

November 20, 2025

Dear Shearith Israel family,

Our Year of Allegiance. Ner News for the 250th. This past Shabbat, about 350 people attended the Rabbi's third lecture in his 10-part series celebrating the 250th. Many of these guests were there attending one event or another, and they all got to hear an excellent talk.

The Rabbi is giving his fourth lecture in this series this Shabbat, titled *The Rabbi, The Minister, and the Battle of Bunker Hill*. These have been marvelous lectures, focusing on a bit of American history, a bit of Shearith Israel history, and putting the two together in ways to deepen our appreciation of each. Before we take a break for the Thanksgiving holiday and weekend, please join us.

Last week, I discussed our trip to Newport and sung the praises of Yale's A Capella group, Magevet. Thank you to Congregation Ahavath Israel's stalwart Dr. Jim Herstoff for this photo of Magevet's performance at Touro Synagogue:



Thanksgiving Plans. Before you finalize your Thanksgiving Day plans, please think about joining us. Everyone knows that parade viewing from our portico is easy once you have gotten to Shearith Israel early (services start at 730a). What you also should know is that joining us on Thanksgiving will enable

you to be a part of American Jewry's continuous celebration of Thanksgiving since its first official occurrence in 1789. You can join us for a short lecture by Rabbi Soloveichik and then help us organize, sort, and pack up to 2,000 bags of food for those in need. I promise we will be finished and you can be home before *Alice's Restaurant* airs at noon (if by now you are unfamiliar with that tradition, then you should definitely join us, since I will explain it to you). On top of all that, we – hopefully with other of our faith-based partners – will be announcing a fitting and ambitious undertaking for the 250th. You will want to be there when it happens.

Best Music/Lyrics Combos. We have two extraordinary posts for this challenge this week:

First, our new friends from Queens, Joseph and Florence Levin, offer the 1953 English language song, [*The Magic of Life*](#). Joseph explains that the music is by Sholom Secunda, lyrics by Dave Goldman, Danny Winchell, and Marvin Worth from the record, *Yiddish-American Sing Along - Solomon Schwartz & His Orchestra with the Emmanuel Fisher Singers*. Joseph describes both lyrics and melody as “lovely - a bit melancholy but also a bit hopeful at the same time”. Listen to the song for all the lyrics. I think the reason the song fits perfectly into this category is the beautiful phrase:

*Without love a life is but sadness and strife/
For love is the magic the Lord gave to life*

Joseph, thank you. Got more?

Second, last week, we reminded each other of how great the Jim Webb song *Wichita Lineman* was and remains (thank you to Fortuna Calvo and Alan Zwiebel for correcting my clumsy reference to *coup de grace*). We were especially enjoying the song's gorgeous music and timeless phrase:

*And I need you more than want you/
And I want you for all time*

Scott Weiner sent in a link to [an incredible video](#) all about the song, in which the composer addresses these very lines. You will *love* this link. Thank you, Scott.

These are the best of the best, so chime in with your favorite favorites.

Name that Haftarah Tune. We are now collecting tunes for the **haftarot** of the final seven parshiot in Sefer Bereshit: **Parshiot Toldot** (this week's parasha), **Vayetze**, **Vayishlach**, **Vayeshev**, **Miketz**, **Vayigash**, and **Vayechi**.

The **Haftarah for Parashat Toldot** is from Malachi 1:1-2:7. It includes the prophet's description of The Almighty's preference for the traits of Jacob over the traits of Esau/Edom; the clear intent that Jewish leaders (here the kohanim) had moral responsibilities to the people; and a castigation of priests who do not lead in ways of righteousness. Malachi is seen as one of the last, or the last, prophet.

My suggestions for songs for Parashat Toldot include:

- [Fix You](#), here by Coldplay
- [Mother and Child Reunion](#), by Paul Simon
- [I Can See Clearly Now](#), here by Johnny Nash
- [He Ain't Heavy, He's My Brother](#), here by the Hollies
- [Follow You Follow Me](#), here by Genesis

Poultry Pitching and Pythagorians. The global Daf Yomi learning cycle is this week studying Tractate Zevachim pages 63-69. These pages straddle Chapters 6 and 7 of the Tractate. Both Chapters discuss the ins and outs (sorry) of the offerings of birds. If sacrifices of larger animals were for the wealthy and sacrifices of grains were for the poor(er), bird sacrifices, I would submit, should have been for the middle classes, making them in theory the most prevalent of offerings. Indirect support for my wholly speculative thesis is that the two species of birds that were available for offerings were pigeons and doves, birds of great(er) abundance at that time and place.

For our purposes this week, two discussions on page 64a offer particular treats. Bear with me for the relevant background. The Gemarra notes that, as the Mishna on page 63a states, although fowl were usually sacrificed on the southeast corner of the Altar, when it got too crowded there, fowl sacrifices could be performed at the southwest corner. The Torah itself, however, says that the crop and feathers of the sacrificed birds were to be thrown where the ashes accumulate, which was on the east side, near the ramp leading up to the Altar itself (see Vayikra 1:16).

At this point on page 64a, our first treat occurs:

אמר רבי יוחנן: בא וראה כמה גדול כחן של כהנים – שאין לה קל בעופות יותר ממוראה ונוצה, פעמים שהכהן זורקן יותר משלשים אמה.

*Rabbi Yoḥanan says: Come and see how great was the strength of the priests, as you have no parts of birds lighter than the crop and feathers, and there were times when the priest would toss them **more than thirty cubits** from the southwest corner of the Altar to the place of the ashes.*

What R' Yochanan is saying is that the kohanim would not walk the material to be placed with the ashes from west to east sides. Rather, the material would be *thrown* the full distance. We know from this and other sources that that distance was more than 30 *amot*, a/k/a 30 cubits. And we also know that an *amah* or cubit is between 18-24 inches. So the distance to be thrown was between 45-60 feet. Interestingly, the gemarra marvels at the throw, not because the material was heavy but because it was light! To me, to hit a spot on the floor 45-60 feet away is a marvel whether the projectile is heavy or light. It is something neither I nor any of you could do (any pitchers out there reading this?). R' Yochanan is right to comment on it.

To see the second, related treat, you need the following background. To arrive at the distance between the place of sacrifice and the place of ashes of 30+ feet, two dimensions need to be traversed, both left-right (west-east) as well as north-south. That's because the Altar was 32 *amot* square, but the

throwing wasn't done from the corners. The ramp leading up to the Altar was 16 *amot* wide, and the access from the ramp to the spot of throwing and landing created about a near-square whose sides were 21 *amot* by 23 *amot* from place of sacrifice/throwing to place of ashes. The great medieval commentator Rashi seems to use a short-cut of assuming a 22x22 square, and then he uses for the hypotenuse an estimate of $1\frac{2}{5}$ the length of a side. That gives us 30.8, which is where R' Yochanan got his "greater than 30" number.

This is where the second treat occurs. A few lines later, the gemarra literally asks why R' Yochanan said "more than 30" *amot* when the distance is actually more than 31 *amot*. Why so precise? What the gemarra *says* is going on is that R' Yochanan was counting the area where the kohen was standing, so a slight adjustment needed to be made. I can't challenge that, but I think there is more going on here. Even putting aside whether we do or don't count the few inches taken up by the kohen's body, if you do not take short-cuts and actually do the math, the hypotenuse of a rectangle 21x23 is 31.14. It is clear that the Sages in the gemarra knew the Pythagorean Theorem (to find the length of a hypotenuse, the equation is $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$). They were asking R' Yochanan why he was using an estimate when a precise measurement was available. What a treat!

Twain for the 250th. We have another reader for our book club: Francine Alfandary, and a great reader she is. More are welcome to join Francine, Aura Bijou, Laury Fieber, Michael Schulder, and me.

So what books are we going to read, and in what order? Apparently, there is a [Mark Twain Project](#) at Berkeley. It's hard to navigate. Wikipedia seems to have a serviceable list of Twain's books. We might distinguish between works published during his lifetime (~22) and works published posthumously or editorially completed (7-9). I'm thinking we should move chronologically, earliest to more recent among the published ~22. That will give us about 2-3 weeks per book, and we can try to finish around Rosh Hashana next year. If the task becomes arduous, we can divide the titles among book club members, who can write short summaries right here as we go. Any other ideas?

Let's start with the first five:

- [The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County, and Other Sketches](#) (1867)
- [The Innocents Abroad](#) (1869)
- [Roughing It](#) (1872)
- [The Gilded Age](#) (1873)
- [Sketches, New and Old](#) (1875)

This is SO fun – and such a nice way to celebrate the 250th.

In this, our ***Year of Allegiance***, let us couple our collective ***commitment*** with a prayer to The Almighty, ***Hatzlich'ana, help us succeed.***

Louis Solomon, Parnas