

September 21, 2023

Dear Shearith Israel family,

Dis and Dat in Da Nu Year. I was using the Hebrew *הזי הז* along with the English for this section's heading. But Bentsi Cohen – who had a starring role in both of our minyanim on Rosh Hashana Day 2 – told me that there was some grammatical error in what I was doing (for a change). I invite him to explain (btw, Bentsi has a marvelous weekly email/blog on the parasha, etc. – the Hebrew is hard but not impenetrable. If you think you can make it through, ask Bentsi to be added to his mailing list; his postings are invariably excellent).

Were I even just to summarize the highlights of the past week, there would be too much to stuff into this section. Rosh Hashana services were quite well attended on Shabbat and well attended on Sunday. This year's Hatanim (Ben Suckewer and Guy Reiss) took to their roles with panache and by the way look great in tuxedos and morning suits. Our Clergy were magnificent, as was the choir. Together they enabled the deeply affecting liturgy and melodies to carry us through both days of Rosh Hashana.

Gedalia In Our Hearts and Minds. But let me respectfully suggest that, at this time and place, among the most important days in the past week was the Fast of Gedalia, which we observed on Monday. Huh, you will say, compared to the Big Three holy days occurring on both sides of this “minor” fast day? Here's my thinking:

Everyone knows that the Fast of Gedalia commemorates the senseless murder of Gedaliah ben Achikam, who was appointed Governor of Judea after the destruction of the First Temple (Jeremiah Chapter 41 tells the tale – and our impossible-to-use prayer book for fast days has some piyyutim on the story, which are worth reading). Gedaliah was trying to hold things together, was being reasonably successful, but was killed by another Jew, Yishmael Ben Netaniah, who was sent via deception by the neighboring King of Ammon. Gedaliah ignored specific warnings that he was in mortal danger. The murder essentially ended Jewish hegemony in Judea after the Temple's destruction, even as a lowly province of Babylonia. The Talmud places the murder on either the first or third of this Jewish month of Tishrei, the month that begins with Rosh Hashana.

The importance to us of this fast day flows from what I observed last year. It does not seem like an accident that this fast occurs during the High Holiday Season. Of the four day-time-only fasts throughout the year, only the Fast of Gedalia focuses so intently on the deep and lasting harm caused our people by the internecine fighting *between* Jews. Sure, the others have it as important parts of the day. But for the Fast of Gedalia it seems like the *raison d'être*.

We have just finished two days of Rosh Hashana. As we have been discussing, those days focus on our understanding our role in the universe, that though we are blessed we are flawed, fallible, and most significantly finite, no matter how great we think we are. The miracle of Rosh Hashana is that, if observed successfully, it convinces us that even our deeply ingrained modes of unproductive or

negative thought and behavior are *capable* of change. The capacity to change is not something felt by many people, and that very *capacity* to change is miracle enough for Rosh Hashana.

After Rosh Hashana, in this week of Days of Awe, our religion goes further and says, not only *can* you change, but you can and should change in *specific directions*. Judaism gives *content* to the meaningful, purposeful, fulfilled life. Yes there is a large dollop of Human vs The Almighty in that content. But there is also a large dollop of Human vs Human in that content. And in the human-human dimension there is much more to say than even the very important, [What the World Needs Now, is Love, Sweet Love](#). All of this content, this concreteness needs to be considered immediately after Rosh Hashana. LOOK, says our calendar! See what happened to Gedalia, felled by another Jew. However we collectively observe our marvelous ritual and our relationship with the Almighty, if we do not behave well – really well – towards each other, there is little point in observing these holy days. That is the message of the Fast of Gedaliah. And that is why we still need it so badly, even today.

Tractate Kiddushin Chapter 1's final pages. The global Daf Yomi learning cycle this week is coming to the end of the longest chapter in any tractate in the Talmud (can someone confirm?). There are laws and stories (*aggadata*) aplenty in these pages (this week we cover Kiddushin pages ~35 to ~41). Two discussions can't be skipped; they are too central to the very issues we are grappling with above.

First, it is in these pages that we see an extended discussion of the reasons why men and women observe different commandments. The main point to consider is just how many commandments apply to both. Our tradition has it that together there are 613 positive and negative commandments. Many great scholars and commentators in the Middle Ages came up with lists. Of the 613 commandments, ~365 are of the negative commands; ~248 are positive. Men and women are equally responsible for essentially all negative commands (these pages of the tractate discuss three negative commands that women are not liable to observe – quick, for one point, who knows them?). Of the 248 positive commands, women are not responsible for those that are specially time dependent. Perhaps the number of those is in the range of 30. All other positive commands are the responsibility of both men and women. I'm reckoning that there is 95% overlap (both men and women) and 5% differentiation. I'm sure you are about to say that quantity is not the same as quality. There is about 98% overlap in the genes of human beings and our nearest monkey species; so, you will ask, what does simple quantitative overlap tell you? I think it tells a lot but not everything.

Second, what could be a more fitting Talmudic discussion during this very week than what appears on page 39b. There we learn the marvelous paragraph that we begin prayer with every day – listing the specific acts of kindness that weigh most heavily in our balance of good deeds:

כבוד אב ואם, וגמילות חסדים, והכנסת אורחים, והבאת שלום בין אדם לחבירו

Honoring one's father and mother, acts of loving kindness, hospitality toward guests, and bringing peace between one person and another.

This just about says it all. With Rosh Hashana, we accomplished the hardest part. We *do* have the *capacity* to change. The road to turning capacity into directed energy cannot be a road to Hell, paved merely with good intentions (author please for one point – so obvious). Nor can it be a [Yellow Brick Road](#), and it is not even a [Thunder Road](#), though the Springsteen song is way better than the Elton John song (you disagree? prove it). It is perhaps a [Long and Winding Road](#), but the way is brilliantly illuminated for us. All it takes is the dedication and energy to remember Gedaliah and practice the specific content taught by our tradition.

Hoping to see you all this Shabbat Teshuba, where we will hear a derasha by Rabbi Soloveichik after Morning Services, and then again on Kippur. To all, *Well Over the Fast* ([see my email of 8/11/22](#)).

Built Back Better.

Just So Quotes. It's been a couple years since we've been reminded of the brilliance of Kipling's *Just So Stories* ([see emails of 8/26/21](#) and [12/2/21](#)). The same phrase "just so" comes to mind in a new challenge – "just so" quotes, similarities, or observations. A "just so" if done well gives multiple layers of meaning to a comparison without needing a lot of wordy explanations (like the one I'm now boring you with).

I have a candidate for a ***Just So*** that I want to start with. I recently reread George Orwell's classic, *1984*. So many cliches of that masterpiece have found their way into common parlance that, I fear, not enough of us keep in mind the greatest parts of the book and, indeed, just how relevant this great book still is. In a telling moment in the narrative, remember the following description of the goal of the fascism being peddled at the time, which Orwell was railing against:

'Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past,' repeated Winston obediently. 'Who controls the present controls the past,' said O'Brien, nodding his head with slow approval.

I also just finished Christopher Rufo's *America's Cultural Revolution*. I don't want to get into a debate about the premise or thesis of the book. The history seems meticulously researched and fairly presented. My only point in referencing the work here is that Rufo includes the following quote from Angela Davis, who (Rufo says) was dragged out of obscurity during the 2020 Black Lives Matter events (p. 124):

Angela Davis had once suggested in her first lectures at UCLA: erase the past, demolish the present, control the future.

And I say:

Just So

You get the point. Now it's your turn.

