

August 10, 2023

Dear Shearith Israel family,

Random Ramble. Aquidneck Island, where Newport, Rhode Island's Touro Synagogue is situated, usually bears little resemblance to Manhattan Island, where (as you might know) Shearith Israel is situated. This past Sunday, however, the similarity between the two islands ran deeper. Parking for example was impossible on both islands. In the case of Newport, it was due to the Jazz Festival and the short tourist season being in full swing there.

But there was another, more meaningful connection: Lively and insightful lecturing and Jewish learning. In the case of Newport, it was due to a lecture that Rabbi Soloveichik gave to more than 60 of us, mostly Newporters. Here is a photo:



The occasion of this event was the first joint programming between Congregation Ahavath Israel (CAI) of Newport and Congregation Shearith Israel. CAI is a revival of an Orthodox Newport congregation dating from 1915. CAI and Shearith Israel are jointly committed to revitalizing Touro Synagogue, which Shearith Israel owns and has been ritual steward of for 200 years. CAI intends to take up residency at Touro Synagogue once legal proceedings are completed to exit the current tenant.

On Sunday, the joint programming included not only the Rabbi's entertaining and educational lecture (the topic was two-really-three paintings at Yale and the Jewish community of Newport); after the lecture, most of us sat together for over an hour in a town hall setting, dialoguing respectfully and constructively about how the two Congregations can work together to ensure Touro Synagogue's

renewed purpose and vitality. It was an event the positive energy of which ran both deep and wide. It was a significant moment in the history of Touro Synagogue and, really, of Shearith Israel as well. Many more joint programs are being planned. This is a wonderful project for people to get involved in. If you are interested, send an email.

Gittin and the Mendacious Husband: Closing Remarks, for Now. We are nearing the end of our study of Tractate Gittin as part of the worldwide Daf Yomi learning cycle. By next week we will be thinking about Kedushin, or the law and lore of Jewish marriage.

I, like you, remain dissatisfied that we have not arrived at any consensus for how to make it easier for a wife to avoid the depredations (too strong a word? I don't think so) of a husband who, through spite or ill-will, refuses to give his wife a *get*. The Talmud has shown its willingness to be inventive – and to go right up to the line of depriving the *get* of its force, which would occur if the husband did not have some form of intentionality and volition in the act of marriage severance. This is something we learned in the very first Mishna in the Tractate, and it has been an abiding counterweight since.

The effort to find an effective solution has plagued us throughout the Tractate. And it persists right up to the end. In one of this week's pages, 88b, just two pages from the end, we find the following Mishna:

מתני' גט מעושה, בישראל – קשר, ובגוים – פסול. ובגוים – חובטין אותו ואומרים לו: "עשה מה שישראל אומרים לך" (וקשר).

MISHNA: With regard to a bill of divorce that the husband was compelled by the court to write and give his wife, if he was compelled by a Jewish court it is valid, but if he was compelled by a non-Jewish court it is invalid. But with regard to a non-Jewish court, they may beat him at the request of the Jewish court and say to him: Do what the Jews are telling you, and it is a valid divorce.

However unseemly is the Mishna's suggestion, isn't this just what we've been looking for? We could just replace non-Jewish court beatings with non-Jewish court sanctions or other penalties or damages, right?

Not so fast, I'm afraid. The Gemara discusses this authoritative Mishna. And within half a page (all on page 88b) we seem to be told that the view expressed in the Mishna is an error; or that it is correct Biblically but that the Rabbi's created the rule prohibiting the practice of using force for the very reason that it seems to swallow the rule that the husband must give the *get* with some degree of intentionality and freedom; or that this rule permitting force applied only during the time when the Rabbi's were of the greatest and highest order (ordained judges of Israel) and not even when, in the time of the Gemara, many of our greatest Sages lived in Babylonia. It is frustrating, but we do not have a clear statement of approval of the "get tough" practice even by Sages trying hard to support it.

So where does that leave us? Not in a great spot. Shearith Israel supports the rules laid down by the various supervising organizations: If a husband is found to have refused and continued to refuse to grant a *get* out of spite or ill-will, he should be shunned. We are also ready as a community to support whatever heavier sanctions our governing bodies can find the consensus to enact. For those marrying now or in the relatively recent past, pre-nuptial agreements have found a valid basis in halacha – that should ameliorate the problem for many of the wives holding them. For the rest, our heart grieves. Some of us are ready to give of our time and resources to help. If you know of a particular situation not

being dealt with by a Beit Din, let us know. And let us hope, and pray, that, when we meet Tractate Gittin again in about 7-1/2 years as part of the next Daf Yomi cycle, the issue of *agunot* will be a phenomenon of the past.

Built Back Better.

Great Songs by The Boss. Now didn't I tell you that there were too many great Springsteen songs to have only one favorite? The Schulder Brothers – our own duet of warmth, wit, and wisdom – offer, respectively, [Rosalita](#) (from Michael), and [Jungleland](#) (from Billy). And there are plenty more.

Michael also scooped up an easy point knowing that “what’s in a name” is from Shakespeare’s *Romeo & Juliet*. Claude Nadaf knew that, too – but I’m coming to wonder whether Claude *is* an AI program, and a big one at that. I’ve yet to stump him. Claude also knew that *A Room of One’s Own* is a short book published in 1929 by Virginia Woolf. And he also echoed Barbara Reiss’s view about manners in his tell:

The manners codified in Shulhan Arukh laws of table manners (Orah Hayyim 170) encourage all members of a community to sanctify meals through good behavior.

Fortunately, Claude stubbornly refuses to admit defeat over his erroneous opinion that trying to fix market failures, such as the commons problem, is somehow communist or socialist. Does that show that Claude is not an AI program after all? I don’t think so; even manifest error would not be proof of humanity. Don’t AI programs make mistakes? In fact, for one point each, send in a blooper that you personally observed in an AI answer. Some are true howlers.

Summer Music Fun. First, thank you to Gabriella Styler, who, in “appreciation and love of Tony Bennett”, points us to his great duet with Juanes, [The Shadow of Your Smile](#).

Second, I received a bunch of great ideas for new song challenges:

- **Songs of Hope.** Faith Fogelman offered three possible contests, my favorite being “songs of hope”, whether or not the songs actually mention hope. Faith likes Dusty Springfield’s [Wishin’ and Hopin’](#), or [Somewhere](#) from West Side Story. I love a category of “Songs of Hope” and offer, from *Les Mis*, [Do You Hear the People Sing](#). Ok, the idea of “hope” in the song is obscured in the blood-bath that follows. But that describes the French Revolution in general. Still, the song itself is terrific.
- **Happy Songs.** Billy Schulder also has a great suggestion: fun songs, or what I would call happy songs. Billy’s suggestion, [Happy](#), by Pharrell Williams, is a perfect example of a fun song. The song, by the way, is a prime example of how great songs can still be written, even though every note combination has been used before, every chord progression has been endlessly repeated, and every beat already familiar and drummed.

Ok, team, here are two great categories. Send in your suggestions. Let’s let others enjoy your good ideas.

Books and More Books. For some light summer fare, try one or both of these heady beasts, brought to you by our inveterate reading couple, Margy-Ruth and Perry Davis:

Perry recommends *The Soul of the Mishna*, by Yakov Nagen. Explains Perry:

Now the senior rabbi at Otniel Yeshiva, Rabbi Nagen is the son of a long-time West Side family. This book portrays and reveals threads spirituality and rabbinic wisdom in the Mishna.

Margy-Ruth recommends *The Believer and the Modern Study of the Bible*, edited by Tova Ganzel, Yehuda Brandes, and Chayuta Deutsch. Explains Margy-Ruth:

Originally published in Hebrew following a conference on belief and Biblical criticism, the volume opens with an anthology of rabbinic sources from the medieval period and on that reflect a critical awareness of the Bible. The essays are written by some of today's leading Orthodox thinkers as they confront the challenges of academic Biblical studies. Essays by Rabbi David Bigman, Chayuta Deutsch, and Rabbi Yoel Elitzur, among others, are worth the price of admission.

I actually had a nice fun summer read to suggest as well. With all the above erudition, however, I think I'll tell you next week.

Covid-19 Update.



With a caveat that with infection rates reportedly rising significantly in our area this summer, if you are feeling unwell, please get tested, keep others safe by following current guidelines, and feel better soon. Also, be on the lookout for the seasonal vaccine coming soon.

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

Louis Solomon, Parnas