

October 12, 2023

Dear Shearith Israel family,

***The End of Chag; The End of Joy, for Now.*** Shabbat and Sunday, *Shemini Hag HaAtzeret* and *Simchat Torah*, were first muted and then marred by the terrorist incursions into Israel. The barbaric attacks— a pogrom would be a more accurate description— have caused the greatest loss of Jewish life in a single day since the Holocaust. On my own dismal reckoning, the loss of life in Israel thus far is proportionately akin to *ten* 9/11s for us in America.

We have all been praying for those whom we know and love. We have all been praying for those we don't personally know, for everyone actually or potentially affected. And we have all been praying for the children and grandchildren, including of many of our members, who are directly in harm's way. Again on my own reckoning, I cannot help but silently rejoice at the fact that the modern miracle of Israel has for the first time in millennia been stable enough such that living grandparents are desperate over the fate of grandchildren fighting for the State of Israel. But after rejoicing comes great sorrow; like others, I am crushed by the news that one of our members lost a not-so-distant cousin.

I am of two minds about whether to send an email this week at all. We have decided to send this nonetheless (but with no jokes and no contests), and with it a final invitation to everyone to attend Synagogue this Shabbat. Rabbi Soloveichik will be addressing all of us after services, and then we will be having our Hatanim Luncheon. This will now include communal recitation of Tehillim and other features connected to this crisis that is rightly occupying our minds and hearts. I am writing this, and we are proceeding as announced, since now is a critically important time for unity among all of us. That does not diminish the pain and grieving in the slightest. Please see these two photos, which tell it better than I can:



And please accept my three unities: unity of resolve; unity through time; and unity in space.

**Unity of Resolve: Knowing When to Fold 'Em.** We read all or parts of the last parasha of the Torah, *V'zot Habracha*, many times these past few weeks. The very last commentary by Rashi on the Torah is in that parasha, on Debarim 34:12. It extols the virtue of Moshe for having the moral strength to smash the first set of Tablets. Moshe knew when to walk away, even though, at the time, it meant the loss of his life's work.

I can't say that I like any other Kenny Rogers song as much as the highly popular [The Gambler](#). The song speaks of *knowing when to hold 'em*. When to hold onto a plan or a goal, when to persevere and continue to sweat and toil despite the set-backs, despite the odds, is the stuff of judgment and life's experiences. In many cases, it separates success and failure. At the same time, it is just as important to *know when to fold 'em* and indeed *when to walk away*. Cutting losses and moving on, finding another way to solve a challenge, or walking away to fight another day, is quite apt to have kept our species alive and thriving.

I wonder if Kenny Rogers knows that he has our Talmudic Sages to thank for the inspiration for his song. In the worldwide Daf Yomi learning cycle, we this week are learning pages 56-62 of Tractate Kiddushin. There we find more law and lore on the types of items that are legally valid (or invalid) to satisfy the financial prerequisite for a betrothal.

Then, on page 57a, the Talmud asks what is the significance of the word in the Torah, "אֶת" or "et", meaning the definite article like "the". Oftentimes, the Sages learn laws or interpretations from words in the Torah, including that little word "אֶת". It turns out that a Talmudic Sage by the name of Shimon HaAmasoni (though it may have been Nehemya HaAmasoni) interpreted each and every "et" in the Torah save one. Here, then, the Talmud tells the famous story that, when R' HaAmasoni was stumped with the very last "et" to be given a legal interpretation, he gave up the entire enterprise, feeling that he was possibly incorrect in his other interpretations if he could not figure them all out.

The story continues:

אָמְרוּ לוֹ תַלְמִידָיו: רַבִּי, כָּל אֶתִּין שְׁדַרְשַׁת מַה תְּהָא עֲלֵיהֶם? אָמַר לְהֶם: כְּשֵׁם שְׁקִבְלַתִּי שָׂכַר עַל הַדְרִישָׁה, כִּן קִבְלַתִּי עַל הַפְרִישָׁה.

*[R' HaAmasoni's] students said to him: Our teacher, what will be with all the occurrences of the word "et" that you interpreted until now? He said to them: Just as I received reward for the exposition, so I received reward for my withdrawal from using this method of exposition.*

He knew when to fold 'em and walk away. The strength of will, the resoluteness and resolve, has been remembered since.

The Talmud here finishes the story that the last "et" remained uninterpreted until R' Akiva interpreted it. The unfinished usage of "et" involved why the Torah says that we should fear the Almighty but uses the "et" before the Almighty's Name. What could be more encompassing than the Almighty? Why use the definite article of "et" there? R' HaAmasoni was stumped. R' Akiva was not. Says the Talmud:

עַד שֶׁבָּא רַבִּי עֲקִיבָא וְלִיְמַד: "אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ תִירָא" – לְרַבּוֹת תַלְמִידֵי חֻכְמִים.

*The word “et” in this verse was not explained until Rabbi Akiva came and expounded: “You shall fear the Lord your God”: The word “et” serves to include Torah scholars, i.e., that one is commanded to fear them just as one fears God.*

I believe it was the modern Torah giant, R' Gifter, who said that the reason R' Akiva was able to interpret the last  $\text{לֹא}$  was because he had R' HaAmasoni's shoulders to stand on, including that the latter was willing to abandon the entire enterprise in the name of truth – showing that he was a true Torah scholar. That gave purpose to the “et” – meaning that Torah scholars themselves should also be revered and listened to, akin to the way we revere and listen to the Almighty.

**Unity in Time: Origin of “To Forgive Is Divine”.** Recall that I asked for the origin of *To Forgive Is Divine*. Comes now Alexander Grinberg, who is affiliated with “Kisvei HaKodesh Research” (his own company), and offers this deep and learned and frankly extraordinary response through time, which we can all learn from:

*Rabbeinu Yonah, at the opening of Shaarei Teshuvah, refers to repentance as a favor from G-d ... He does not specify why, but (based on Hovot Halevavot Shaar HaTeshuvah Chapter 1 4th paragraph in Feldheim edition as well as Rambam Hilchot Teshuvah 2:10) my interpretation is that, technically speaking, a misdeed cannot really be undone; only that mankind is granted a special kindness in the ability to wipe away our mistakes through repenting for them. To this end, just as G-d forgives us where we make up for our wrongdoings, so too we, in emulation of His Divine Attributes, should do the same; and where we indeed do forgive each other - this is divine.*

*The . . . Rambam also points out that forgiving is a markedly Jewish trait; the Giv'onim, for example, were unforgiving of Shaul for wanting to wipe them out, and this is attributed by the [verse] to their not being ethnically Jewish, but rather only having made an alliance with the Jewish nation (see Shemuel 2 21:2-6 with commentaries, specifically Metzudat David, there). By contrast, [the People of Israel] are referred to as children of G-d (Avot 3:17); as such (my interpretation) we are endowed with this special quality of being easily forgiving.*

Alexander showed up at Shearith Israel during *Hol Hamoed* Succot. He then sent me a link to a blog of Jewish customs and this link to great Jewish musical liturgy, including some Western Sephardic liturgy, [here](#).

**Unity In Space: Summer Travel.** How did David Douek know that I, and I trust you, would find his short email to me interesting in at least three ways. First, he jots that he was “walking the Camino”. It's not often that I meet or learn of someone walking one of the oldest pilgrim routes in Spain. Second, he says that, while doing that, he took a detour to see the *Festa da Istoria in Ribadavia*, in Galicia, Spain. See [here](#). And third, look at what was being sung and performed in [this outpost](#).

**Word and Phrase of the Year: A Pause:** Under the circumstances, we are extending the voting for another week. We got no new suggestions for Word of the Year. So the list to choose from, *or to supplement*, is:

**Awakenings**  
**Matter**  
**Gratitude, or hakarat hatov**

For **Phrase of the Year**, thank you to Andrew B. Druck for

- ***Yeshua[t] HaShem Keheref Ayin (God's help happens in the blink of an eye).***

And thank you to Laura Fleishmann, quoting Rabbi Elliot Schrier (Mara d'Atra of Congregation B'nai Yeshurun in Teaneck), quoting the Book of Joshua from the haftarah we read this past Sunday, Simchat Torah:

- ***Chazak Ve-Ematz! (be strong and courageous)***

So we are giving (at least) one more week for voting on the following extraordinary list:

- ***Be kind***
- ***Con alegria y permanencia; with joy and permanence***
- ***Con el pie derecho; with the right foot, or right foot first.***
- ***Mi Zenen Du; We are here!***
- ***Yehiyeh tov; T'will be good***
- ***Yeshua[t] HaShem Keheref Ayin (God's help/salvation comes in the blink of an eye).***
- ***Chazak Ve-Ematz! (be strong and courageous)***

### **Covid-19 Update.**



Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom. Here! *Kaminando kon Buenos*. And may the Almighty bring the fighting to a swift and successful end.

Louis Solomon, Parnas