

July 3, 2025

Dear Shearith Israel family,

Our Year of Renewal. Last Thursday and Friday, we greeted the month of Tamuz, the Fourth Month in our prayers. In 10 days, we will observe the Fast of Tamuz, which will usher in the three-week period leading to Tisha B'Av. Given the custom of many to refrain from enjoying music during at least part of that period, you will understand the super-abundance of tunes this week.

Short and Sweets. Hayyim Obadyah has a lovely addition:

- **כִּי לְעוֹלָם חַסְדּוֹ: or *ki lə'olam ḥasdo***
For divine lovingkindness is eternal

Hayyim provides a nice comment as well: “Lovingkindness”, he says, “is not commonly used in English, and may seem out of place in a modern translation. Nonetheless, Hebrew **חֶסֶד** *hesed* is a unique and specific term, which should be differentiated from ‘love’, ‘kindness’, or other alternatives. (‘Benevolence’ perhaps comes closest.)”

Movies on Paved Paradise. Names and dates next week!

Name That Parashat Tune. We have a lot to cover this week. We opened the collection for the back half of Sefer Bemidbar, consisting of **Parshiot Chukat, Balak, Pinchas, Matot, and Masei**, which will complete this Fourth Book of the Torah. But, as has been our practice, we never really leave parshiot behind.

Pearl Shifer shares a humorous thought on last week's **Parashat Korach**:

Many years ago I worked at a community health center in “Loisaida” [the Lower East Side] on E 3 St. The fellow in charge of ordering supplies, Moses B, was a churchgoer and was very familiar with the Bible. He had a lot of gripes toward management (he wasn't the only one) and he would say: I'm waiting for the Lord to do a Korah number on this place!

Asher Reimer also has an add for **Parashat Korach**:

- [He's a Rebel](#), “sung by the amazing Darlene Love” (the Crystals) [look at the size of the band!]

Jay Harwitt has his usual super-keen sense of music and melodies. For **Parashat Chukat**, Jay suggests

- [*Ushavtem Mayim*](#) - Jay quips: “Too bad [Moses] didn't just talk to the rock”, but the song is about more than that. The words, as Jay knows, are from Isaiah 12:3:

וּשְׁאַבְתֶּם מַיִם בְּשִׂשׁוֹן מִמַּעַיְנֵי הַיְשׁוּעָה

Ushavtem mayim b'sason mi-ma'aynei ha-yeshuah
And you shall draw water with joy from the wells of salvation.

For **Parashat Balak**, Jay suggests:

- [*Overture to A Midsummer Night's Dream*](#), by Felix Mendelssohn, “with the orchestra mimicking the braying of the donkey”

For **Parashat Masei**, Jay likes a folk song I love:

- [*I Am a Weary and Lonesome Traveller*](#), here sung by Barbara Dane.

“And maybe for the five daughters of Tzelophechad”:

- [*Marry the Man Today*](#), from *Guys and Dolls*

Andrew Druck also has much of importance to say about **Parashat Chukat**. His penetrating presentation includes:

This is a difficult, sad, parasha, filled with death, sadness, and transition. 38 years have passed, and there is a new generation. The generation of Yotzei Mitzrayim [those who were part of the Exodus] has died, and the Dor Hamidbar [the generation of the Desert] has taken over. Miriam dies, Aharon dies, and Moshe is told he won't go into the Promised Land.

For these, Andrew offers:

- [*The Long and Winding Road*](#), as sung by the Beatles
- [*Hello, Goodbye*](#), as sung by the Beatles
- [*Time Waits for No One*](#), as sung by the Rolling Stones
- [*New Kid in Town*](#), as sung by the Eagles

Andrew continues: People have died every Tisha B'Av. The mood is captured by the Beach Boys in

- [*Till I Die*](#), and
- [*Summer's Gone*](#), also sung by the Beach Boys

Miriam, says Andrew, deserves a tribute:

- [*She's a Woman*](#), as sung by the Beatles

- [*Oh, Pretty Woman*](#), as sung by Roy Orbison
- [*Long Live*](#), as sung by Taylor Swift
- [*I Am Woman*](#), as sung by Helen Reddy

Finally, Andrew thinks about the “difficult ‘sin’ of Moshe hitting the rock ... instead of speaking to it.”

- [*I Am A Rock*](#), as sung by Simon and Garfunkel. Andrew explains that the song “is especially apt, not because of the facile ‘rock’ connection, but because it expresses our imagined sense of Moshe’s loneliness and alienation at that time in his life. I also suggest...”
- [*Rocket Man*](#), as sung by Elton John, “as expressing Moshe’s mood.”

Avoiding Idol Worship – Strict But Not Self-Immolating. This week, the global Daf Yomi learning cycle is studying pages 11-17 of Tractate Avodah Zarah. We are past (for now) the fantastic aggadata (stories with a moral) and are into the laws against aiding others to engage in idolatry. The rules are strict; our Sages were quite wary of Jews even doing business with idol worshippers at times proximate to idol-worship holidays, lest Jews financially support the odious practices.

At the same time, however, the Talmud exhibits a practical bent about some of the rules. For example (as you would expect, there are often dissenting or variant views expressed),

- Don’t go into a town of idol worshippers to do business, but if there are non-idol worshippers to do business with in that town, it’s ok to go.
- Don’t do business with an idol worship store, but it’s ok to do business with a store next door.
- Don’t do business directly with an idol worshipper, but it’s ok to do business with someone who does business with an idol worshipper. This principle, known as *lifney d’lifney*, has other important implications in Talmudic law (I’m sure you can think of many).

Any system of jurisprudence must make rules, and in any legal system the line between conduct lying inside and outside the governing rule may be, as Simon & Garfunkel said, “thinly drawn” (from [*Flowers Never Bend with the Rainfall*](#)). (Does anyone have an earlier citing for that unforgettable, poetic phrase?) The test of a legal system that will be embraced by people and stand the test of time has to include whether the distinctions seem sensible and if, in the end, life is enhanced and not stopped by observance of them. There is no system of justice more adept at achieving those ends than Jewish law, I think.

Books. Is Animism Idol Worship? Since we are learning Tractate Avodah Zarah, involving idol worship issues, I had shared an observation the other week that it seemed to me that the idol worship being addressed in the Talmud is the heady, full-throated variety. Staying with that undefined definition, it’s worth asking how much true idol worship actually goes on today. Let’s take one candidate.

I just finished [Robert MacFarlane's *Is a River Alive?*](#) MacFarlane is a young(ish) Fellow at Emmanuel College, Cambridge, and author of a bunch of books on things and themes nature-related. He is a version of the great John McPhee, meaning that MacFarlane writes exceptionally well, in the style of creative non-fiction. (It turns out that Tess had him for a class when she was in Cambridge, so the connection was too interesting to pass up.)

Is a River Alive? uses MacFarlane's treks to Ecuador, India, and Canada to explore the history of the *Rights of Nature* movement. The book paints effective and effecting images of several nature activists in the countries he visits.

To my untutored ear, some of the rhetoric used by some of these activists, and by MacFarlane himself, is overblown. A river can have rights – other artificial or non-human entities have rights, after all - without its being alive. Once we cross into the realm giving inanimate objects (which MacFarlane would assert is an incorrect description to begin with) thoughts, feelings, holistic stuff, it's easy to confuse the animism he is describing with idolatry. Are they the same?

In general, I don't think so, but remember I just work here and am sure there are Jewish legal approaches to the topic that must be considered (and I hope you will raise them with us so that we *can* consider them). The reason I don't think animism (it's a word MacFarlane uses to describe what he and his interlocutors believe) is idol worship is because, simply, there is a difference between seeing even the spiritual in an object and worshipping it. We don't pray *to* the moon every month, but we do pray *at* it. Seeing the Almighty's handiwork in nature is among the most common themes of our Psalms, yet we wouldn't confuse that with idol worship.

That's not to say the line doesn't get crossed, sometimes, in the book. In his first vignette, MacFarlane describes a mycologist (someone who studies fungus) as being so "at one" with her objects that she can sense them at a distance with no ability to see or smell them. That's not credible, but it's not idol worship either. In his second vignette, his subject is an Indian eco-biologist deeply "at one" with nature (especially insects – yuck). Again, the character is an activist but not idol worshipping. In the third vignette, though, it does seem that rites and rituals directed *to* the river – propitiating conduct like giving the land and the river due pinches of tobacco – seem to cross the line.

In this, our Year of Renewal, let us feel and express gratitude and pray *Hoshi'á nna, save us now*.
AND A HAPPY FOURTH TO ALL.

Louis Solomon, Parnas