

Upping the Ante

8 So Moses and Aaron were brought back to Pharaoh. "Go, worship the LORD your God," he said. "But who exactly will be going?" 9 "We will go with our young and old," Moses replied. "We will go with our sons and daughters, and with our flocks and herds, for we must hold a feast to the LORD." 10 Then Pharaoh told them, "The LORD so be with you should I ever let you go with your young'uns. See how evil stares in your faces."

What did Pharaoh mean by "the Lord so be with you should I ever let you go"? Some commentators think the request to let the young go made Pharaoh realize the Israelites really had no intention to return. Some go further, understanding it as a rhetorical, tongue-in-cheek "God help you if you plan on leaving!" Egypt is, of course, surrounded by dangerous deserts, and the chances of a large ragtag population of slaves, among them women, children, and elderly, surviving and succeeding in an arduous trek to the Promised Land were slim. Hence this could easily be understood as sarcasm: "You're **all** going to leave? Good luck with that!" But I (and I did find just one other translation which seems to agree with me) would interpret quite differently: Pharaoh here is swearing at Moses and Aaron, cursing them out with an oath of imprecation or curse. We find similar expressions understood as self-curses in such episodes having to do with the Sotah, the unfaithful wife, or with Ruth's oath not to leave Naomi. I doubt whether Pharaoh would originally have cursed using the Tetragrammaton; most probably the narrator switched the god's name both to make it more recognizable to Israelite readers and because we Israelites are forbidden to swear, even in cursing, by any other god's name. My interpretation would understand Pharaoh as expressing outright, hostile anger, spite rather than sarcasm: "God's [damnation] be with you, that I would send you off so, with your young'uns too! See how evil is plainly against your face!"

Pharaoh's cursing out Israel, of course, comes to naught, for God transmutes the curse that God should be with them for evil into the blessing of God's being with Israel for good. Indeed, the Bible may have completely substituted opposite terms here, as it often does, in order to "clean up the language" and avoid imprecations, as often terms for blessing substitute for curses, and sometimes vice versa. But to me it's clear that only outright anger made Pharaoh go back on the promise he made to his fellow Egyptians to let Israel go off and conduct their festival. And Pharaoh is quite justified in his anger: God is deliberately having Moses change the terms of the deal, upping the ante considerably. Pharaoh could have expected a limited number of Israelite men to go on this "festival," and had reason to expect he would be given a list of those released. But Moses now changes the terms: Moses is to dictate the terms of who is to go, with children and women also. Later on, Moses will up the ante of his demands yet again, insisting all Israelite livestock must go, as well, and even asking Pharaoh to contribute some of his own Egyptian livestock as a sacrificial tribute to the God of Israel at this "religious festival!" God's telling Moses to up the ante of his demands each time is intended to demonstrate to Pharaoh that God who will be in charge. God will call the shots; He is Boss.

All of this is intended to make a "mockery" of Pharaoh, to belittle and ridicule his power and authority. At the beginning of our Parasha, the Torah tells Israel that they are to retell their children of the Wonders which God "wrought" (הַתְּעַלְלֵהוּ) in Egypt, but the term carries the sense that Israel should retell how God "mocked" Egypt. God was indeed "taunting" the vaunted Pharaoh at his powerlessness, toying with the Egyptians. Perhaps the Plagues had to be so immense and destructive because of the immense power and fabled grandeur which Egypt and Pharaoh were traditionally thought to possess. Only by definitively showing their powerlessness, exposing them to ridicule and shame for their spurious claims to strength, could Egypt be defeated. Another term which our Parasha uses at its beginning is: "Until when will you refuse to humble yourself (לַעֲנֹת) before me?" The term could possibly be understood as asking Pharaoh how come he was taking his time "responding," but the vocalization gives the accepted meaning, that God is explicitly demanding Pharaoh bow and bend before God's superior power. Pharaoh is quite aware that God's intentions towards him are entirely malevolent, and Pharaoh's "refusal" each time, despite the increasingly dire circumstances of the Egyptians, can only be understood as the response to his anger being intentionally stoked. Each time Pharaoh is actually ready to cut a deal, but Moses deliberately ups the ante. This no doubt lengthened the plagues and the timeline of liberation, bringing untold calamity and destruction upon Egypt. But the lesson that the enemy, especially a large and potentially threatening one like Egypt, must be resoundingly defeated and humiliated was an important one for a smaller nation like Israel to remember. And, of course, it is that utter humiliation of Egypt, wiping them out and making Egypt cringe in fear of the God of Israel, is what we are to remember as we eat matzah on Passover, commemorating how terrified Egyptians were of Israel that they begged Israel to leave as hastily as possible.



Shabbat Bo

January 31-February 1, 2025 | 3 Shebat, 5785

SCHEDULE

Hertz: p. 248 | Haftarah: p. 263 / Kaplan: p. 300 | Haftarah: p. 1102

- Candle Lighting** | 4:55 pm
- Evening Services** | 5:00 pm | Main Sanctuary
- Friday Night Lights** | Rabbi Soloveichik | following services | *5785 Season sponsored by the Julis Romo Rabinowitz family*
- Young Professionals Shabbat Dinner** | for registered guests | Elias Room

- Zemirot** | 8:15 am | Main Sanctuary
- Shahrit** | 9:00 am | Main Sanctuary
- Special Shabbat Morning Shiur** | Rabbi Soloveichik
- Tot Shabbat** | 10:00 am | Fidanque Youth Room | *Thank you to our Teen leaders, Barbara Sasson and Ruthie Sherizen, for leading Tot Shabbat in Liz's absence*
- Youth Groups & Jr. Congregation** | 10:30 am | Little Synagogue
- Kiddush** | following services | Levy Auditorium | *Sponsored by Mitch Julis, in memory of his brother, Richie Julis*

- Shabbat Afternoon Class** | 4:05 pm | Rabbi Soloveichik
- Teen Shiur** | 4:05 pm | Baruch-Lev Kelman
- Evening Services** | 4:50 pm
- Habdala** | 5:43 pm

Weekday Service Times

Mornings:

Sunday: 8:05 am

Monday-Friday: 7:05 am

Evenings:

Sunday (Minha & Arbit): 5:00 pm

Monday-Thursday (Arbit only): 6:30 pm

COMING UP

Sign up at shearithisrael.org

REGISTRATION DEADLINE: THIS MONDAY!

Community Shabbat Shira Dinner: Magevet Returns!

Yale's premier Jewish a capella group

NEXT Friday Night, Shabbat Shira, February 7

Following Friday Evening Services & Friday Night Lights

Following our Friday evening services – always musically exquisite – registered guests will enjoy a festive Shabbat dinner enhanced by a musical performance by Magevet, Yale University's Jewish a capella group. A co-ed ensemble, comprised of talented undergraduate students at Yale University, Magevet is known for its sweet blend of voices, unique arrangements, and lighthearted sense of humor, and is one of the nation's premier Jewish a capella singing groups.

Register Now for Parent-Child Learning

With special guest Dr. Pesha Kletenik, Head of School, MDS

For elementary school students & their parents or grandparents

Motzei Shabbat, February 8 | 7:00 pm

Let's give her a warm CSI welcome!

Tu B'Shebat Seder

"Letters in Bloom: Isaac Luria and the First Tu B'Shebat Seder"

Wednesday, February 12 | 7:00 pm | with Baruch-Lev Kelman

After last year's successful Seder, gourmand Baruch-Lev will again lead this tasty banquet of fruity delights native to the land of Israel. Join for a night of flavors, mysteries, and histories!

Stitch & Fix

Presented by the Sisterhood

Alternating Wednesdays in the Fidanque Room

Upcoming Sessions: February 12 & 26

RSVP to Rose Edinger at rgedinger@gmail.com.

In partnership with the Jewish Center & Lincoln Square Synagogue

UWS Ski & Snowboard Trip

Sunday, February 16 | At Camelback Mountain | For All Ages

Register at jewishcenter.org.

COMING UP

Sign up at shearithisrael.org

Co-sponsored by Shearith Israel and The Habura

Between Tradition & Modernity:

The Life of R' Elia Benamozegh

A Scholarly Discussion moderated by Baruch-Lev Kelman

Thursday, February 13 | 7:00 PM | At Shearith Israel

After services, join us for an exciting panel event celebrating the life and thought of Rabbi Elia Benamozegh of Livorno, a 19th century scholar and visionary.

In partnership with the Habura, Shearith Israel is excited to host Rabbi Mark Gottlieb of the Tikvah Fund and Dr. Clemence Boulouque, Associate Professor in Jewish and Israel studies at Columbia University & author of *Another Modernity:*

Elia Benamozegh's Jewish Universalism.

The Sisterhood presents

"Let's Get Organized" with Bohne Leah

February 23 | 4:00 pm | On Zoom | Link provided upon registration

Have you ever wanted to organize an area in your apartment? In need of organization tips? Then this is the event for you! Professional organizer Bohne Leah will introduce customized solutions to your organizational problems and get you jumpstarted on that organization you've been putting off.

PURIM PREVIEW

Your Purim Checklist - complete it at shearithisrael.org/purim5785:

- Order Sisterhood Mishloah Manot
- Become a Women's Megillah Reader
- Give Matanot L'Ebyonim
- Sponsor Purim Breakfast
- SAVE THE DATE: Purim Night, March 13 - Purim Dinner & A Show, plus Youth Activities

OF INTEREST TO OUR COMMUNITY

The League is a co-sponsor of

Mazal Bueno: The 8th Annual New York Ladino Day

THIS Sunday, February 2 | 2:00 pm | Tribeca Synagogue, 49 White St

Refer to our emails for the registration link and details.