

September 28, 2023

Dear Shearith Israel family,

Kippur in Our Congregation. I associate our Segan and Trustee Michael Lustig with the quip that we are the only Synagogue that has its biggest attendance on the saddest day of the Jewish calendar, Tisha B'Ab. I usually don't weigh in on which is our most beautiful or uplifting day or service, since mine is Kippur, and some people who haven't prayed with us seem skeptical.

This past Monday, we and the rest of the Jewish world observed Kippur (we drop the "Yom", by the way). We observed it in a very full Sanctuary. It's obviously not a fun day, but it is our most uplifting and positive day of our year (if instead you want a funny chuckle, see Alan Zwiebel's [card](#)).

As we've discussed in the past couple weeks, as a community we observed Rosh Hashana – teaching that we are capable of change; then the Fast of Gedalia – teaching that change has content, and it's importantly about healing and improving interpersonal relations; and now Kippur – teaching that we can be together for an entire day, praying, singing, and supporting each other as a community, improving ourselves and our community in the service of doing right and doing good. To forgive is truly Divine (who actually first said that, by the way?).

We made it, as a community. It would not have happened without our Clergy who, to the person, was exceptional. Nor would it have happened without our seganim, that is, the two people standing on each side of the Hazan during the major services throughout the day. That too is a most difficult task, and to each of you, it was your steadiness and stamina that helped the rest of us.

Thank you, by the way, to Jerry Raymond for knowing that the quote from last week ("the road to Hell is paved with good intentions") is from Boswell's 1791 biography of the great Samuel Johnson, to whom the quote is attributed. It appears elsewhere, by the way, but the meaning is plain wherever used. And the Fast of Gedaliah, followed by Kippur, together stand in stark and unbending rejection of the idea that good intentions amount to very much of anything.

We can now prepare to rejoice during Succot and Simchat Torah, holidays dedicated to knowing whence our true protection comes and also rejoicing in our *collective* good fortune of having a code of conduct that can repair and indeed light the entire world. We will be using two succot this year – they are both magnificent. Come and enjoy.

Yelling Isn't Everything; It's Nothing. Last week, our global community of Daf Yomi learning passed the half-way point in the 7-1/2 year cycle to learn the entire corpus of our Talmud (page 39 of Tractate Kiddushin is the half-way point). I didn't tell you last week because I wanted us to be *well over the fast* and *well over the half* before mentioning it. Congratulations –like gasoline registering on a car's fuel gauge, the back half will go faster.

This week we are holding in Chapter Two of Tractate Kiddushin (pages ~ 42 to 48). We are deep into issues of legal agency and whether loans can act as legally valid consideration for transactions. The discussion is needed not just to understand who can function as an agent in a marriage proposal or betrothal and what can be given to secure a betrothal; the rules have wider applicability. The discussion here, imho, is developed, sophisticated, intuitive, and fair.

Interestingly, in the middle of all this heady ferment, we come upon the following on page 44a, where the Sages are debating a fine point of agency law, and Reish Lakish is bringing a Biblical proof-text to prove a point:

וַצְנוּחַ רֵישׁ לָקִישׁ כִּי כְרוּמָא: "וַיֵּצֵאָהּ. וְהִיתָהּ", וְלִיכָא דְאִשְׁגַּח בֵּיהּ.

And Reish Lakish screamed at them like a crane: Doesn't the verse state: "And she departs out of his house and goes and becomes another man's wife" (Deuteronomy 24:2), juxtaposing the halakhot of divorce and betrothal? But no one paid any attention to him.

Why does the Talmud tell us this story? Clearly it was not simply to bring Reish Lakish's view to the fore. To me the point is that, as great a Sage as was Reish Lakish – and he was a monumental figure in the Talmud – if you yell, no one listens.

The story, a moral for our times, gets even better. The next page in the gemarra (45b) quotes Reish Lakish again. He is calmer, not yelling. He was not canceled. He is still in the fold. And his view here was given weight.

Built Back Better.

Book Corner. Many of the living icons of our age are aging. And with the greater experience that comes with aging sometimes comes an increase in the very talent that made the person exceptional in the first place. Then, sometimes, the talented person self-reflects on the fact that he or she is aging, and with that comes output as good or better than what came before but with a self-reflective quality – or at least a quality of knowledge of pending mortality.

One of the great self-reflective acts was Paul McCartney's naming of his album title, *Memory Almost Full*. The songs aren't recognizably "aged" or introspective; they are simply great. Another supposedly introspective act is the recent publication of a book by John McPhee, *Tabula Rasa: Volume I*. McPhee taught our daughter Tess (among innumerable other excellent writers) at Princeton.

McPhee, who is 92, tells in the book's introduction that the writing of a "*Volume I*," containing pieces that were started or contemplated years, and in some cases, decades ago, is his way of staying alive and putting off (or at least ignoring) his mortality. In fact, however, the writing shows no signs of agedness or maudlin introspection.

The small volume is wonderful, chock-full of dozens of pieces treating a dazzling diversity of topics. The book confirms two things we already knew from earlier books and articles from this master of "creative nonfiction":

First, at his level of skill, he is a professional amateur of the first order. Not unlike my day job, where clients pay me to learn about different disciplines so that I can litigate cases involving those areas, McPhee learns intensively and microscopically about the subjects he writes on – and then writes on them in a way for the lay reader not just to learn but to enjoy.

Second, because of his style of presentation and underlying humanity (at least it seems to me), people he describes in his stories are, in their own way, and with respect to their own areas of work or life, noble if not heroic. Every person is noble when portrayed sympathetically, in their own element. They become Twenty-First Century Leopold Blooms, if you will. The pieces are uplifting and life-affirming, even if the topic under discussion is not one we would otherwise read about.

New Year, New Word, New Phrase. We still need a new Word of the Year and a new Phrase of the Year.

For *The Word*, I ventured

Matter

Thanks to Charlie Helinski for sending in a reaction to my **Just So Quote** on Angela Davis with a nod to hoping that it *matters*. Thanks too to Michael Schulder, who is concerned about content control in the Age of AI – and just finished all of George Orwell’s works (works, not just novels – impressive)!

Debby Sondheim improves on “matter” by suggesting:

Gratitude, or, in her words, **hakorat hatov**

Says Debby, beautifully:

as you learn to appreciate what others do for you, or even the beauty around you, you also gain serenity and humility, for starters. As you practice it regularly, you gain JOY! It is a gift that keeps on giving to others AND YOU, even as you thank others. We are told that when one gives tzedakah [charity], [the Almighty] will return it to you. [Similarly], gratitude is ... acknowledging what you have received and yet - it comes back to you as happiness and contentment.

In these very pages we have discussed the power of the Almighty’s promise to those who give charitably ([see email of 10/14/21](#)). I composed a song, called *Hakorat Hatov*, which some in our family actually sing after Havdalah. And oh yeah don’t forget the song by another song writer, a guy named Paul McCartney, titled [Gratitude](#), which appears on the very album referenced above.

We have received some great suggestions on *The Phrase* front, too. Our resident Ladinoist, Steve Beispel, offers a melancholy phrase, which I’m omitting, and a happy one:

Con el pie derecho; with the right foot, or right foot first.

Steve explains: “Any time you start a journey or a job and especially get on an airplane you should go right foot first.” It gets better, since along with Steve’s explanation comes a real story:

Many years ago, my grandmother told my uncle. as he boarded a plane for Japan one cold February, ‘Pie derecho’. He didn’t listen to her. A snowstorm blew into JFK airport and after many hours on the tarmac the plane returned to the gate.

