

August 14, 2025

Dear Shearith Israel family,

Our Year of Renewal. After this Shabbat, we will have about four weeks until we announce our slate of winning words, phrases, and song-themes for the coming year. These are fun contests that we do together as a Congregation+Friends. We jointly need to decide on the name of our upcoming year; our Word of the Year; our Phrase of the Year; and musical themes for the new year (at least one or two).

In recent years, here is where we have been

- **Naming our Year.**
 - *In 2023-24, our year was called our **Year of Hope**.*
 - *In 2024-25, our year has been called our **Year of Renewal**.*
- **Word of the Year**
 - **Here!** (our 2022-23 winner was Michael Schulder)
 - **B'yachad, or united, together** (our 2023-24 winner was Laury Frieber)
 - **Gratitude** (our 2024-25 winner was Caroline Kabla – has anyone seen her?)
- **Phrase of the Year;**
 - **Kaminado kon buenos, or let's walk with good** (our 2022-23 winner was Laury Frieber – the only person to win each of Word of the Year and Phrase of the Year)
 - **Yihiyeh tov, or things will be good** (our 2023-24 winner was Jack Shenker)
 - **Hoshi'ana, or save us now** (our 2024-25 winner was Gabriella Styler)
- **Musical themes.** We have had so many shared music themes that it's a challenge to list them. We have collectively suggested literally thousands of songs for seasons, feelings, ideas, even our parshiot. These have been great fun – and have shown the musical side of so many of us.

For this year, I'm hoping we can come up with a theme that blends with our 250th, discussed below.

The polls are officially open!

Our Semiquincentennial. Boy is that an ungainly word meaning 250th – as in the celebration of 250 years since America's Independence. The first thing we need to do is figure out a better name. One point for each good one; two for the winner.

As a Congregation, together with Congregation Ahavath Israel at Touro Synagogue in Newport, we are planning educational, interesting, and fun events relating to Shearith Israel and Touro Synagogue as part of the American Experience. Think about what we might do. Send in some suggestions. Now is the time to start planning.

Photo Finishes. We've had no more guesses, so I'm going to share the photograph of the Sisterhood circa 1955-60 that Abigail Gerstein Chill sent in one last time (thanks to Seth Haberman for resizing the photograph):



We already know that Esther Oppenheim, Amy Gerstein, Selma Guedalia, Hannah Tarry, Irma Cardozo, possibly Mathilde (or Lucy) Touriel, Anne Elias, Dolly Marks, and Dorothy Ain (maybe) are or may be in the photo. Can we not spot anyone else?

Summer Movies. *Chariots of Fire*. Tonight at 8p. Hope to see you there. Walk-ins welcome, so bring friends.

Name That Parasha Tune. We are collecting tunes for the first five parshiot of Sefer Devarim, consisting of **Parshiot Devarim, V'Etchanan, Ekev** (this week's parasha), **Re'eh, and Shoftim**. For **Parashiot V'Etchanan and Ekev**, Aura Bijou (spotted speeding south on the bikeway along the Hudson River last Sunday!) suggests:

- [*Promised Land*](#), here by TobyMac [and I agree with Aura, the video is good]

I want to make two suggestions arising from this week's **Parashat Ekev**:

First, Devarim 8:3 says, "The Lord ... fed you manna in the wilderness", for which we could repeat all the songs we've had in week's past about gratitude, but for today I offer:

- [You'll Never Walk Alone](#), here by Jerry and the Pacemakers – but I better remember [the version by Frank Sinatra](#), the Chairman of the Board, Ol' Blue Eyes himself.

Second, keying off one of the most penetrating set of verses about the human condition, in Devarim 8:10-20 – “when you have eaten and are full... beware lest your heart be lifted up, and you forget” all that The Almighty has done and does for us (Deut. 8:10–14) – we need songs about humility. For this I suggest:

- [Humble and Kind](#), here by Tim McGraw [love the video]

But surely someone has some better suggestions for humility?

Theodicy in the Talmud. Theodicy seeks to explain how evil can exist in a world created by the ultimately Good and Benevolent Deity. I didn't *choose* this topic for the dog days of Summer. It arises from our reading last week, on Tisha B'Ab, from the Book of Job, and it literally (meaning of course *not* literally) jumps off the pages of Tractate Avodah Zarah being studied this week.

The global Daf Yomi learning cycle is this week studying pages 53-59 of Tractate Avodah Zarah. On page 54b we find the following Mishna:

מתני' שאלו את הזקנים ברומי: אם אין רצונו בעבודה זרה, למה אינו מבטלה? אמרו להן: אילו לדבר שאין צורך לעולם בו היו עובדין — היתה מבטלו, הרי הן עובדין לחמה וללבנה ולכוכבים ולמזלות, יאבד עולמו מפני השוטים!?

MISHNA: The gentiles asked the Jewish Sages who were in Rome: If it is not God's will that people should engage in idol worship, why does He not eliminate it? The Sages said to them: Were people worshiping only objects for which the world has no need, He would eliminate it. But they worship the sun and the moon and the stars and the constellations. Should He destroy His world because of fools? (Sefaria, edited)

On its face the Mishna strikes us as deeply wise; little more need be added to it. But let's try to unpack it a little more anyway. The premise of the Mishna is that The Almighty intervenes in nature – or perhaps what we think of as “nature” includes an overseeing eye and hand that not only has the power but also the will to guide events based on the behavior of people. To guide events, and maybe to guide all events, yes, but then not always in the way that some people will feel is fair or just. The last sentence of the Mishna, reverberating through time and space, says that The Almighty can but will not always intervene. Sometimes, G-d will let the process of free-will take its course on history. Sometimes, these are excruciatingly hard concepts to jive with the belief in a Benevolent Deity. The inevitable truth is that, sometimes, the bad guys win, and need to be allowed to win, because the world functions with a degree of apparent freedom of human agency that must be tolerated.

These truths are not only hard to comprehend; sometimes it is hard to maintain sustained faith in the face of these truths. Sure, our religion explains better than anywhere else I've seen (admittedly a small universe of places) that free-will is essential for us to have abiding faith in the first place. What's the nobility or honor to be accorded an act that has been hard-wired since the Big Bang, whether or not we know the mechanism of action? We need to be able to do foolish and even evil things. That's the way

this world works, and we have known that since even before Abraham was tested at the binding of Isaac.

And then it gets even harder still. Fundamental to our religious world view is the belief in the power of prayer. And don't give me the business. When I pray that a sick person be healed, I'm not doing that so that *I* can feel better. I'm doing that so that the sick person will be healed. So The Almighty can intervene in nature, and prayer permits us to intervene with The Almighty. And the last sentence of the Mishna is saying what, do you think The Almighty will destroy, build, change the world because of some fool?

In some cases, the seas do split, the dead are revived (the State is reborn?). How is that happening? And does it square with the elemental importance of free-will? The only thing that seems certain is that fools, whether or not they [rush in](#), need not apply.

This topic leads right into some of the keen insights in the book discussed below.

Books – Feelin' Lucky? The great line is from Clint Eastwood in *Dirty Harry*:

You've got to ask yourself one question: 'Do I feel lucky?' Well, do ya, punk?

David Spiegelhalter is an emeritus Professor of Statistics at University of Cambridge, is a Fellow of the Royal Society, and has a good many other accomplishments in the world of statistics, risk, uncertainty, and even the study of luck. I read his *The Art of Statistics* and just finished his 2024 *The Art of Uncertainty*. His writing is lucid, compelling, interesting, and even fun.

In his recent *Art of Uncertainty*, Spiegelhalter, among many interesting points, bears down on the argument that success is largely shaped by the “randomness” of birth and upbringing. It's a point the Talmud makes many times (one point for each correct citation). Spiegelhalter takes a mathematical stab at showing how much randomness can be used to explain various events (like (British) football matches or League standings). He is persuasive in proving that, for all our self-proclaimed talents and genius deserving of praise and glory, in reality most of us most of the time are the product of 1) genes and upbringings that we can take no legitimate credit for (the author calls this “constitutive luck”), and 2) random luck itself. The point is intuitively obvious – and should be deeply humbling. *The Art of Uncertainty* is a great read.

I also can't pass up sharing with you Spiegelhalter's famous quote from John Tukey, one of the great statisticians of the last Century, whom I had the privilege to work with:

Far better an approximate answer to the right question, which is often vague, than an exact answer to the wrong question, which can always be made precise.

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

Louis Solomon, Parnas