

July 10, 2025

Dear Shearith Israel family,

**Our Year of Renewal.** We hope to see you on Sunday morning and evening, as we observe the Fast of the Seventeenth of Tamuz. The fast commemorates the breach of walls around Jerusalem, leading to the burning of the Holy Temple three weeks later, on Tisha B'Av, in the year ~70 CE. The day commemorates many other tragedies, including Moshe's breaking of the tablets of the Ten Commandments. We observe the Seventeenth of Tamuz together, as a community, donning tefillin in the morning and late-afternoon services. It is the initial book-end of a three-week renewal period, with Tisha B'Av the other book-end.

**Movies on Paved Paradise.** You will surely ask what watching movies in our outdoor space has to do with the Three Weeks. Well, come and see the first of the two movies we have scheduled, and you will learn.

*The Impossible Spy* | Thursday, July 24 | 8:30 pm

Some really fun folks have already signed up. If you are in the city and have some time, [sign up here](#), and come and help make this a fun and rewarding event.

**Touro Treasures.** News from Newport remains positive and promising. Touro Synagogue, under the auspices of our fellow Congregation Ahavath Israel, hosted a baby naming and another Shabbat of full minyanim. It has plans for services on Tisha B'Av. Tours are happening daily, with full crowds. Plans are also being made for services on the High Holidays as well as Fall programming to include, for example, *Magevet*, Yale's fabulous a cappella group, which will be singing there on November 9.

There is still time and room for many of us to enjoy a Shabbat at Touro Synagogue this summer. At this stage, just showing up as a goodwill ambassador will help greatly. Instead of watching more mediocre episodes of *The Gilded Age*, some of which showcase Newport 130 years ago, why not go and experience the dream first-hand?

**Short and Sweets.** I love Claude Nadaf's entry:

- בָּרַב עִם הַדָּרַת מֶלֶךְ, *in multitudes there is glorification of the King*. Claude well explains that this "is a concept in Judaism that the more Jews that are present in a single place, the more God's honor is increased. This concept has applications to the performance of Torah commandments in a public setting,"

**Name That Parashat Tune.** We are collecting tunes for the back half of Sefer Bemidbar, consisting of **Parshiot Chukat, Balak** (this week's parasha), **Pinchas, Matot**, and **Masei**, which will complete this Fourth Book of the Torah.

For this week's **Parashat Balak**, enjoy Faith Fogelman's clever entry, referring to the central story of the first part of the parasha, that of Balak and Bilaam,

- [\*Donkey Serenade\*](#), "a song written by H. Stothart & R. Friml /B. Wright & C. Forrest. It is from the 1937 movie *The Firefly*. Allan Jones sang it in the movie. What a tribute and love song."

Dr. Zachary Gorden also has entries for **Parashat Balak**:

- [\*Magical Mystery Tour\*](#), here by The Beatles
- [\*Magic\*](#), here by Olivia Newton-John; and
- [\*Magic Man\*](#), here by Heart [Zachary, great song – you have prodigious memory for R&R]

**Maarit Ayin and Chashad in Tractate Avodah Zarah.** This week, the worldwide Daf Yomi learning cycle is studying pages 18-24 of Tractate Avodah Zarah. These pages complete Chapter 1 and then, on page 22a, begin Chapter 2. As we have been summarizing, Chapter 1, and like it Chapter 2, involve the dos and don'ts of doing business and other things with true idol worshippers.

On several of these pages, we see another set of related principles at work: that of *maarit ayin* (translated as *appearance to the eye* with a meaning of *appearance of impropriety*) and *chashad* (חֲשָׁד), or *mistrust or suspicion*. These are related principles laced with law but more-than-law. It's an interesting case study in how our religion cares about more than sterile rules of conduct.

Roger Mesnick picked up on the subtlety, which appeared already in last week's discussion of why Jewish law would prohibit conduct that was not itself violative of a legal tenet but might create a mistaken appearance. (Secular law has concepts like this, but they are minuscule parts of minuscule parts of our jurisprudence.) In defining *maarit ayin* or מראית עין - btw, words I do not see in the text of the pages here but that I too was thinking of – Roger says:

*It is the avoidance of an act which, even though permissible, may look to an uninvolved outsider as if it violates the mitzvot [commandments]. It is an interesting way of avoiding internecine arguments and suspicions, and reducing potential reciprocal recriminations and temptations.*

It's a good and thoughtful definition. And it comes up quite directly in the Mishna on page 21a. After discussing cases where Jews can or can't rent fields or houses to idol worshippers, the Mishna seems to change the subject and discusses renting a bathhouse to a non-Jew. It says:

וּבְכָל מְקוֹם לֹא יִשְׁכְּרֵי לֹא אֶת הַמְּרִיחִין, מִפְּנֵי שֶׁהוּא נִקְרָא עַל שְׁמוֹ

*And for the same reason, in every place, one may not rent a bathhouse to a gentile, since it is called by the name of the owner, and onlookers will think that the Jew is operating it on Shabbat.*

The scene has shifted a bit, eh? We are now discussing not just idol worshippers but any non-Jew. We are now discussing Shabbat and not idol worshipper holidays. And the reason for the law is that people might be confused – since bathhouses back then were called by the name of the owner – into thinking

that owning, operating, using a bathhouse was permissible on Shabbat. We should not be troubled at all with the quick scene change. The Talmud does that all the time, and here it teaches us that the fundamental reasoning for these different laws share common bases. The law itself, however, is a classic case of *maarit ayin*.

For completeness, I mentioned in the subject line of this section the word *chashad*. This is a related principle that does make an appearance, by variant names, in these pages (for example 24a). *Chashad* is a phrase used to describe a case where someone knowledgeable of the law will think that what you are doing violates Jewish law – and so you should not do it because someone else will think you are doing it *wrong*. In a case of *maarit ayin*, on the other hand, the confusion will lead someone to conclude that the conduct is permissible under Jewish law – and so you should not do it because someone else will think you are doing *right* and that the violative conduct is ok. The distinction is fuzzy, imho (just a minus sign, really), and to the extent it turns on the knowledge of the viewer and not the doer, it is even more challenging to see any clear line between them.

Both of these related principles are fundamental in animating much Jewish law. They are principles to be proud of, and aspirations to try to live up to. Does anyone disagree?

**Books Redux.** Interesting takes on our discussions of two books recently:

**First**, we discussed Robert MacFarlane's [\*Is a River Alive?\*](#) to answer the question how much true idol worship exists today. Jay Harwitt disagrees with my premise that "true" idol worship isn't the same as the analogy to idol worship that all of us need to resist. Says Jay:

*Los Angeles includes Hollywood, and most of our local congregations can count at least a few members who are involved in "the biz." (For example, Issur Danielovich, better known as Kirk Douglas, was a member of Sinai Temple until his passing in 2020 at the age of 103.) When I was more involved with teaching 12-year-olds how to turn 13, I used to keep a plastic replica of Oscar on my desk. I used it to explain, not necessarily that Oscar itself was the object of worship, but rather that it represented the false deities to which one could easily be drawn: money, fame, and power.*

**Second**, Lester Gottesman had thoughtful reactions to our discussion of the 2016 publication by Desmond Tutu and The Dalai Lama of [\*The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World\*](#). I had said that the fundamental communitarian aspect of Judaism, the role of song, and the beauty of Shabbat were not prominent parts of what either Archbishop Tutu or The Dalai Lama focused on in the teachings summarized in the book. Lester says, in words worthy of serious consideration:

*Having spent a great deal of time in Tibetan Buddhist countries due to my earlier foolish mountaineering proclivities I can attest to the importance of community and song in the lives of Tibetan Buddhists, of which the Dalai Lama is the head. They do not have a "shabbat" per se but have more holidays than we do by far. The Dalai Lama, whom I have had the privilege of meeting several times, is a very curious man and explores many things including the science of meditation.*

*Archbishop Tutu, and now I put on my South African hat being married into a South African family, [was] not your run of the mill Anglican spokesman. Lived through the struggles of apartheid and its subsequent reconciliation he has shown more generosity and grace than his coreligionists in the UK.*

*Both the Dalai Lama and Tutu represent the ideals of their beliefs and are unique tsadikim [righteous people] in their own right. At the end of the day, I might suggest, we are actually more alike than not.*

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

Louis Solomon, Parnas