

July 26, 2023

Dear Shearith Israel family,

Random Ramble. The Jewish calendar was so brilliantly set that the Shabbat immediately before Tisha B'Ab is always Parashat *Devarim*, on which most Jews read the haftarah beginning with the words “*hazon yishayahu*”, *הַזֵּן יִשְׂחַיָּהוּ*, a vision of Isaiah (Isaiah 1:1-27). This year, Rabbi Rohde read the haftarah, using the haunting trope or cantillations used during the Three Weeks between 17 Tammuz and 9 Ab. His voice, chanting the melancholy, deep, stirring melody, filled the Levy Auditorium, our ears, and the souls of those of us listening.

To usher in the week of Tisha B'Ab, can there be any more fitting exhortation than Haftarah **Hazon**, with its unforgettable lines:

What are your many sacrifices, says G-d. I am full of burnt offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts. I do not delight in the blood of bullocks, lambs, or he-goats. Who has required that you trample My courts when you come to appear in My presence? Stop bringing meaningless offerings. . .

Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean. Remove the evil of your doings before My eyes. Stop doing evil. Learn to do good. Seek justice, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow.

Tisha B'Ab, Where The Past IS Present. These stirring words of Isaiah are not some 2023 AI-generated set of pablum. They are not a post-modern, politically correct mask of an embarrassingly antiquated approach to the human condition doled out by our ancestors in ancient times. Isaiah's remonstrance is the way the fast of Ab was *always* supposed to be observed. With all our modern wizardry of words, it is we who typically miss its import.

Our Talmudic Sages (in Tractate Taanit, though recall just a few weeks ago we saw that Tractate Gittin also has some pages of tragic tales appropriate to study on Tisha B'Ab) and our great Rabbis since have identified an astonishing litany of calamities that befell our people, all on the same day of the year, 9 Ab. The tragedies have occurred over the course of millennia, not merely centuries:

- The spies in the desert returned from their mission and spread negative information and negativism, dooming the Israelites to 40 years of wandering and the death of virtually the entire generation in the wilderness;
- The First Temple was destroyed;
- The Second Temple was destroyed;
- The battle of Beitar was lost, finally crushing the Bar Kochba rebellion;
- The Jews were expelled from England in 1290, as Rabbi Soloveichik just discussed in his excellent lecture last week;
- The Jews were expelled from Spain in 1492;
- Not limited to us alone, World War I began (some suggest that WWII did, too), the Treblinka Death Camp began operating, and deportations to the death camps began from the Warsaw Ghetto; and
- Innumerable other catastrophes befell our people in more local assaults.

Many related explanations have been given for this confluence of disasters. This past Shabbat, at the afternoon class, Rabbi Soloveichik gave another beautiful one, flowing from the failure of the Jews to believe in the Almighty during the episode of the spies.

To me, one point seems compelling, as simple as it is piercing: As the Prophet Isaiah tells us in Haftarah *Hazon*, history does not unfold in some random way; these are not all random events, remarkable coincidences. If we keep repeating our failures to form and sustain a community dedicated to helping and healing – helping and healing ourselves, others, and the world – history will indeed keep repeating itself, as if on the same day and in the same way. George Santayana famously put it:

Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.

Jews set aside only a few days a year to remembering our repeat performances of tragedy. Tisha B'Ab is surely the most difficult. (Rosh Hashana and Kippur each have other redolent themes, not merely remembering.) Come and join us tonight and tomorrow to remember and relive, so as not repeat, the past. Well over the fast to all.

Gittin's Additional Confirmation of Rabbinic Leadership. It was Margy-Ruth Davis who correctly described what our Sages are doing in much of Tractate Gittin – they are demonstrating *leadership* to find lawful ways to ameliorate the painfully negative effects that flow from poor or seriously imbalanced application of our divorce laws. In previous weeks, I have identified a great many examples. Maybe at the end of the Tractate I will collect them all. For now, this week's global Daf Yomi learning cycle identifies several more, which I want to summarize briefly (this week's pages run from 68 to 74).

- The Talmud concludes that generally a document of divorce, or a *get*, is not valid if given after death of the husband. Validating a post-mortem transfer would have consequences far beyond issues arising from the giving of a *get*. However, in these pages, especially pages 71-72, the Sages reason to a conclusion permitting a husband to grant a divorce if he gives clear direction prior to death, even if the effectuation of the divorce occurs after death.
- On page 72b, the Talmud states the opinion of R' Yose that intent to effectuate a *get* at the moment of death can validly be inferred from the husband's advertent dating of the *get*. This is a significant leniency.
- There is a principle in Jewish law that making a contract that is subject to uncertain future events may render the contract unenforceable. The Jewish law principle is called *asmachta*. Application of the law of *asmachta* in the case of giving a *get* would undermine many laws, including the laws just summarized, where a husband gives a *get* subject to later events happening (such as the husband's death). The Rabbis, especially in generations after the Talmud, did not apply the rule of *asmachta* to invalidate the giving of a *get*, finding that a husband is usually serious about giving a *get* and that therefore we do not need apply the protective rule of *asmachta*. This, too, is a significant leniency.
- Finally, although having nothing ostensibly to do with Tractate Gittin, pages 69a/b of the Tractate contain one of the primary sources in the Talmud addressing medicine and medicinal healing. Later generations had no trouble determining that we do not have to, and indeed may not, rely on Talmudic medicaments and related health dictates. Just consider the Rabbinic leadership demonstrated in this refusal to adopt these earlier pronouncements.

Half-Full Report.

Tempest Tossed. Shelley Cohen (apologies for misspelling her first name last week) took us back to Shakespeare in anticipating the famous words used by Emma Lazarus in *The New Colossus*, the poem that now adorns the Statue of Liberty as well as the foot of her grave at Shearith Israel's cemetery in Cypress Hills, Queens. Scott Weiner, a regular at Rabbi Soloveichik's Shabbat Afternoon Class and, I'm proud to say, my law school classmate, takes us back still further:

Shakespeare got it from the Geneva Bible (1560), translating Isaiah 54:11.

That verse reads:

O thou afflicted and tossed with tempest, that hast no comfort, behold, I will lay thy stones with the carbuncle, and lay thy foundation with sapphires.

As Scott points out, we chant that verse at the beginning of the haftarah of Parasha *Re'eh*, which we read in a couple of weeks. That beautiful haftarah is one of the seven post-Tisha B'Ab haftarahs of consolation taken from Isaiah. Two points to Scott, with our thanks.

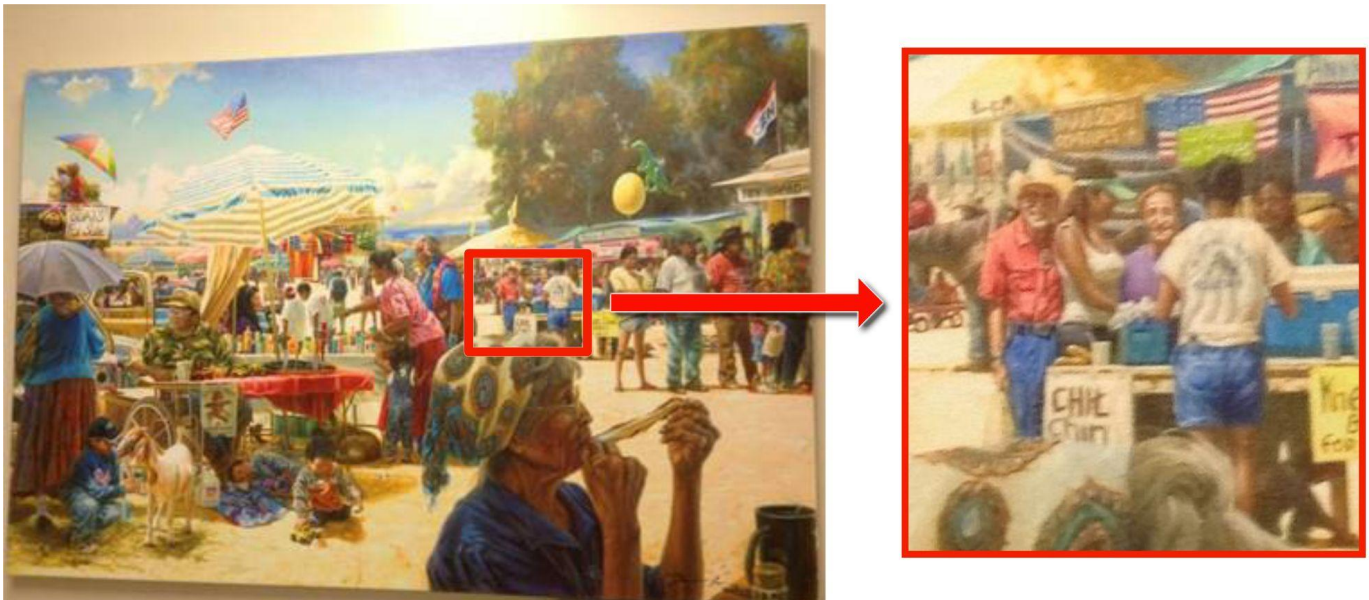
Now, having finally arrived at about as early a use as we can of "tempest tossed", we can inaugurate this part of our email by celebrating with stories, photos, or really anything of your family's or other's lives, together with a few sentences of description, reminiscences, nostalgia. Our first entry is a marvelous set of photos and descriptions by Sarah Gross, our Office Manager & Financial Associate. Sarah explains that her maternal grandparents

were great connoisseurs of art, particularly indigenous art in the Southwest. I went to visit them several years ago and was floored by how much of their home and walls were covered by art of varying kinds. One such item really spoke to me:



Sarah goes on to explain that her grandparents

also made great friends with various Navajo and Pueblo artists, and were actually incorporated in a few pieces over the years. Here's one such piece



Sarah's photos and explanations comprise a perfect Tempest Tossed entry. Did *you* know that "indigenous" art of America's Southwest included a Magen David? I sure didn't. We are all enriched by the knowledge, all moved by the photographs and the story. Everyone, please send in more like this, from whatever locale or country. And Sarah, many thanks, from all of us.

Other Gorgeous Synagogues. Please enjoy these four fabulous entries:

- *First*, Ruth Reimer sends in a photo of our Mother Synagogue, the great Synagogue in Amsterdam, taken by her daughter Alissa Ossip just recently:



- *Second and Third*, our ever-surprising Claude Nadaf sent in great photos of two great Synagogues. The first is of the Ben Ezra synagogue in Fustat, Cairo, also known as the El Geniza Synagogue. Claude explains that the

[S]ynagogue predates 882 CE and even Islam. This oldest synagogue in the world is located at the site where baby Moses was found and where Rambam prayed and lived a short walk away until his death in 1204.



- Claude's second synagogue is of the Eliyahu Hannabi Great Synagogue of Alexandria, which, he says, was renovated and rededicated in 2020:



- *Fourth*, Bonnie Barest, our Deputy Executive Director, sent in several photos of the synagogue in Cavaillon, Provence, France. Bonnie explains that

Rebuilt between 1772-1774, the synagogue had a main level room for men, and women were downstairs (which also served as a ritual bakery), and a miniature Elijah’s chair, symbolically high, close to the tabernacle.

The architectural and ornamental vocabulary of this synagogue is unique, inspired by the baroque style of Louis XV. It has a profuse use of gold leaf. The main floor was restored in 1985-86.

I have misgivings about this entry. As Bonnie says, it is not a functioning Synagogue any longer. “It is now a museum.” The photos are great, and maybe the story will inspire more photos of still functioning houses of Jewish worship. So here they are, and Bonnie thank you for them:



