

Dear Shearith Israel family,

**Our Year of Hope.** The gyrating extremes continue even post-Thanksgiving. The temporary cease-fire in Israel brought home 105 hostages, including 81 Israelis. Yet perhaps 125 remain. The resumption of fighting followed a spasm of violence in Jerusalem. Vocal protests on our own Central Park West, where a small handful spewed ugly, hateful, and violent threats against Jews, momentarily interrupted Shabbat for each of the past two weekends. Yet our Rabbi Rabbinic Intern, Baruch-Lev Kelman, spoke beautifully Shabbat morning, gave a nice class Shabbat afternoon, and led a marvelous pre-Hanukkah party for our youth this past Sunday:



The only thing worse than gyrating extremes is a solo chant of the negative. So for now we have added singing the *Star Spangled Banner* to our communal singing of *Hatikvah* after services on Shabbat. We heard a truly uplifting lecture by Rabbi Soloveichik about righteous Japanese who saved thousands of lives during the Holocaust. We will greet Hanukkah tonight with as much joy as we can muster. Yet we will do all we can for our ailing family, immediate and extended, here and in the rest of the world, as we actively hope for improvement or at least amelioration of the torments.

**Praying for local weather: Barech Alenu.** Another optimistic moment this week came Tuesday night, December 5, when we ushered in the special blessing for local weather. The prayer is beautiful if long. Why we begin this prayer on December 5 is fascinating. I'm offering three points for getting all these questions right:

- Why do we determine this prayer by the solar calendar?
- What is the source for using the solar calendar and beginning when we do?
- Do we determine it by the solar calendar everywhere in the world?
- Is this the only prayer whose start date is determined by the solar calendar?
- What solar calendar do we use to calculate the date to begin saying the prayer?
- What was the amount of the adjustment needed to arrive at the date on which we now begin?
- When was that adjustment made?
- Over the past several centuries, has the date on which we begin the prayer changed? Why?
- Will it change again? When?

Obviously, any ritual with these types of questions has to be fascinating. Lean in, try to answer them, and we can discuss more next week.



**Idolatry Is Too Good A Descriptor?** Certain writers have found some benefit in describing the mindset that animates the horrific recent violence as stemming from modern forms of idolatry. Leon Kass ([here](#)) and Gil Deutsch ([here](#)) are two such. Both pieces are worth reading because both are powerfully written. Still, I'm not sure that we need to call the behavior anything other than brutal and dehumanizingly immoral. I don't know lots of idolators, but I can't believe they all act like this.

**Dayyo and the Restaurant Dilemma.** Last week, to illustrate the power of the Talmudic logic principle of *dayyo*, I asked which would be the most logical inference about the frequency of your friend's appearance at a restaurant at which you saw him or her each of the two times you went there, when it's a place you do not go to often? Is the most rigorously logical conclusion that your friend goes less frequently, or more frequently, or with the same frequency as you do?

One way to approach the question is to consider whether you have any concrete logical basis to say "more" or "less". If it doesn't appear so, then is the right answer "the same frequency as I go".

Claude Nadaf thinks that the principle of *dayyo* demands more proof than statistical speculation can give to conclude anything other than that your friend goes as often but not more or less often than you.

Aura Bijou has a different and funny take:

*The most sensible thinking is that the [friend] owns the place and is there all the time. Tell him to treat you to dinner for your being a regular. 😊*  
(Smiley face Aura's.)

A third and different response comes from Dr. James Herstoff, Shearith Israel Touro Affiliate and one of the leaders of Congregation Ahavath Israel of Newport, which will be taking possession of Touro Synagogue upon the successful conclusion of the Touro matter still pending in Rhode Island. Jim easily rejects the notion that your friend goes less often. And the odds are just too great to conclude that you go with the same frequency. He reluctantly concludes that the friend must go more often than you do. How much more? Who knows.

I'm going to give you all another week on this. Weigh in. After all, how wrong can you be?

**Baba Kama Continued.** This week's Daf Yomi cycle (covering Baba Kama 31-37) straddles the end of the Third Chapter and beginning of the Fourth Chapter of the Tractate. We are knee-deep in examples of how different types of conduct leads to different types of damages and how the payment of damages is allocated and assessed. There are more Mishnaot per page than previously in the Tractate. Characteristic examples allocate responsibility, for example, when person-carrying-barrel slams into person-carrying-beam; when two people are walking in a public thoroughfare; when one is walking and one is running; when one is running on Friday afternoon; and at what point does an animal move from the category of being a *"tam"*, or domesticated or docile, to *"muad"*, or in the habit of injuring; and what are the different compensation schemes applicable depending on that character of the animal?

These pages are fun. Throughout them are discussions of how to treat human conduct that either directly causes injury or indirectly but inevitably causes injury or indirectly but not inevitably causes injury. These themes are addressed in more detail elsewhere in the Talmud. But here is where I finally began to understand the difference between two important Talmudic principles: *gramah* and *garmi*. *Gramah* seems to be used to describe a form of causal connection to damage where there is a human agency. *Garmi* also requires human agency, but the indirect damages is more certain to occur. Some commentators suggest that one is not liable for *gramah* but is for *garmi*. So far I'm not seeing such a consistent pattern.

I can't explain these concepts well in two sentences. But I can offer the following, which should clear it right up: Newton's law of gravitation can be thought of – and has been described as – “action at a distance”. The action is certain to occur, but it is separated, in time and space. Think of that as *garmi*. When Einstein later wanted to explain to Max Born the operation of entangled quantum states that are not readily explainable even by quantum mechanics, he described the relationship as “spooky action at a distance”. Think of that as *gramah*. Got it?

**Books.** We have been hoping to receive information about new books by our congregants. And we did! Another publication by SM Rosenberg, our Communications Associate, Programs Coordinator, and insightful next-gen editor of this email. Her book is titled [Millennial Quarter-Life Crisis: A Mosaic of Thinky Thoughts](#). You can find it on Amazon. Supercongrats to SMR. Hasn't anyone else published lately?

In the meantime, Master Bibliophile Debby Sondheim suggests two books:

- *The Book of Charlie: Wisdom from the Remarkable American Life of a 109-Year-Old Man*, by David Von Drehle. Explains Debby:

*[The book] is told by his neighbor. Charlie passed away in 2014. The author met him in 2007 when Charlie was 102. He was a doctor before there were antibiotics!!! Charlie is an optimist who saw every obstacle as an opportunity. He was a mensch ALL his life. He had many interesting experiences. It is a slim volume but packed with lots of wisdom. He was always grateful, appreciative and always felt tomorrow would be better. The author includes American history as it impacted Charlie's life.*

- *The Country of the Blind: A Memoir at the End of Sight*, by Andrew Leland. Explains Debby:

