

June 5, 2025

Dear Shearith Israel family,

Our Year of Renewal. Shabuot is behind us, though we are basking in its wake not just by the good feeling it created but by being absolved from saying daily *tachanun* for a few more days (does anyone know why? It's straightforward, but the judges will give one point for a correct answer).

What a lovely holiday we all had. As predicted, the Sisterhood made the front part of the Sanctuary into a gorgeous green-and-flower show. The Rabbi's talks were excellent, and the girls' and young women's reading of the Book of Ruth was absolutely marvelous. The chanting was clear and strong. Enormous thanks to our readers: Jenny Blass, Lael Blass, Lily Cohen, Navah Edinger, Sarah Flaks, Yaara Kaplan, Hudson Lentnek, Dakota Lentnek, Naomi Minevich, Hella Sasson-Gelman, Ruthie Sherizen, Neta Wiznia, Zahava Wiznia, and Sofia Zigler, and to Rabbi and Lisa Rohde for working with the girls. All of that is on top of truly beautiful melodies we sing on this holiday and most agreeable weather.

Summer Movies on Paved Paradise. We are now officially in Summer, whether or not the Summer Solstice concurs. I hope we can find some movies for Paved Paradise. Please choose your favorite 2-3:

- *Exodus*
- *Lawrence of Arabia*
- *The Red Violin*
- *Yankee Doodle Dandy*
- *A Woman in Gold*, 1945 (Hungarian Film, subtitled)
- *Ida* (a Polish film, subtitled)
- *Casablanca*
- *12 Angry Men*
- *Inherit the Wind*
- *Raiders of the Lost Ark*
- *Wall E*
- *Any of the Toy Story movies* ("preferably the first one")
- *ET*
- *What's Up, Doc?*
- *Erin Brockovich*
- *Kazablan* (1973 choreographed musical, with Yehoram Gaon)
- *Les Aventures de Rabbi Jacob* (1973)
- *Cast a Giant Shadow* (1966)
- *Golda* (2023)
- *The Impossible Spy* (1987, "about Eli Cohen, done three decades before the Netflix production")
- *Chariots of Fire* (1981) [now you're talkin']
- *Mivtza Yonatan/Operation Thunderbolt*
- *The Monuments Men* (2014)

- *Life is Beautiful* (1997)
- *Lupo b'New York* (1976, Eng subtitled)
- *The Chosen* (1981)
- *Shalom Y'all* (2003)
- *Gut Shabbes, Vietnam* (2008)
- *Hester Street* (1975)
- *Crossing Delancey* (1988)
- *Sum of All Fears* (2002)
- *The Out-of-Towners* ("the 1970 original, with Jack Lemmon & Sandy Dennis, not the remake with Steve Martin & Goldie Hawn")
- *It's a Mad Mad, Mad, Mad World* (1963)
- *Get Smart, Again!* (1989)
- *Batman* (1966)
- *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home* (1986) ("the lightest and probably most imaginative film in its series. Nimoy had fun directing")
- *It Happens Every Spring* (1949)

Perek 6. The last Chapter of Pirkey Avot is admittedly a bolt-on, our Rabbis wanting there to be six Chapters so that the usually occurring six Shabbatot between Pesah and Shabuot could each have one Chapter dedicated to it. (Say, does anyone know when that happened?)

My thought on Perek 6 is not a quote but an observation: In describing the good, worthy, noble life, it seems that *every single* Mishna in the Chapter includes the attribute of humility. Can someone check if I'm right?

The Meaning of Life in a Few Words. We saw last week that Ben He He took (or tied for?) first place in the *Shortest Phrase of Great Meaning* contest. In Pirkey Avot Chapter 5, his three words in Hebrew translate into

- *According to the labor is the reward*

I also offered *carpe diem*, since its three-word English translation is profoundly meaningful:

- *Seize the Day*

I would have thought my invitation for *short brilliance* would have called forth a lot of suggestions. With the holiday on Monday and Tuesday, we will need to give people another week or even two. That's not to say we haven't had some great suggestions. Claude Nadaf for example suggests:

- *When opportunity knocks, grab it.*

I like the aphorism, though it reminds me a little of the great *Yogi-ism*:

- *When you come to a fork in the road, take it!*

Claude also knew that “lies like truth” is from *Macbeth*, Act 5, Scene 5 (*To doubt the equivocation of the fiend/That lies like truth*)

Back to short and deep aphorisms, Alan Zwiebel suggests,

- *Watch Your Back*

While Lester Gottesman offers the “amazing Greek word”:

- *Eudaimonia* (“it is one of those noun-verbs meaning the perpetual striving for living well; perfection in respect of virtue and goodness”).

If we are going to move to one-word answers, I vote for

- *Amen*

Team, this list is good, but verily I think we can do better. So think, dream of glory, and send in some great suggestions.

Name that Parasha Tune. We are collecting tunes for *Parshiot Bemidbar, Naso, Be’halot’cha, Shlach, and Korach*, the first half of Sefer Bemidbar. Lots of people confirmed that the name of the *Sefer*, and its first *Parasha*, is spelled and called *Bemidbar*, not *Bamidbar*. But it was only email handle *Ravdoc*, or Rabbi Mark Licht, who cleverly observed that the only *Sefer* of our Torah containing the word *bamidbar* in the first verse is, not *Bemidbar*, but *Sefer Devarim*. Go figure.

For some great tunes for these *parshiot*, Andrew Druck rightly observes that *Parashat Bemidbar* begins with a census of the people. For that he suggests:

- [Song of the Count](#), as sung on Sesame Street
- [One is the Loneliest Number](#), as sung by Three Dog Night
- [How Deep is the Ocean?](#) as sung by Frank Sinatra
- [How Deep is Your Love](#), as sung by the Bee Gees

Noting that promises about entering Israel start renewing themselves here, Andrew also suggests:

- [The Promised Land](#), here sung by Bruce Springsteen

For *Parashat Naso*, which recounts the identical gifts by each of the Tribes, Andrew suggests:

- [Love Over and Over](#), as sung by Kate and Anna McGarrigle, which Andrew likes more than I do, but still it's a good song; and
- [It's The Same Old Song](#), as sung by the Four Tops, especially the verse: *Now it's the same old song but with a different meaning since you been gone*. Andrew gets here by observing that Rabbi Hertz, in his commentary on Parashat Naso, says that "though the offerings of all the princes were identical, these had a different significance for each tribe" (p. 597). Great suggestion given the logic, especially because I really like the song.

Dr Zachary Gorden also has a great one. Noting that the last verse in **Parashat Naso** says that Moshe "heard" the voice of the Almighty, Zachary suggests:

- [The Voice](#), here by The Moody Blues

Burden Shifting and Circumstantial Evidence in Tractate Shevuot. This week, the global Daf Yomi learning cycle is studying pages 31-37 of Tractate Shevuot. We are deep into the laws of oaths when we come upon two principles of evidence that are utterly modern in their application in the common law:

First, we are old hands at understanding the genius of the Talmud in shifting burdens of proof in cases where justice might otherwise be frustrated (see the discussion in my [emails of 8/11/22 and 8/22/24](#)). In Tractate Shevuot, the burden shifting takes on a more subtle guise and arises when proof by two witnesses is lacking but proof by a single witness exists. Usually, we know, it takes two witnesses to give competent evidence. There are a few exceptions, one discussed here, on page 32b.

Page 32b contains a series of passages each beginning with the words, *Everyone agrees that . . .* That really seems like a recipe for disagreement, which of course there is. The general context being discussed here is a witness lying that he does not have competent testimony to give – that is, the witness actually does have competent testimony but falsely states that he does not. To summarize one example, let's suppose you have two witnesses to most but not all of the activity necessary to force an allegedly adulterous wife to drink the "sota water" (ha, I just made that up). Let's suppose that, for the last act (you know, the *last* act), you have only one witness, and that one swears falsely that he has no competent evidence when in fact he does. The Talmud treats the case like one for money – because the wife will give up her dowry if she declines to go through the sota water ceremony. And, because the case is characterized as one over money, the single witness can indeed testify and can be punished with the sliding-scale sacrifice as if he were part of a lying duet (remember usually you need two witnesses to testify competently).

Second, page 34a treats the case of circumstantial evidence. The Talmud asks whether a witness always must *see* and *understand* what the wrong is that is being committed. The Talmudic discussion leans towards requiring both sight and understanding in all cases except money matters, where circumstantial evidence will suffice. One example of circumstantial evidence is that of a fighting camel, which is jumping around and then, after the witness's back is turned, another camel is found trounced

and dead. Is the fighting camel the culprit? In this case of monetary loss, circumstantial evidence is permitted.

Last week it was flying camels; this week trampled ones. Camel camel everywhere! The evidentiary points are interesting – and very modern.

Books. Francine Alfandary just finished an “outstanding” new non-fiction book, [Melting Point, by Rachel Cockerell](#) (2025). Francine is a great reader and just as adept a summarizer:

Using ONLY excerpts from documents - letters, newspapers, speeches, memoirs - Cockerell recounts the search for a refuge for the Jews in the early 1900's. Theodore Herzl and Israel Zangwill are the most prominent characters, but everyone from Teddy Roosevelt to Jacob Schiff makes an appearance. The newspaper accounts of the Zionist Congresses in Basel are fascinating. Of course, the whole idea that Russian Jews would find a sanctuary in Galveston, Texas, is head-spinning.

I'm going to read it. And thank you, Francine. Who else has been reading, and what?

In this, our Year of Renewal, let us feel and express gratitude and pray *Hoshi 'á nna, save us now.*

Louis Solomon, Parnas