

July 31, 2025

Dear Shearith Israel family,

***Our Year of Renewal.*** Abigail Gerstein Chill is the daughter of Rev. Dr. Louis C. Gerstein (apologies for omitting his Ph.D. last week). Rev. Dr. Gerstein was one of our inspired religious and ritual leaders in the Twentieth Century. Abby writes from Israel with another possible identification in the photo below: Abby says that “second from the left in the back row in the Chatham Square photo is Mr. Irving Elias”. And, she reports from Annette Gourney, our Elias Room is named after Irving’s parents. This is marvelous, thank you.



But there is even more to fill us with a sense of continuity as we head into Tisha B’Ab. Abby also sent the following photo of the Sisterhood circa 1955-60. Abby sent along a partial list identifying the women in the photo, but I’m not going to share that with you – not just yet. Who can you name?



**Tisha B'Ab 5785.** This Saturday night and Sunday, we, along with Jews around the world, will observe Tisha B'Ab. The day is our saddest of the year. It has been for millennia, for it is that long that Jews have been mourning the loss of our Temples in Jerusalem. The day commemorates other tragedies in our history as well, like the Expulsion and pogroms, with many also remembering the Holocaust on this day as well ([see my email of 5.1.25](#)).

We all know the apocrypha attributed to Napoleon that, upon seeing Jews mourning the loss of their Temple on Tisha B'Ab 1700+ years after the most recent destruction, Napoleon said that a people who mourn their Temple are destined to return and rebuild it. The quote is unverified, and the Judges would happily part with two points for an accurate and documented attribution. In the meantime, it is a sentiment deeply ingrained in our collective observance of the day.

In *The Innocents Abroad*, Mark Twain writes about a trip he took in 1867 to Europe and the Middle East (Constantinople, the Holy Land, and Egypt in particular). The book is extraordinary. Having just read it, I can tell you that I am not aware of too many equals in terms of its wit, humor, irony, and keenness of observation.

Quite distinct from the urbanity of so much else in the book, Twain sums up some feelings about Jerusalem and, as then called, Palestine. He says (at pages 492-93):

*Palestine sits in sackcloth and ashes. Over it broods the spell of a curse that has withered its fields and fettered its energies. Where Sodom and Gomorrah reared their domes and towers, that solemn sea now floods the plain, in whose bitter waters no living thing exists – over whose waveless surface the blistering air hangs motionless and dead – about whose borders nothing grows but weeds, and scattering tufts of cane, and that treacherous fruit that promises refreshment to parching lips, but turns to ashes the touch . . .*

*Palestine is desolate and unlovely. And why should it be otherwise? Can the curse of the Deity beautify a land?*

The sentiment seemed so apt in 1867 – and so impossibly wrong today. Indeed, the Holy Land is unimaginably different now than it was in 1867 – surely with greater variation then and now than any other single place Twain visited and wrote about.

Still, his words eerily echo the *kinot* or lamentations we will dolefully sing Saturday night and Sunday morning, on Tisha B'Ab. Tisha B'Ab at Shearith Israel is a singular event. Our night-time reading and the Rabbi's lecture afterward usually get the top billing as meaningful events that demand our participation. In truth, the service in the morning (Sunday morning this year, so easier for people to attend) is also one of the most significant events of the year. Please come and experience our community's fellowship in reciting *kinot*, or special lamentations, in words that reach back centuries with tunes that do as well. You will be deeply moved. And we will benefit from your attendance.

**Movies on Paved Paradise.** The screening last week of *The Impossible Spy* was a success. It is a difficult movie to watch and appropriate for The Three Weeks. Come to the next showing, of

*Chariots of Fire*, on August 14. You will be uplifted and will find yourself rooting *not* for the Jewish character. If, like us, you have seen the movie dozens of times, then come again for sure; we can recite the lines and sing the songs together.

**Name That Parasha Tune.** We are collecting tunes for the first five parshiot of Sefer Devarim, consisting of **Parshiot Devarim, V'Etchanan, Ekev, Re'eh, and Shoftim.**

Before that, though, I want to thank Irving Ruderman for correcting an errant “t” in the heading for this section, which I (and all the rest of you) didn’t notice. And I want to thank Robert Burke from Montreal for pointing out that it may be Leonard Cohen’s voice and not his songs that I find so, well, unmelodic. I will say “maybe” to that.

Michael Lewyn has two nice suggestions for the end of Sefer Bemidar, which are not late by any means:

- The theme from the movie [Goldfinger](#), for the army giving “gold rings as offerings”; and
- [I’ve Been Everywhere](#), here sung by Johnny Cash

And now on to **Parashat Devarim**. As I mentioned, the entire Sefer has a sense of reprise; indeed it is called something of a repetition of the Torah, or *mishneh torah*. What is different in the Sefer is that Moshe gives three deep discourses on where the Jewish people have been, before we get to Moshe’s blessings and future foretelling, the death of Israel’s greatest prophet, and the end of the Sefer.

Andrew Druck plays on the themes and very name of Sefer and **Parashat Devarim**, literally *words*. Andrew suggests:

- [Words](#), as sung by The Bee Gees
- [Words of Love](#), as sung by the Beatles
- [Letter to You](#), as sung by Bruce Springsteen

Michael Lewyn also riffs on the theme of *words*:

- [Show Me](#), from *My Fair Lady*

I too want to offer a tune for the beginning of **Parashat Devarim**. Moshe is recounting the (large) number of instances when the Israelites should have been content with their lots and should not have been complaining quite so much. My suggestion here is:

- [Gratitude](#), here sung by the incomparable Paul McCartney

**As the Talmud Says, The World Is Round.** This week, the worldwide Daf Yomi cycle is learning pages 39-45 of Tractate Avodah Zarah. We have begun Chapter 3, which is still very much about details concerning, for example, how far removed from idol worship must an act be to be permitted. (A post-script from last week’s terrific discussion about what Gil Deutsch describes as the “blabbing Rav Yochanan” [who promised not to disclose the details about a medicinal cure but

then did so]. Claude Nadaf also supported the view that the story was teaching that the needs of the “Many Outweigh the Needs of the Few”, and with typical Nadafian rigor, argues that the public health need for the disclosure not only avoided its being a *chilul Hashem* [a desecration of the Almighty’s Name] but also justified it outright.)

This week we consider the following extraordinary discussion appearing on page 41a. The Talmud is analyzing a Mishna, appearing on page 40b, that prohibits a Jew’s use of a statue used for idol worship that depicts a person holding a bird, a staff, or an orb of some kind. Each of the objects suggests divinity of the statue itself, explains the Talmud. Let’s look at what the Talmud says about the holding of an orb:

כְּדֹר — שְׁתּוֹכֵשׁ אֶת עַצְמוֹ תַּחַת כָּל הָעוֹלָם כּוֹלֵו כְּכֹדֹר

*An orb symbolizes dominion as the idol grasps itself under the entire world, i.e., it grasps the entire world, as one grasps a ball in his hand.*

I passed over this phrase quickly, thinking, well sure, that’s a legitimate basis for Rabbinic prohibition. And then it hit me: This observation was made between 800-1,000 years before Copernicus was born! Now, I recognize that there are other places in the Talmudic corpus that provide other descriptions of the shape of the earth. But this one can’t be ignored either – and it’s clear that the Rabbis had a developed view that the earth was round. How do you like them apples (which are also round, you know)?

***In Memoriam.*** We note the passing this week of Tom Lehrer, a favorite of Rabbi Rohde and Baruch-Lev Kelman. He was funny, brainy, scaldingly satirical, as in [\*National Brotherhood Week\*](#).

In this, our Year of Renewal, let us feel and express gratitude and pray *Hoshi’á nna, save us now*. And, for Tisha B’Ab, well over the fast.

Louis Solomon, Parnas