

April 4, 2024

Dear Shearith Israel family,

***Our Year of Hope.*** The rhythm of the year continues. Even before we experience the deep and abiding optimism of Pesah, we did or shall experience two moments worth celebrating:

First, last Shabbat, we observed Parashat Parah, one of the “special” Shabbatot leading up to Pesah. The day celebrates the purifying Ceremony of the Red Heifer and the community’s observance of this ancient and mysterious rite (in all of history there have been only nine red heifers). If you do not read the Hertz commentary on the parasha, you will be missing one of the truly marvelous treatments of this subject. You will miss out even more if you fail to remember that, four years ago, our Synagogue, the rest of New York, and much of the rest of America and the world were shut down due to Covid-19. Four years ago, ten brave congregants came together to read Parashat Parah in our Sanctuary. We were spaced very far apart. We were masked. We were speedy. But we wanted not to miss this profoundly communal event.

Second, as of the end of last week, Paved Paradise – the green space next to our Synagogue building – is officially tented and open. It is such a thrill – really a thrill – to see the tent back up. Enjoy this amateur photo:



This year, let’s come together as a community and together think of all the uses we can make of this special space. When it gets a little warmer, we will have Shabbat kiddush on PP. And we already have several families who have reserved the space for smachot. But, in addition, it behooves us to think about how else we as a community can use it. I favor weekly movie nights, but that will take a fair bit of lay sweat equity to pull off. Does anyone have the time and energy to take on that project?

Paved Paradise is such a rare gem in Manhattan. In this last half of our ***Year of Hope***, let’s enjoy it while the tent is up.

**Tractate Baba Metzia and Watching the Watchers.** The magnificent Dr. Seuss and one of his brilliant inventions, the Hawtch-Hawtchers, immediately comes to mind.



As part of the worldwide Daf Yomi learning cycle, we began Chapter 3 of Tractate Baba Metzia. The Chapter is concerned, at least initially, with *shomrim*, or watchers of some type. Although the Tractate treats the subject extensively in a later chapter as well (around page 93a), the Mishna on page 33b assumes familiarity with the four categories of *shomrim* that play such a large role in the Talmudic corpus. We need to learn the four categories:

*First, the shomer chinam, or the unpaid custodian;*  
*Second, the shomer sachar, or the paid custodian;*  
*Third, the sochair, or a renter; and*  
*Fourth, the sho'ale, or a borrower.*

In the Talmud, obligations, responsibilities, and liabilities of each type of *shomer* differ. We will fill out our understanding as we proceed through the Chapter and Tractate.

At this early stage in the Mishna, also on page 33b, we are introduced to the following concepts. Let us suppose Person A deposits with Person B an object or an animal for safekeeping. B is a *shomer*, and for this scenario the Talmud supposes the *shomer* is an unpaid custodian. Let us suppose the object or animal is then lost or stolen. We learned in an earlier Chapter that a person in an analogous position to Person B could be absolved from liability by taking an oath that B was not negligent and did not appropriate the deposited article or animal for his or her own use. But let's suppose B did not want to swear. B could pay for the lost/stolen article or animal. This Mishna says that by doing so B fulfills any obligation to A.

So far so good. Now the Mishna asks, ok, so what if the person taking the object is found out, and let's suppose the person is found to be a thief. A thief we learned earlier needs to make either a double payment or the four/five-fold payment ([see our email of 1/4/24](#)). In the case of a *shomer*, does the thief pay A or B? This Mishna says that the thief pays B in the case where B paid but did not swear. If on the other hand B did swear, then the extra payment is made to the original owner, A.

**Portuguese Jews Around the World and Through the Centuries.** Thank you to Albert Rosenblatt for passing on [this video](#) from the Jewish community in Lisbon, which features Jews of Portuguese heritage or descent in the Diaspora. There are a few factual errors about the Jews of America/New York, meaning our Community, but it's an interesting video. An amazing number of Jews are described here. Thank you, Albert.

**Daniel Kahneman.** We mourn the passing last week of Israeli-born Princeton Professor and Nobel Laureate Daniel Kahneman, about whom I wrote in [my email of 8/19/21](#). One of his theses, as in his best seller *Thinking Fast and Slow*, is that an experience and the memory of that experience are two different things. Isn't it ironic that, when I wrote about the book in 2021, I was lukewarm about it, whereas I have thought about the book many times since and now, in my memory, have a hugely positive recollection of both it and the man.

**Books.** Lena Haber, correcting an error I made two weeks ago, unwittingly deserves my thanks (along with Aura Bijou) for identifying [The Orientalist: Solving the Mystery of a Strange and Dangerous Life](#), by Tom Reiss. Reiss won a Pulitzer for a later book on the Count of Monte Cristo, and I can't find anything by him in over a decade (can anyone help?). But *Orientalist* was a good read, especially in its feel and tone of inter-war Berlin.

**Featuring Songs.** New and fun song challenges abound:

First, we've been seeing pieces recently bemoaning the use of **Artificial Intelligence** in the composing of songs. An article in *The Economist* (3/23/24 edition) is balanced and interesting – and as usual has the best title anywhere: *Algorithm and Blues*. I'm wondering if any one of us can use AI to compose a song about our community or about one aspect of our history, heritage, culture, minhag. Who's game? Three big fat inflation-adjusted points await you.

Second, last week, we began lists for the *Greatest of All Time Long Songs* and the *Worst of All Time Long Songs*. I knew I would get some nudnicks complaining that I didn't define "long." It is true; I didn't. And I won't. If you have to ask, this is not for you.

What I do want to do, though, is replace the WOAT Long Song category with a GOAT Short Song category, a suggestion made by Billy Schulder. I'm not going to define "short" either, by the way, so don't ask.

Here are our current lists:

**GOAT Long Songs:**

I kicked things off by suggesting surely the greatest of the great long songs:

- [Layla](#), by Derek and the Dominos (Eric Clapton)

I wasn't going to forgive Billy Schulder, ever, for commenting that this piece of R&R eternity is "overrated". But since Billy has forgotten more great R&R than I ever knew, all was forgiven when Billy himself suggested three great long songs:

- [In-a-Gadda-Da-Vida](#), by Iron Butterfly, is a loooong song, says Billy
- [Won't Get Fooled Again](#), by The Who
- [Season of the Witch](#), here by Al Kooper & Co. (which I don't love, btw)

Laury Frieber suggests:

- [American Pie](#), by Don McLean

Laury is funny, thinking that this classic might be on different people's best and worst lists. Not to worry, Laury, I will take the flak; the song is definitely one of the best long songs ever written. If you disagree, send in better ones.

Also, since we've dispensed with a category of the worst songs of all time, I might as well add here my view of the worst:

- [Stairway to Heaven](#), by Led Zeppelin

I couldn't get Zeppelin off the list even if I wanted, though. Gil Deutsch likes:

- [The Rain Song](#), also by Led Zeppelin

**GOAT Short Songs** (two suggested by Billy Schulder, who, having thought of the category, has a head start and no competition this week):

- [Her Majesty](#), by The Beatles
- [Oxford Town](#), by Bob Dylan

In the great short song category, I want to propose

- [One by One, Two by Two](#), by Burl Ives, which I just linked to last week for other reasons

Charlie Helinski says beautifully:

*Our father would bring home many Burl Ives records, which we thought uncool and played just to laugh at. Soon though, we were playing them to sing along and enjoy, over and over.*

So true. (BTW, I also really liked Charlie's independent point that, when Judaism instructs Judges sitting on a Beit Din to go beyond the letter of the law (a remarkable point I discussed last week), what it is really instructing Judges to do is actively and creatively encourage pre-judgment compromise. Brilliant insight, Charlie.)

I solicit again your entries of great *long* songs and solicit for the first time great *short* ones. Together, let's assemble a robust flock of long and short GOATS.

***Shearith Israel Year of Hope Songs Plus.*** Let's link to this one more time for now. Thanks again to our nextgen editor, SM Rosenberg, for collecting our final list of songs, [here](#). And thanks again to Lia Solomon for Spotifying the list, [here](#).

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

Louis Solomon, Parnas