

September 14, 2023

Dear Shearith Israel family,

This and That Thankfulness. As the third in our month of Elul's weekly expressions of gratitude, we all want and need to thank our Clergy: Rabbi Soloveichik, Rabbi Rohde, Reverend Edinger, and our new Rabbinic Intern, Baruch-Lev Kelman. They enrich our Congregation and our lives. We could not be more thankful for them.

The Jewish Cosmology of Rosh HaShana — 5784. We are all so blessed. Maybe that is all one needs to feel to go into our impending holy day of Rosh HaShana with the right frame of mind.

Last week, I described Rosh HaShana as that cosmic "do over" or reboot holiday challenging us with the most excruciatingly difficult of tasks: remembering our true place in the universe. This week, let's ponder together, how do we accomplish that task? Or, more realistically, how do we glimpse at an answer to that question? To start the dialogue, I cannot do better than to rely on two of the mainstays underpinning these emails over the years: thoughts from our Tradition, and song.

Modern cosmology began a little over 100 years ago, when Einstein and those on whose shoulders he stood added to the three dimensions of Newtonian space the integral concept of time, or space-time. Jewish cosmology begins where Einstein ended: with time. Human beings are frail and fallible, sure. But clearest of all we are finite. To see our place in the universe, we can never be too far from our irreducible, ineluctable, unalterable finitude. Like it or not (*not*, if you ask me), our finitude informs (or should inform) our every thought, our every action. And it is the comparison of our finitude with the Almighty's infinitude - and everything that goes with that - that compels us on Rosh HaShana to dare the bottom of the question, how puny, finite beings can achieve meaning, for ourselves and for the world.

With mortality comes incompleteness. Incompleteness of knowledge. Incompleteness in our ability actually to see the race all the way through, no matter how fast and far we can run. The comparison with the Almighty here is also poignant on Rosh HaShana. Paul Simon's hauntingly beautiful [Slip Slidin' Away](#), which I referred to on [6/3/21](#), still captures it best:

*God only knows
God makes His plan
The information's unavailable
To the mortal man*

My own view is that this song, from 1977, is even better at capturing the theme of Rosh HaShana than is Simon's new and in parts stirring album, [Seven Psalms](#) (here is a recent trailer).

If Jews start with time, and our relation to the Almighty is captured there, how do we account for the other three dimensions of space? For us, I think the three dimensions of physical space equate to the three interpersonal dimensions around which our lives, and our religion, revolve: Our relation to the world at large; our relation to our own people and community; and our relation to our more insular groups and immediate families. Meaningfulness in all three of these dimensions is what we begin to contemplate on Rosh HaShana, in the sobering context of our finitude in time.

Of course there are innumerable examples in the liturgy of the day that speak to the Almighty as infinite king and ruler. There is a lot, though, that animates each of our three interpersonal

dimensions as well: Rosh HaShana is not just for Jews; it is the birthday of the entire world. The Torah portions and *haftarahs* and the shofar sounds bring us face-to-face with our coreligionists trying to build a community of faith (how can you read the story of the binding of Isaac and not be stunned into contemplating faith). And so many of the passages, psalms, and *piyyutim* involve our intra-personal and familial connections. Find beautiful parts of the service on Shabbat and Sunday that animate these themes. They are abundant.

Mapping Rosh HaShana's Themes Onto Kiddushin. I want to share three short parts of the Daf Yomi learning cycle from this week, covering Tractate Kiddushin pages ~28-34. They appear in the last third of the first Chapter of the Tractate. The first third of the first chapter of Tractate Kiddushin involves discussions of marriage (which we will get back to in this Tractate, I promise). The second third of the first chapter involves “acquisitions” in other contexts, including specifically servitude. The final third of the first chapter, which we just started, involves discussion of positive commandments and includes parables seemingly tailor-made for our place in the Jewish calendar right now. My three examples all appear on the same folio, pages 31a/b. The three stories speak to the three interpersonal aspects of Rosh HaShana discussed above.

- The first story involves the non-Jew, Dama the son of Netinah. This justifiably famous story (which on these pages has variants) tells of a son who had so much respect for his father that he refused to wake his father even at the expense of losing a highly valuable business deal. A related story tells of this same son, a year later, refusing to take any more for an even more valuable transaction than what he would have earned in the first transaction, since he did not wish to profit from the honor he felt compelled to show his father. Rosh HaShana is not just about Jews. We have much to teach, and much to learn from, the rest of the world, as the Talmud here teaches (and Rabbi Soloveichik mused upon in his recent Wall Street Journal article from last week. If you missed it, you can find it [here](#), posted in the press section our website)
- The second story on these pages involves a piece on R' Yochanan Ben Zakai. This short reference needs amplifying (we need to get Rabbi Soloveichik to do a lecture on R' Yochanan). As I understand it, R' Yochanan's father died while R' Yochanan was in the womb, and his mother died in childbirth, so he was raised by the community; he lost ten sons; he connived to be smuggled out of Jerusalem before its destruction and saved Judaism by negotiating a deal to permit a learning center at Yavneh to remain undestroyed by the Romans – and yet with all that he succumbed to depression and death because of the loss of a dear friend and learning mate, Raish Lekish. R' Yochanan is the embodiment of the best that Jews can be for each other – key links in the J-Continuum – surely the second of the three interpersonal relations in need of resetting on Rosh HaShana.
- The third story involves one of the extended discussions in the Talmud of intrafamily relations, specifically the relationship between children and their parents. Here we learn of R' Avimi, who, even though he raised five great sons, all of whom has “*smicha*” or the highest degree of ordination, himself continued to personally minister to the needs of his father, R' Abahu. And we learn another story about R' Avimi, who was asked by his father to bring him some water to drink, and he did so, but when he got to where his father was sitting R' Abahu had fallen asleep – R Avimi “bent over and waited for him to awake”. What an image to learn from.

When we do Rosh HaShana's rebooting right, not only can we turn ourselves around, but, yes, remembering the great Harry Belafonte whom we lost earlier this year, we can also [Turn the World Around](#) (must be listened to over and over).

The Elephant in the Room. Full marks to Claude Nadaf for knowing that the Tractate page we learned last week, 25b, includes a discussion of

The feasibility of R Shimon's position of acquiring ownership of [an] Elephant . . . by lifting.

Truly, the Talmud grappled with the elephant in the room! Tee hee.

A last note on Jewish Servitude. Thank you to Gabriella Styler for recommending *Freedom in the Making of Western Culture*, by Orlando Patterson (which won the 1991 National Book Award for Non-Fiction). As only Gabriella can say it:

I can't begin to express the . . . thankfulness [for] the Divine guidance of [how] our Hebrew Patriarchs' practices has come down through the ages to me and our generation.

Built Back Better.

Shomer Shearith Israel. No one got why I was so excited by the number of entendres (way more than just a double entendre) in Dr. Susan Lobel's great photograph and caption last week, "shomer Shearith Israel", reinserted here:



Maybe it was too simple a request. Shomer Shearith Israel is from tefillot, right? That's one entendre. It's also about guarding the remnant of Israel – in Israel. That's two. It's also about guarding or watching over our Congregation, Shearith Israel. So that's three. And there is a fourth. Know what it is? Let's get with it, people!

New Year, New Word, New Phrase. It was about a year ago that Michael Schulder won the *Word of the Year* contest (with the word, “here”) and Laury Frieber won the *Phrase of the Year* contest (with the phrase, “kaminando kon buenos”, or *let’s walk with good*). “Here” and “Kaminando kon Buenos” have adorned our emails since then, and they have brought manifold joy and happiness to all of us. They were perfect words for this past year.

But now it’s time for a new Word and a new Phrase for 5784. Think hard, and come up with something brilliant. The three points to the winner is only a minuscule part of the reward awaiting you. After all, your winning word and phrase will bring happiness and inspiration to all of us in the coming year.

Summer Songs of Hope, Happy, & Marriage. For everyone’s ease of reference and enjoyment, here is a link to each of our three lists for [Hope](#), [Happy](#), and [Marriage](#) songs. Spotify lists on the way.

Covid-19 Update. Covid-19 Update. Even with the uptick in Covid-19 infections, we are looking forward to having beautiful services in our Main Sanctuary over Rosh Hashana. We have just decided to also offer a small and efficient outdoor minyan for the benefit of the immunocompromised and those who are apprehensive or more cautious. This outdoor minyan will meet on both days of Rosh HaShana on Paved Paradise starting at 7:30 AM and will end by 10 AM. We thank the volunteers who will be running this service. **If you have already signed up for a seat for Rosh HaShana and now feel you want to pray outside, please contact me immediately by replying to this email.**

For everyone, if you feel unwell, please do not attend services – you can still hear shofar on Paved Paradise at two other times during the day (check the listings). And if you are more comfortable wearing a mask, whether indoors or out, then by all means don one.

I did want to thank Alexandra Schein Bruckheimer and her husband for sending me [this link](#) to NYC hospitalizations. With no help from the government or really anyone else, I’m not sure what to make of it – except it has to be better than having no data at all. Thank you, Alexandra.



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

Louis Solomon, Parnas