

December 14, 2023

Dear Shearith Israel family,

Our Year of Hope. Hanukkah has been joyous in the tiny speck of geography called our Synagogue. We have been lighting our 300-year-old hanukkah. We add familiar Hanukah tunes to our morning service especially in Hallel. We daily sing a snippet of melody from [Hail the Conquering Hero](#), from Handel's *Judas Maccabeus*. We greet each other with *Hanukkah Alegre!* The enormous menorah in front of the Plaza Hotel has brought both Hanukkah light and celebratory crowds more broadly to New York City as well – [click here](#) to watch a clip.

Yet the relative calm and peace that we have experienced during Hanukah can't mask the continued trauma playing out in Israel and the turmoil occurring on US campuses, which blessedly are quieting as the end of term approaches in most colleges. One can't call family or friend in Israel without hearing how recently they attended a funeral or paid a shiva call or were doing something for the hostages or their families. Here, we are doing what we can, and what we can do may be seen as precious little. As a Congregation, we continue to pray and donate. We are continuing to have our voices heard – voices of support and understanding.

Our choir this past Shabbat moved from chanting Hatikvah in unison to singing a gorgeous set of harmonies. May the polyphonous recognition of difference lead to a swift and real peace in Israel and a calming of tensions here.

I want to make one request. For a few weeks after October 7, congregants were sending in vignettes of Jewish life in America that reaffirmed the three core values that our Congregation stands for: Truth, Justice, and Charity. And even if the stories didn't exactly map onto one of our three pillars, they are wonderful stories nonetheless. We need more stories. Share them, and we will all benefit.

Dayyo Dayenu, for Now. No one got exactly right the reason why it is no more likely that the person you see each of the two random times you go to a restaurant is there more than you are. The principle of *dayyo* will not let you speculate as to greater frequency of either you or your friend.

In addition to the funny quips about this topic shared last week, I will end this discussion for now with one from Paula Van Gelder:

Upon encountering the same friend at a local restaurant one time too many, I'd probably sing, 'Dayyo, and I wanna go home.'

Especially in a year when we are remembering the great Belafonte, this is priceless.

Praying for local weather: Barech Alenu. Last week, I promised to tantalize you with an explanation of why we begin this prayer on December 4/5 each year, that is, calculating its

commencement by use of the solar calendar. I offered a bonanza of points (three, the most we have ever awarded) to the people getting it right. Claude Nadaf and Daniel Chazin both did, masterfully (the latter just having heard a class on the subject by Rabbi Michael Taubes). Claude by the way is officially number 1 in the GOAT rankings in our email contests. Polymath! Well done! To our prior leaders now licking Claude's dust, do not forget the great Yogi Berraism: "It ain't over till it's over". And it ain't over.

Let me explain this fascinating area by addressing the questions I posed last week:

- *Why do we determine the annual advent of this prayer by the solar calendar?* Because that is what the Talmud says to do. You will see below that doing it this way generates some complexities. It appears to be one of the only times we determine a Jewish observance by reference to the solar calendar. Claude says, simply, "Seasons are a function of the solar cycle. Seasons determine rain".
- *What is the source for using the solar calendar and beginning when we do?* The Talmud (Tractate Taanit 10a) says that we begin to pray for local rain in Israel on 7 Marcheshvan (a decent interval after Succot to let people get home without needing galoshes). Outside of Israel, however, we want to wait for crops to dry (at least in Babylonia; Claude says the reason is that Babylonia didn't need rain as early as Israel did). The Talmud dictates that we wait 60 days after the Fall Equinox to begin the prayer. The Fall Equinox is September 23 (it varies a bit – don't bother me with details, sonny). (Actually, I have seen a few explanations for this phenomenon, and they are not consistent on whether the Jews of antiquity used September 23 or even September 24.)
- *Do we determine it by the solar calendar everywhere in the world?* No, in Israel we begin the prayer for local rain on 7 Marcheshvan, as noted.
- *Is this the only prayer whose start date is determined by the solar calendar?* It is certainly the best example but, depending on definition and semantics, it may not be the only one. Claude and Daniel correctly noted that *Birkat Hachama*, or the prayer for the creation of the world and our Sun that we say every ___ (one point for the right answer, it's too easy) is another one, arguably.
- *What solar calendar do we use to calculate the date to begin saying the prayer?* This starts to get funky. Jews have been calculating 60 days after the Fall Equinox for millennia. Until about 1572, the calendar used was the same as the Julian calendar. In 1572, the Christian world adopted the Gregorian calendar. Two of the most significant changes wrought by that change affect our start date significantly, as summarized below.
- *What was the amount of the adjustment needed to arrive at the date on which we now begin?* Talmudic Jews counted a 364.25-day solar year. The Gregorian calendar not only (i) initiated leap years every four years but also (ii) determined that years divisible by 100 but not also divisible by 400 were to be omitted as leap years. So, for example,

1700, 1800, and 1900 were not leap years, but 2000 was. Pope Gregory determined that, to apply his calendar retroactively, he needed to lose or omit 10 days. Because Talmudic Jews counted years in basically the same Julian way, they too needed to lose 10 days, to keep up with the Joneses, so to speak. So, November 22 became December 2 as the day “60” adjusted days after the Fall Equinox.

- *When was that adjustment made?* The 10 days were lost in 1582. Note though that adjustments were also needed henceforth, right? Since we use Julian years, in 1700 and 1800, which were not leap years for the Gregorians but were for Talmudic Jews, we needed to skip another day in each of those centuries, again to keep up. December 2 became December 4. There are differences of historical opinion about what we did in 1900. The fact is that our prayer books or *siddurim* seem to suggest that we have been using December 4 since 1900 at least. And we didn’t need to skip again in 2000 because even the Gregorians leapt 2000, so we stayed abreast.
- *Over the past several centuries, has the date on which we begin the prayer changed? Why?* See above. The only thing left to explain is that, by the time one is approaching the fourth year of a four-year cycle, that is, in the third year, which is the year preceding a leap year, the day parts are off enough so that the exact time of day for the start of the Fall Equinox and therefore the start of “60” days after the Fall Equinox is already after nightfall – *i.e.*, the next day in the Jewish calendar. It’s for that reason that we begin the prayer on December 5 (rather than December 4) in the year *preceding* a Gregorian leap year. That is what happened this year. We began on December 5 because *next* year is a solar calendar leap year (2024).
- *Will it change again? When?* If you followed the above, and if you didn’t it’s my fault, then you will observe that, in the year 2100, Talmudic Jews will ordinarily leap, Gregorians will not, and thus we will need to move the prayer from Dec. 4/5 to Dec. 5/6, again to keep up. That is SO cool, isn’t it?

And the Daf Keeps Rolling On. You’re thinking my reference is to [When the Saints Go Marchin’ In](#). Wrong. Nor am I thinking of any of the “rolling” songs, not the great Mandy Patinkin song, [When the Money Keeps Rolling In](#), from *Evita*; nor the Dylan song, [Like a Rolling Stone](#); and not even as the Dylan song was better paraphrased by Don McLean, in one of my favorite songs, [American Pie](#). Really, I’m just thinking that fun cavorts into calendrical curiosities do not absolve us of the hard but rewarding work of keeping up with the worldwide learning of Daf Yomi.

This week we are holding on pages 38-44 of Tractate Baba Kama. The Mishna and ensuing Gemara on page 41a give a nice glimpse into the Tractate’s methodological approach. The Mishna addresses the question of the amount of compensation awarded when an animal kills a person. A distinction exists between a “*tam*” and a “*muad*” animal doing the killing. (Remember “*tam*” is an animal that has not gored or harmed more than three times, though Rashi does seem to read the law as “three or more”, which is very interesting.) The compensatory differences between “*tam*” and “*muad*” in this context include whether the owner of the animal needs to pay “*kofer*”. *Kofer* is

essentially the value of the life taken, and this is typically paid only when the animal is a *muad*. Common law concepts are not identical, though there are definite similarities.

A nice discussion ensues because the Mishna also says that any animal, *tam* or *muad*, that kills is typically put to death (whether that ruling is modified by the Talmudic discussion of whether the animal needs to act with intent is interesting). However, the Talmud quickly asks, how could an animal gore more than once to become a *muad* if the law is that the animal is killed after the first death it causes? The Talmud comes up with 4+ different ways that could happen. Some are a bit far-fetched. But the felt need to answer the question, given the principle that any animal that kills is itself put to death, is a marvel of intellectual honesty.

Thank you all. Bless us all. Happy last two days of Hanukkah. Shabbat shalom. *B'yachad* (united together). יהיה טוב *Yihiyeh tov* (things will be good).



Louis Solomon, Parnas