

December 21, 2023

Dear Shearith Israel family,

Our Year of Hope. Thanks in part to Hanukkah, dread and dreariness over the war in Gaza have temporarily turned to song. Here is a sampling. If you have something to send in to cheer others, please do.

- Steve Tilly saw [on PBS](#) during Hanukkah, and I also heard at a loud and wonderful Hanukkah celebration outside the Plaza Hotel, the US Military's rendition of the Ladino song *Ocho Kandalikas*, or *Eight Candles*, in honor of the holiday. It's great, and thank you Steve.
- Thanks as well to Trustee Bruce Roberts for finding [Canadian Cantors singing Maoz Tzur](#), which imho is marvelous.
- Thanks, too, to Barbara Reiss, who sent in a link to Yehoram Gaon's new "anthem", [Lo Tenatzchu Oti](#), which I found on YouTube, and is among the more uplifting homages to Israel's right to exist that I have seen since October 7.
- Although not a song, you don't want to miss [this](#), sent in by Esther Ingber, which Beth is sure is Photoshopped and I am equally sure is real real real.

Here Comes the Sun. Of the several comments received on my disquisition on why we begin saying *Barech Alenu* on December 4/5, no one had a problem with the explanation. There were two numerical typos, for which I apologize. Joel Maxman pointed out one of them: Gregorian years are 365.25 days long (of course). And Claude Nadaf notes that Gregorians lost the 10 days to correct for Julian's shorter years in 1582, which I typed correctly once but incorrectly a second time. Both Joel and Claude pick up a point each for knowing that *Birchat Hachama*, or the prayer for the creation of our Sun and world, occurs once every 28 years. Joel in fact

Remember[s] taking my family to the roof of the JCC on the most recent date where, besides the blessing, we did yoga sun salutations.

The most recent time we said the prayer as a community was April 8, 2009. Joel, sound about right? Anyway, enjoy [this Beatles timeless great](#), written by George Harrison.

Depths and Depths. In the worldwide Daf Yomi learning cycle this week, we have begun Chapter 5 of Tractate Baba Kama and are covering pages 45-51. After a few final discussions of *muad* begun in Chapter 4, the new Chapter turns to a discussion of *bor*, which often involves liability issues arising from a pit or well and branches out to include types or damage that arise from unintentional acts or stationary objects, typically in the face of negligence.

On nearly adjacent pages, 49b and 50a, two discussions occur that can only be described as "deep." In the Mishna and ensuing discussion on 49b, the Tractate addresses the "depth" of a hole or pit dug,

specifically how deep does it have to be to impose liability on the digger (10 *tefachim*, or 50+/- inches), and whether liability follows when one digs a pit on private property with an opening on public property, and vice-versa. In the main, the rulings are predictable (liability generally follows negligent pit construction from private to public and vice-versa). There is an interesting exception given that everyone in those days seems to have dug under the public right-of-way to build a foundation for a house on private property. Because of this practice's ubiquity, no one was liable for such an act. The analogy to modern tort concepts of environmental damage caused by a private property owner is evident – and it is anything but *boring*.

The thinking of the Talmud then gets deep in another way. Page 50a tells the story of "*Nechunya, the Ditch Digger*." Nechunya dug ditches along the public way so that Jews making their pilgrimage to Jerusalem would have water as they traveled along the road. This was a selfless and righteous act. The Talmud tells that Nechunya's daughter fell into a deep well full of water. People ran to tell Nechunya, who initially sensed that his daughter was in danger but then sensed that she was saved, all of which was true. Nechunya insisted that he was not a prophet. The daughter was saved by someone sounding an awful lot like our Patriarch Abraham. The moral the Talmud teaches is that the Almighty does not meet true acts of charity with tragedy in the same mode (digging ditches/falling into a deep ditch and drowning).

The story, however, doesn't end there. The Talmud goes on to relate that Nechunya had also had a son. He lost his son to dehydration and thirst. The imagery is too close to be a coincidence, and the Talmud feels the need, and the candor, to suggest an explanation. It advises that the Almighty exacts punishment with scrupulous accuracy, so the righteous when punished suffer for even slighter transgressions than others (yes, there does seem to be a basis for holding some to a higher moral standard).

I think I can understand the first story, concerning Nechunya's daughter. And I think I can glimpse at an understanding of the second story, concerning Nechunya's son. I'm less sure I can understand them both at the same time, one told right after the other. I guess we can say that the water gets deep, deep into the depths of Baba Kama. Other than that, a little help here, please?

Book Report.

No Magic in The Magician. I just finished *The Magician*, by Colm Toibin. The book is helpfully subtitled "A Novel", in case you thought it was an accurate history of the life, family, and times of Thomas Mann. I appreciate how popular Toibin is. He is Irish, which in English writing is already a leg up. He boasts a long and growing lists of awards. He teaches at Columbia University among other august institutions.

I didn't love the book. I share three observations, in increasing seriousness, ihmo:

First, though sweeping in topic and treatment of the pre/mid/post WWII Germany and the effect on the Jewish rich there, *The Magician* needs a good edit. Some of the novelistic fill-ins are trite to the point of being silly.

Second, the author it seems is obsessed with showing that Mann himself was a sexual obsessive, borderline deviant. The goal wasn't worth the effort; anyone reading *Death in Venice* gets the point, and I at least didn't need a dose of it on every other page of the book. It frankly makes for a boring read to hear about the extramarital titillations of a married person. Even if true, so what? This is supposed to be a novel, a work of fiction, right?

Third, there is a basic ambiguity in the writing. If the author had in mind a story of moral bankruptcy through three generations, then he succeeded, at least in that regard. But if he wanted to map the moral degeneracy of nation-states onto his characters, I think he only partially succeeded with Germany and failed with Switzerland. He mindlessly caricatures America during and after WWII, so one has to wonder if his treatment of Germany and Switzerland are any more realistic. He does portray the two lead women – Mann's wife and eldest daughter – as strong and appealing characters, though one of the reasons that works is because he doesn't overwrite them.

Who else read the book? Who has a view?

Built Back Better.

A Call Back to Action: Bring Back Our Neglected Sections. People are busy, I know. And these days, we are all dispirited and even depressed. One thing that will help is participating in some of the sections of this email that would benefit from a little re-ignition. We are always looking for write-ins, stories, photos, songs, whatnot in any of the following Departments:

Books. Ok, maybe few of us are publishing new books. But aren't many of us still reading books? Several people share their reading and reactions, but it would be nice, for everyone, if more of us did;

Photos of Synagogues that you visited;

Tempest Tossed ([see my email of July 13, 2023](#)). Stories about family or other people or families from other Jewish locales or communities; and

Just So Quotes ([see my email of Sept. 21, 2023](#)). Find quotes that animate a subject, with a touch of insight, irreverence, etc. It's a little challenging, but it is mighty fun, for writer and reader.

As a community, let's help each other by reviving these.

[Say, last week I omitted our Global *Thumbs Up* indicating business as usual in terms of Covid-19 protocols. No one missed it – at least no one complained. Could it possibly be . . . ?]

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

Louis Solomon, Parnas