that they should not be deprived of inheriting their father's property. Moshe brings the case to the Almighty, who says that the sisters' case is just. ("The plea of Zelophehad's daughters is just" (Numbers 27:7).)

Both Bentsi and Claude say that the fact that the Almighty needed to intervene in a just cause shows that laws can be modified – and both say that that should be applied to the situation of *agunot*.

The reason I'm not buying is, first, I don't see what we are gleaning from the fact that Moshe inquired of the Almighty concerning how the laws of inheritance should work. Moshe inquired of the Almighty frequently about many varied matters. Second, telling me that the Rabbis have the power to alter or amplify law is not novel – we see that all the time in the Talmud. The question is how should *this* problem be addressed in a way consistent with halacha but effective.

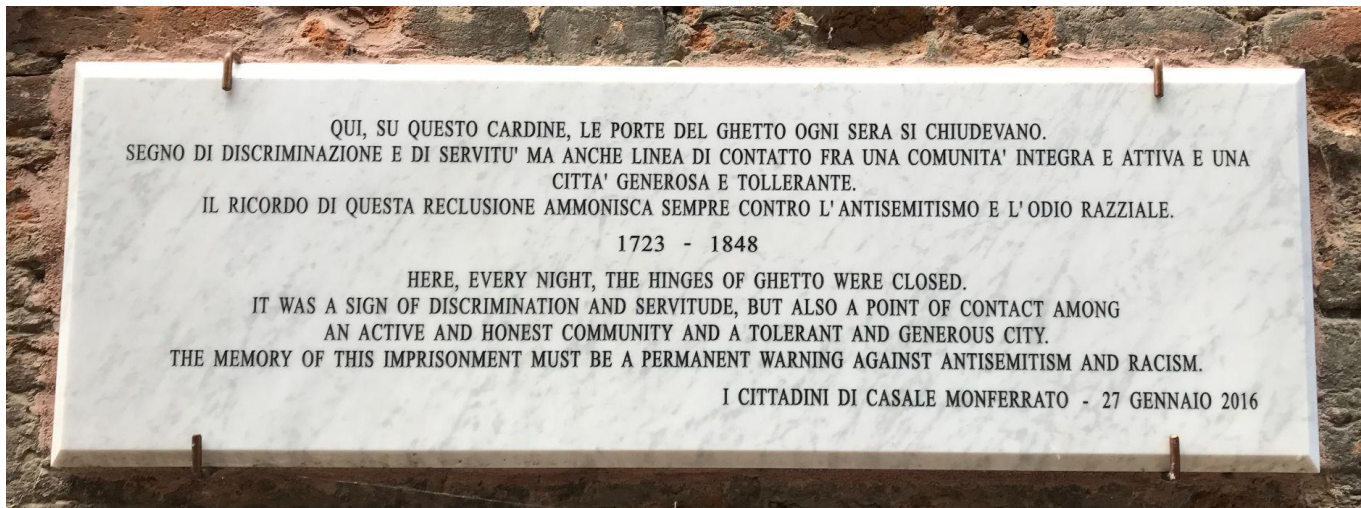
Personally, I think we are going to have to revert to some of the other means of addressing this problem. Great thanks to Margy-Ruth Davis for sending the link to the following website, which I cite solely as an example of one approach to the thorny problem of *agunot*: [International Beit Din](#).

***Half-Full Report.***

**Another Gorgeous Synagogue – with a Poignant Story.** Thanks to Barbara Reiss, who sends in this photo of the synagogue in Piemonte/Piedmont, Italy:



The handsome young man in the photo is Harlan Reiss, more belonging to Barbara and Guy than to the Synagogue (congrats, Harlan, by the way, on graduating – what’s up for next year?). Barbara took a picture of another, more somber sign, which needs to be read:



Plenty of gorgeous Synagogues still to be featured here. If you took the pic, please send it in.

**Tempest Tossed.** I'm borrowing a phrase from our Congregant Emma Lazarus's *The New Colossus* to begin a new feature of these emails. ("Tempest tossed" (using various spellings) is older than this Nineteenth Century poem affixed to our Statue of Liberty – get me the earliest usage for two points.)

The new feature has its genesis in the fact that, last Shabbat, we too experienced the beauty of services in the Levy Auditorium followed by the great food and conviviality of our community kiddush on Paved Paradise. In Levy, one is now surrounded by an exhibition sponsored in part by the Israeli Museum ANU (formerly known as Beit Hatfutsot or the Diaspora Museum, and more recently known as the museum that was gifted the Codex Sassoon that was recently purchased on auction at Sotheby's for \$38.1 million). In about 45 panels of photographs and written summaries, we are treated to a potted history of *Anusim*, or Jews from Iberia and other places who were forced to hide their Jewish religious observances or face death or expulsion.

I got to thinking: We have so many congregants from these lands. Actually, though, we have so many congregants from *so many* lands. I'm reminded that, when our daughter Tess drew a hanukiah to adorn the cover of her Bat Mitzvah booklet 13 years ago, she cleverly used the names of the 54+ countries where our Congregants have hailed from. It's a marvelous image – and an even more extraordinary story.

So here is my suggestion. If you have stories, photos, anything of your family's *or other's* lives in other countries, send them in with a few sentences of description, reminiscences, nostalgia. Please, permit the rest of us to enjoy, learn from, ponder them.

**Fully Answered.** I can't improve on our next-gen editor's reference to Walt Whitman as having first used "I contain multitudes" in *Song of Myself*, 51:

*Do I contradict myself?  
Very well then I contradict myself,  
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)*

Does anyone have an earlier sighting?

**Still Unanswered.** I offered two points to anyone who knows the super-great musician about whom The Traveling Wilburys wrote *Tweeter and the Monkey Man*. Do none of R&R mavens know this great story? Even fans of The Boss, to give a hint?

**Covid-19 Update.**



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

Louis Solomon, Parnas