

July 20, 2023

Dear Shearith Israel family,

Random Ramble; Choosing Life. Neither of the suggestions for the title of this part of our weekly email, suggested respectively by Steve Smith and Cantor Jay Harwitt, got a commanding majority of votes. I like both titles. The reason that I'm slightly partial to Steve's is that "choosing life" signifies stuff of way more meaning and importance than what I confess is the more accurate "random ramble." I'm going to try to use "Random Ramble" but am going to cover items showing "life" in our community or otherwise.

My entry for this week is to urge all of you in the City to come to services this Shabbat. Three reasons in addition to the usual: First, it is the last of the Three Week haftarahs before Tisha B'Ab. Our melody for these weeks is unique – and quite moving. Second, you will get to see the ANU exhibit on *anusim* in our Levy Auditorium, which I spoke about last week. The heat and humidity are loosening the adhesive backing some of the panels. Several panels have slid down already. See the exhibit before the panels go [slip slidin' away](#) (but don't worry, the Levy Auditorium is delightfully cool – actually, by the end of services, some locations in the room feel a bit like a meat locker). And third, over the Summer we do get a contingent of Shabbat visitors. Come and introduce yourselves, *after* services on Paved Paradise of course. During services some visitors need a little help finding their place in our Siddur. So come and help.

Advance item. Please consider joining us not only for Tisha B'Ab night (*next* Wednesday night), when much of the rest of the West Side joins us for our popular Eikha Reading Noir followed by Rabbi Soloveichik's illuminating if only partially illuminated talk. Consider as well experiencing our morning service on Tisha B'Ab morning. We chant a set of ancient *Kinot* or Lamentations in doleful melodies the likes of which you will never experience anywhere else. Our service is long, deeply affecting, and very worthwhile. You will be transported and changed. I'm not exaggerating. Please come, even for an hour or two.

The Ways of Peace: The Tragedy and Triumph of the Commons. Based on a concordance-like, Shabbat-friendly sefer that our son Joseph shared with me, it appears that pages 59-61 of Tractate Gittin (the last Mishnaot in Chapter 5 of the Tractate) are the only places in the entire corpus of the Talmud where we learn the principles of

דַּרְכֵי שְׁלוֹם - "darkei shalom," or the ways of peace or harmony.

The worldwide Daf Yomi community is learning the last two of these pages this week. They and 59b (from the end of last week) are fitting reminders that, in the words of someone other than me (but whom I don't remember), the Talmud teaches both law and life.

The Mishnaot on these pages identify over a dozen unrelated instantiations of the principle of דַּרְכֵי שְׁלוֹם. Here are six examples:

- The order of calling people to read from the Torah, Cohen, Levy, and Israelite, are done in that sequence, with little room for variation, because this is one of the ways to foster harmony, or מִפְּנֵי דַּרְכֵי שְׁלוֹם.
- The placement of the communal "eruv" in a courtyard of houses should always be placed in the same house, again מִפְּנֵי דַּרְכֵי שְׁלוֹם.

- The sequence of filling cisterns, beginning with the one closest to the water channel, is prescribed, מְפִנֵי דְרֵכֵי שְׁלוֹם.
- An article of clothing or personalty found by a deaf-mute, or by an insane person, or by a child, even though they are not primary beneficiaries of the laws against theft, are nonetheless protected under such laws, מְפִנֵי דְרֵכֵי שְׁלוֹם.
- Items caught in traps are considered to have been claimed by the trapper rather than being available to others or to the public before the trapper arrives, מְפִנֵי דְרֵכֵי שְׁלוֹם.
- Even impoverished non-Jews, who would otherwise not be protected under the Biblical injunctions about leaving fruit or harvest for the needy, are nonetheless protected, מְפִנֵי דְרֵכֵי שְׁלוֹם.

These examples, along with the rest of those covered in the Talmud, appear to deal with interpersonal relations. Many seem to ask people to act more selflessly than Biblical edicts may require. Some relate to how Jews should behave among non-Jewish populations, which perhaps should not have needed to be the stuff of judicial proclamation but indeed seems to have been needed, both then and now.

But there is something else just as fundamental going on in many of the examples, and frankly I think it's fascinating. Several of the examples in the Mishnaot deal with problems that arise when there is a scarce or finite resource that each individual may have rights to but that will be maximized for the good of the community only if there are basic rules of sharing and allocation that restrict the individual's freedom of action. This, of course, is the definition of a "commons problem" (a "commons" meaning a common field, plot of land, or other resource). This area of thought is a cornerstone of modern game theory and is literally called the "commons" problem. The "Tragedy of the Commons" was the title of an influential paper in 1968 by ecologist Garrett Hardin. The problem of the commons had been masterfully, brilliantly, and eloquently analyzed decades before by Nobel Laureate Thomas Schelling in must-reads like *The Strategy of Conflict* and his later treatments of the issue. (I was privileged to take a class with Schelling – another example of the greatest people being the most humble.)

"Commons problems" are not just tricky; they are nearly intractable absent a social compact whereby each individual gives up a bit of freedom and autonomy, which at first blush hurts the individual, for the benefit of the community. Economics mathematically shows that, in the end, a small bit of personal forbearance leads to greater common goods and more efficient and indeed (by some definitions) more "equitable" resource allocation. What is a tragedy without community norms or rules becomes a triumph when a community sets a set of norms or rules that benefit the whole over the part – but in the end benefit the parts as well. It is exactly what our Sages understood 2,000 years ago in their articulation and application of the rules of דְרֵכֵי שְׁלוֹם.

Postscript on the Kamtza story. Jan Rothschild takes issue with my characterization of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza as involving "unexpected occurrences". The right way to look at it, instead, is that:

we should always anticipate the far reaching results of our actions, and they shouldn't be unexpected, but anticipated and perhaps prevented by our actions.

I'm happy with Jan's rearticulation and am grateful for it. Do others want to weigh in?

Half-Full Report.

Two More Gorgeous Synagogues – Arnie Rosen sends in the following photos, taken this Spring of the Synagogue in Siena, Italy:



Arnie notes:

The Synagogue, opened in 1786, was designed as an extension of an earlier Synagogue already in existence in the 16th century. . . . What is striking to me is how the Siena synagogue, in miniature, models the layout of Shearith Israel on Central Park West.

And here is another one, this one of the Curacao Synagogue from our Office Financial Associate Ruth Yasky:



These are great photos of gorgeous synagogues. Thank you Arnie, and thank you Ruth. And now it's time for YOU to send in yours.

Mom, Dad, please meet my friend Zelophehad. I don't know why I found Charlie Helinski's email so funny. Like me, Charlie disclaims any expertise in the *agunot* issue. Still, he likes the discussion last week since:

And hey, ever meet someone named Zelophehad?

Unanswered No Longer. Robert Katz and Claude Nadaf each knew that The Traveling Wilburys wrote *Tweeter and the Monkey Man* in homage to Bruce Springsteen. The song contains at least eight references to Springsteen places or song titles. That Robert knew this is, well, remarkable. That Claude Nadaf knew this – the same Claude Nadaf who corrects my Torah comments all the time with great erudition – that's the stuff of comment. Two points to each, with our thanks.

Tempest Tossed. Kudos and points to Shelly Cohen for knowing that "tempest tossed" did not originate with our Congregant Emma Lazarus but is used in Shakespeare – twice at least, in *Romeo and Juliet* and in *Macbeth*. (Does anyone have an earlier sighting than the Great Bard?)

Tempest Tossed is our newest community challenge. It asks everyone with stories, photos, anything of your family's or other's lives in other countries, to please send them in with a few sentences of description, reminiscences, nostalgia. I can't say that the response to our new challenge has been overwhelming. Truthfully, it has not even been whelming. Not yet, anyway. Please, find some photos, pen a few sentences, and send them in. Everyone else will then benefit, sort of like a commons triumph.

Covid-19 Update.



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