

July 17, 2025

Dear Shearith Israel family,

Our Year of Renewal. I understand that trying to interest you in a communal fast may not be a move most likely to succeed. Yet our Congregational observance this past Sunday of the fast of the Seventeenth of Tamuz was well attended, meaningful, and full of fellowship (a word I apply to both the men and women comprising our minyanim both in the morning and in the afternoon). We began the chanting of four short verses from the Book of Lamentations, which we will read daily and then both on Saturday night and Sunday morning, Aug. 2-3, during Tisha B'Av. Rafe Sasson rightly says that the verses are among the most hopeful in the Book. The tune-chant is other-worldly.

Touro Treasures. Robert Katz likes the song [Green Grass](#), sung by Gary Lewis and The Playboys. Robert doesn't actually relate the song to a single parasha, as we have been doing all year, so I'm putting it here. Why? Because Robert *also* thinks that going to Newport to visit Touro Synagogue is an "awesome" experience – he's done it twice, over successive Labor Days. So what are you waiting for, people?!

And Shearith Israel Treasures Too. Great thanks Debby Cardozo Smith and Judy Tenenbaum Cardozo, daughters of our former Rev. Bram and Irma Cardozo, of blessed memory, for dropping off some marvelous treasures depicting mid-20th Century Synagogue life. The documents and photos will be placed in our archives – that vast and growing repository that is SO expensive to upkeep (hint). My favorites from the Cardozo's recent trove are a 1970s debate about the role of women in Synagogue leadership as well as several photos. Here are two of them. Can you identify who is in them? One point each for a right answer. Another point for guessing the year within two years.



Movies on Paved Paradise. Just a week left to sign up for our first showing of the Summer,

- *The Impossible Spy*

Our Congregational handout/newsletter thanks the Brothers Schulder for the recommendation. They supported it, but thanks should also go to the first person to suggest it, Rabbi Mark Licht, a/k/a Ravdoc, *and* to all of us who voted for it. I hope you will sign up and come. It will be fun!

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

This week, it seems that everyone is thinking about a parasha *other than* **Parashat Pinchas**. The thoughtfulness and diversity of the suggestions is astounding:

Lynnette Gruenhut and brother Billy Schulder independently like the theme of magic, not for this week's parasha but (rightly) for **Parashat Balak**. Each suggests:

- [*Do You Believe in Magic*](#), by the Lovin' Spoonful

Lynnette also likes

- [*Magic To Do*](#), from the show *Pippin*

Billy also says, essentially, "don't waste my time" (the movie that made that line famous for one point), since any one of a million songs with or about magic would fit the bill. Maybe.

Andrew Druck is as usual in his own world on the parshiot – his own world until he explains the tune and the reason, and then it's sublime. On **Parashat Balak**, Andrew says that the parasha could also be called

- [*Heroes and Villains*](#), as sung by the Beach Boys

Andrew also joins the "magic is us" group and so suggests:

- [*Magic*](#), as sung by Bruce Springsteen
- [*That Old Black Magic*](#), as sung by Frank Sinatra
- [*Witchcraft*](#), also as sung by The Chairman of the Board
- [*Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered*](#), as sung by Ella Fitzgerald

Andrew also says that Balaam, when facing the donkey, is like the

- [*Pinball Wizard*](#), as sung by The Who, "particularly at that moment when, like the pinball wizard, Balaam is essentially 'deaf, dumb, and blind'"

Andrew ends his exegesis by summarizing the end of Parashat Balak and the beginning of Parshat Pinchas, where "we have the story of the idol worshipers and sexual activity between an Israelite and a Midianite woman." From the idolators' perspective, they are

- [Dancing in the Street](#), as sung by Martha and the Vandellas.

From the perspective of the Torah, we have Pinchas, described as a

- [Street Fighting Man](#), as sung by the Rolling Stones. “He could also be described as a”
- [Local Hero](#), as sung by Bruce Springsteen [what a song; what a performer!]

All these are genius. Everyone should try a hand at this.

Two Talmudic Postscripts from Last Week. First, with apologies, I misspelled Roger Mesznik’s name. Second, recall that, last week, Jay Harwitt insisted that my bent to try to limit Avodah Zarah to the true, strong, and largely moribund form of idol worship was wrong. Jay persuaded with a memorable anecdote about the Oscars. This week, Claude Nadaf persuades with a different, beautiful, and beautifully written observation. Says Claude:

To be consistent with Jay’s statement, I submit: Modernity summarizes the history of the world by saying that first there were many gods; monotheism taught that there was one G-d; then science came and people believed in no G-d. We have a different way of telling the story: pagans saw the world in terms of vast impersonal forces to which we are all subjected. Today is no different - we have a global economy, the internet and international politics - none of which cares about what we do.

Moral Dilemmas By Our Greatest Teachers. This week, the global Daf Yomi learning cycle is studying pages 25-31 of Tractate Avodah Zarah. We are still in Chapter 2 of the Tractate and will be for another couple of weeks. Among the deep dives into how to deal with true idol worshippers, there is on pages 28a/b a discussion of Talmudic medicinal remedies. We have discussed before that for more than 1,000 years our greatest Sages (including teachers as long ago as during the Gaonic period) have said that for a variety of reasons we do not follow the medical advice in the Talmud any longer.

But that’s not my issue today. My issue today is the following story told of R’ Yochanan ben Zaccai, clearly one of our greatest Talmudic Sages:

תא שמע: רבי יוחנן חש בצפדינא, אול לגבה דתהיא מטרוניתא, עבדה חמשה ומעלי שבתא. אמר לה: למחר מאי? אמרה ליה: לא צריכת. אי צריכנא מאי? אמרה: אשתבע לי דלא מגלית. אישתבע לה: “לא להא ישראל לא מגלינא.” גליה ליה, למחר נפק דרשה בפיקא

Come and hear the following incident: Rabbi Yoḥanan suffered from the illness tzaḥdina, which affects the teeth and gums. He went to a certain gentile matron who was a well-known healer. She prepared a medicine for him on Thursday and Friday. Rabbi Yoḥanan said to her: What shall I do tomorrow, on Shabbat, when I cannot come to collect the medicine from you? She said to him: You will not need it. Rabbi Yoḥanan asked her: If I do need it, what shall I do? She said to him: Take an oath to me that you will not reveal the remedy, and I will tell you, so that you can prepare it yourself should you need it. Rabbi Yoḥanan took an oath to her: To the G-d of the Jews, I will not reveal it. She revealed the remedy

to him. On the following day Rabbi Yoḥanan went out and taught it publicly, revealing the secret of the remedy.

One of the singularly greatest aspects of our Talmud is that our Rabbis don't just accept what is being told to them, they don't shy away from hard questions. As to this story, the gemarra is immediately on the attack. What!? R' Yochanan made a promise and then broke it publicly? The gemarra's first answer is, respectfully, a little too cute – R' Yochanan said he wouldn't reveal it *to the G-d* of the Jews, and he didn't; he told the entire world at a public lecture instead. The gemarra's response is something we should all be proud of, sternly rebuking the expositor of that reasoning and stating that the episode appears to be a *chilul Hashem*, or a desecration of the Name of the Almighty. Some more back and forth occurs, but the point has been made.

The story portrays a moral dilemma of the first order. R' Yochanan came into possession of the cure under a solemn promise not to disclose it. Yet the disclosure would help many people. What is more important, keeping one's promises or helping countless people? The gemarra doesn't take the matter further. It did its timeless job by identifying the issue and calling it like they saw it.

But what is the answer? How do you approach an answer? Not only are the judges giving two points for each thoughtful answer; they are also willing to recommend you for entry in a Ph.D. program in moral philosophy of your choosing.

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

Louis Solomon, Parnas