

Dear Shearith Israel family,

**Our Year of Renewal.** Last week, we opened the voting for our new year naming opportunities. We've already gotten some great suggestions:

- **Naming our Year.** Coming after Year of Hope and Year of Renewal, Hayyim Obadyah suggests
  - **Year of Engagement** (a word he offers for Word of the Year, too). Hayyim's explanation for the choice is beautiful (maybe even more so than the somewhat overused term itself):

*Thinking and feeling all that we should is invaluable. But we also need to engage in a positive way with our congregation, with our city, with our communities, with our neighbors, with our families, with Israel, with the local and worldwide Jewish communities, and with those who most need us.*

SM Rosenberg, a WIHOR (surely you haven't forgotten what that stands for) makes two suggestions, both on the cross-over theme of combining our Congregation's 372<sup>nd</sup> year in America and The 250<sup>th</sup>:

- **Year of Ascent;** and
- **Year of Pursuit**

And, hailing from Silver Spring, Maryland, Meira Shedlo Eidelman and her husband Jonathan (friends of our Office Manager/Financial Associate Sarah Gross) suggest:

- **Year of Legacy** ("in recognition of the 250<sup>th</sup>")
- **Word of the Year.** After our past three years – where our Words of the Year were **Here!;** **b'yachad, or united, together; and gratitude** – as noted, Hayyim Obadya likes
  - **Engagement**

The Eidelmans suggest

- **Redemption** ("aspirationally")
- **Phrase of the Year.** After our past three years – where our Phrases of the Year have been **Kaminado kon buenos, or let's walk with good; Yihiyeh tov, or things will be good; and Hoshi'ana, or save us now** –

Professor Jerome Chanes likes

- **To re-write history**, or in Hebrew **לשכתב היסטוריה** *Ishachtev historia*. Professor Chanes thinks the expression "rich", certainly in Hebrew, and says: *It's provocative—We Jews are rewriting history, in Israel and in America as well, on antisemitism, Zionism, Jewish identity.*

Gabriella Styler makes this marvelous suggestion:

- **May Mercy meet Truth.** Gabriella sees hints of the thought from last week's haftarah of *Nachamu*; it's more directly from the Psalms (85:11) (תִּסְדֹּךְ וְאֶמֶת נִפְגְּשׁוּ צְדָקָה וְשָׁלוֹם נִשְׁקוּ) – *Faithfulness (or mercy) and truth meet; justice and well-being kiss*. Gabriella wants *mercy & truth to meet there [meaning in Jerusalem] for the good of all mankind*. What a beautiful thought.

And our new best friends from Silver Spring, the Eidelmans, suggest:

- **Hatzlich'ana** (“the sequel to *Hoshi'anna*”). This suggestion means *please bring us success* and is mondo clever given this year's *hoshi'anna*.

**Musical themes.** No one has stepped up on this, yet. As I mentioned, I'm hoping we can come up with musical themes that blend with The 250th.

**Our Semiquincentennial.** Nor has anyone come up with a better name for this ugly Latin mashup. I'm thinking we could far more easily call it “The 250th” than the mouth-damaging and ear-offending *Semiquincentennial*. I'm headed in that direction, so if you have another name, let's hear from you.

We have already had some planning sessions with Rabbi Soloveichik, various trustees, our professional and ministerial leaders, and other congregants. It's not too late to send in some ideas. We will all benefit from some thoughtful proposals that show our Congregation as itself and as part of the larger picture of Jews in America.

**Photo Finished.** Deep thanks to Rose Edinger for masterfully supplying virtually all the names in the photograph of the Sisterhood circa 1955-60 that Abigail Gerstein Chill sent in:



**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** (this week's parasha), and **Shoftim**.

A recent add is offered by Aviva Miller, on the subject of humility, as in last week's parasha -- or its ironic counterpoint:

- [\*It's Hard To Be Humble\*](#), here sung by Willie Nelson

Andrew Druck too has a gratitude and humility song, this one a serious one:

- [\*If It Be Your Will\*](#), as sung by Leonard Cohen

Dr. Zachary Gorden describes what Moshe has been doing since the beginning of this Sefer:

- [\*Reminiscing\*](#), here sung by the Little River Band

For **Parashat Re'eh**, Andrew Druck is thinking about the Israelites needing to do all the (many) commandments, or mitzvot, suggesting:

- [\*Carry That Weight\*](#), sung by the Fab Four

Billy Schulder offers an early one for **Parashat Shoftim**:

- [\*I Fought the Law and the Law Won\*](#), here sung by The Crickets [really would have put a comma after Law, no?]

I have suggestions for **Parashat Ekev** that are similar to what we discussed in connection with humility last week. Devarim 8:11-18 speaks of the Israelites succeeding in their quests and what happens as a result. Last week, that same sentiment was expressed, and the Torah felt that idol worship would result – thanking the wrong deity (or non-deities). This week, a very similar sentiment is expressed, and the warning by the Torah is not that human beings will thank non-deities; instead they will believe that *they* are responsible for all the good that comes to them. Arrogance and hubris result, and thus:

- [\*Won't Get Fooled Again\*](#), here sung by The Who
- [\*Instant Karma\*](#), here sung by John Lennon
- [\*Big Shot\*](#), here by Billy Joel
- [\*You're So Vain\*](#), here by Carly Simon [great video]

**The Stringencies Imposed on Idolatry.** The global daf yomi learning cycle is this week studying pages 60-66 of Tractate Avodah Zarah. These pages straddle the end of Chapter 4 and the beginning (on page 62) of Chapter 5 (the last Chapter in this 76-page Tractate). The lessons of both the end of Chapter 4 and the beginning of Chapter 5 teach how tough the Talmud is on idolatry but also show slight leniencies where it would impose overwhelming hardship not to.

At the end of Chapter 4, the Talmudic discussion is summarized by the great medieval commentator Rashi. The first thing to observe is that summaries by our greatest exegete are apparently quite rare.

Second, Rashi places the Talmudic strictures into categories, where idol worship gets the short end of nearly every stick. So as between a prohibition against drinking vs. deriving *any* benefit at all, whether drinking or other forms of benefit, pure idol worship does not permit *any* benefit. For direct vs indirect touching of idolatrous objects, again even indirect touching is prohibited. And even though there are cases where the absence of intent will absolve the worshipper, the general thrust of the discussion is that that leniency does not apply to idol worship.

Chapter 5 continues this trend, but with a ray of light when the strictures become too heavy. The first Mishna of the Chapter teaches:

מתני' השוכר את הפועל לעשות עמו בדין גסד — שוכרו אסור. שוכרו לעשות עמו מלאכה אחרת, אף על פי שאמר לו "העביר לי חבית של יין גסד ממקום למקום" — שוכרו מותר. השוכר את החמור להביא עליה יין גסד — שוכרה אסור. שוכרה לישב עליה, אף על פי שהניח גוי לגנו עליה — שוכרה מותר.

*MISHNA: In the case of a gentile who hires a Jewish laborer to work with wine used for an idolatrous libation with him, his wage is forbidden, i.e., it is prohibited for the Jew to derive benefit from his wage. If the gentile hired him to do other work with him, even if he said to him while he was working with him: Transport the barrel of wine used for a libation for me from this place to that place, his wage is permitted, i.e., the Jew is permitted to derive benefit from the money. With regard to a gentile who rents a Jew's donkey to carry wine used for a libation on it, its rental fee is forbidden. If he rented it to sit on it, even if a gentile placed his jug of wine used for a libation on it, its rental fee is permitted.*

We see two things in the Mishna and the ensuing gemarra. First, while the Mishna includes leniencies in each of the cases (in accordance with at least some of the opinions expressed), in other areas of Jewish law, there would be even *greater* leniencies. Second, however, we see that in extreme cases of hardship the Talmud relents, a little.

What is the point here? The Talmud seems to be saying that the practice of idolatry is so abhorrent to our Sages that it was singled out for particularly harsh treatment. Maybe that is because of the fundamental self-abnegation of humanity that attends the worshipping of idols. The slight leniencies seem to point in the same direction; the law will not be used to negate all human agency; at some extremes, our Sages let up, a little, so that people can for example earn a livelihood when true idol worshipping risks are not present.

**David Spiegelhalter's [The Art of Uncertainty](#) – Redux.** Claude Nadaf – which as flesh and blood (and not just a disembodied runaway winner of so many of our challenges) actually showed up for the screening of *Chariots of Fire* – tried to answer the question I asked last week – for Talmudic discussions evidencing that success is largely shaped by the “randomness” of birth and upbringing. We were talking about Spiegelhalter's excellent book and compelling thesis. Claude didn't actually cite a Talmudic discussion directly on the topic but does say two other interesting things: First, he says that the Talmud focuses on investigation of facts, reliance on the majority rule, and making actions conditional to “guide decision-making in ambiguous situations,” what he calls “situations of uncertainty,” or *safek*. Claude has a breadth of learning to make the statement, and his citations are interesting. Second, Claude frames the issue of uncertainty nicely as follows:

*Uncertainty invests the present with immense significance, and we can focus all our energies on it rather than assuming that past will automatically continue into present.*

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

Louis Solomon, Parnas