

February 8, 2024

Dear Shearith Israel family,

**Our Year of Hope.** As of our email last week, we had just crossed the halfway mark to achieving our necessary goal of raising \$500k to replace our worn carpet and shore up our weakening floorboards.

The first half is always the easier. And we are pleased that, as of today, we have just about traversed half of the remaining distance through some generous contributions from several congregants and trustees. Now, however, the hardest part is upon us. We need everyone's help to get there, and we truly do want 100% participation. Please, if your circumstances permit, join with the rest of us to make the fundraising a quick and complete success. Just [click here](#).

I often remark how much more satisfying (and easier) it is to *spend* money than to *earn* it. Usually, I apply that evident truth to spending on fun or nonessential items. The truth applies even more importantly to spending for charity. Charity is one of three principal pillars defining our Congregation's essence. It has been that way for 369 years. Once again, we need everyone to be as charitable as they can be.

I had challenged you all to be the first to name the movie, leading star, and year of "go ahead, make my day." First in was Claude Nadaf, rightly remembering that the movie was *Sudden Impact*; the leading star, the incomparable Clint Eastwood. The movie came out in 1983 and should be shown on Paved Paradise this summer (I'm sure Barbara/Bonnie will nix it – too violent, they will say).

Rabbi Soloveichik's fourth Year of Hope lecture will be delivered **next** Shabbat, February 17. His topic is *Time Travel and Us: The Most Incredible Calendars in Jewish History*. In the meantime, thank you to Eric Braverman for sending along a stirring note about when the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, in Northwest Washington, D.C., celebrated its centenary in 1903. President Theodore Roosevelt and Secretary of State John Hay sat in the Lincoln pew. Hay, who had been on Lincoln's White House staff, recalled:

*Some of you, I am sure, share with me the memories to which this occasion and place give rise, of the days when I have sat in this church with that illustrious patriot whose fame even now has turned to something remote and legendary. But whatever is remembered or whatever lost, we ought never to forget that Abraham Lincoln, one of the mightiest masters of statecraft that history has known, was also one of the most devoted and faithful servants of Almighty God who has ever sat in the high places of the world.*

Were Honest, Devoted, and Faithful Abe here now, do you have any doubt that he would be digging deep to help us with our campaign?

**Valuing Damage in Jewish Justice.** Some weeks ago, we saw how remarkable it was that the Jewish system of justice included a major role, not just for the plaintiff, the defendant, and the

human court, but for the Almighty as well (see my emails of [1/18/24](#) and [1/25/24](#)). (I'm reminded of C.S. Lewis's image of *G-d in the Dock*, which was the title of Lewis's 1972 compilation of matchless essays on theology and ethics, as the book's subtitle describes.) Jewish law inclusions of the Almighty in the dispensation of human justice aren't just nice pablums; they are not bland or insipid intellectual fare. The Almighty is given a seat at the table, so to speak, and rules of law that might seem strange to us under the common law worked well in Talmudic times in part *because* they included detailed provisions for when the human court would not intercede but the Almighty would.

The pages of Tractate Baba Kama studied this week, as part of the worldwide Daf Yomi learning cycle, present a second anomaly to our Western, common law states of mind: Rules of law applied to human beings are supplemented by expectations that human beings will act in *super*-human ways. We see this explicitly on page 100a, which we learn at the tail end of this week. There the Talmud explicates several passages from the Torah, the last of which is

“אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשׂוּן” – זוּ לְפָנִים מִשׁוֹרֵת הַדִּין.

**“That they must do”;**

The Talmud says this Biblical injunction means that one must conduct oneself:

**beyond the letter of the law.**

Nachmanadies is perhaps the most famous medieval expositor of the awesome obligations that the Torah imposes on Jews to go beyond the letter of the law to be a holy nation, a light unto the nations. We can understand how the ethical mandate might apply in many areas of human existence. But in the application of the law and jurisprudence? And in particular in the application of rules to value the damages that are owed to one injured? The answer is yes.

Let me take one example, from the Talmudic text flowing into our texts this week. The Mishna on page 93b states a general principle in the calculation of damages owed for a tort or wrong:

זֶה הַכֹּלֵל: כָּל הַגְזֵלִים מִשְׁלֵמִין כְּשַׁעַת הַגְזָלָה.

*This is the principle: All robbers pay according to the value of the stolen item at the time of the robbery.*

Paying damages measured as value *at the time of the robbery* (as opposed to the value later, when it might have gone up or down) might not seem so noteworthy. After all, some rule is needed, and “value at the time of theft” is surely among the reasonable ones. Indeed, you will find many a common law jurisdiction to articulate the same or an equivalent rule – at least before adjustments. What is different in the Jewish universe, though, is that, given how Jews are to act beyond the letter of the law, the Talmud arrives at some conclusions that are at least noteworthy if not downright extraordinary. So for example, value-at-the-time-of-theft means that, if the robber, with remorse, returns the object, there are many instances when no compensation is due of any kind. More

noteworthy still is that if, for example, the robber increases the value of the stolen object, the Sages discuss the case of the aggrieved party actually making a payment to the thief upon the return of the more valuable article.

Long before the Prince of Denmark in *Hamlet* expressed the thought, our Sages tried to emulate and thence perchance to teach us to imitate a profoundly emulable aspect of the human condition:

*What a piece of work is a man, How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty, In form and moving how express and admirable, In action how like an Angel, In apprehension how like a god, The beauty of the world, The paragon of animals.*

**Songs of More than Faith and Hope.** As a Congregation, we are on to something special. Last week, we had come up with the following songs that are realistic, a bit subdued, but deeply life-affirming. Here is the current list:

- [Stand by Me](#), by Ben E. King
- [You've Got a Friend](#), by Carole King
- [Wishing & Hoping](#), by Burt Bacharach & Dusty Springfield
- [The Morning After](#), written by Al Kasha & Joel Hirschhorn for the *The Poseidon Adventure*, and recorded by Maureen McGovern
- [I Believe](#), written by Ervin Drake, Irvin Graham, Jack Mendelsohn, and Al Stillman
- [Blue Skies](#), here sung by Frank Sinatra,
- [Count Your Blessings](#), by Irving Berlin, sung by Bing Crosby
- [I've Got the Sun in the Morning and the Moon at Night](#), by Irving Berlin, sung by Ethel Merman
- [G-d Bless America](#), here sung by Irving Berlin himself
- [Lean On Me](#), by Bill Withers
- [I Think It's Going to Rain Today](#), by Randy Newman
- [That's What Friends Are For](#), here by Dionne Warwick
- [You've Got A Friend In Me](#), by Randy Newman
- [Ain't No Mountain High Enough](#), by Marvin Gaye
- [For Good](#), from WICKED
- [Tomorrow](#), from *Annie*
- [I Hope You Dance](#), by Lee Ann Womack
- [A Change Is Gonna Come](#), by Sam Cooke
- [Eye of the Tiger](#), by Survivor
- *You'll Never Walk Alone*. This classic, originally, is by Frank Sinatra (I think). [Here](#) is the Chairman of the Board's treatment. [Here](#) is Elvis's rendition. And [here](#) by Andre Rieu. Billy Schulder and poet-in-(California)-residence Paula Van Gelder both corrected me in not mentioning that this song is from *Carousel*, which came out in 1945, the same year that The Great Frank recorded it.

New this week is another great one in this genre and two other suggestions:

First, Cantor Jay Harwitt (whom I now see is Ritual Director, not just Cantor, of Sinai Temple in Los Angeles, and who has been a marvelous contributor of both haiku and limericks to these emails) suggests:

- [Something's Coming](#), from *West Side Story*.

Second, Michael Schulder suggests

- [For What It's Worth](#), by Buffalo Springfield

Says Michael: "It's about the Vietnam War era, so the politics are a bit skewed, but IMHO the song captures the sense of things being not right in the world." I see this song as a bit discordant to the list above. Not by a lot, mind you, but by a little. Still, I love the song, and it's recognizable from its first warbling chord. Without getting too far into the anti-war genre, there are bunches of songs like it. Who has some to suggest?

Finally, Joanne Ben Avi suggests that we try to put together a list of Hebrew songs. It's fitting, but it's a challenge. Do we have a few congregants and friends who will send in names and, if possible, links? Wonderful idea, Joanne.

**Books.** I will get back to Sci-Fi suggestions next week (though, btw, I took Pearl Shifer's suggestion and just finished *Orbital*, by Samantha Harvey. It's a good book and really well written.) For this week, let me report that I loved Hayyim Obadyah's suggestion of [We Are Not Strangers](#), by Josh Tuininga.

It's a very recent book (2023 publication, it appears). Explains Hayyim (who is a minyan regular and hence a pillar of our community):

*Fictional but based on a true story, it is a graphic novel set in Seattle's Sephardic Community during World War II and presents both the depth of the community's identity and the resilience of its connections to its neighbors. We see how the internment of Japanese-Americans impacted families and how the empathy of a Jewish neighbor makes a powerful difference.*

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

Louis Solomon, Parnas