

January 15, 2026

Dear Shearith Israel family,

Our Year of Allegiance. Magevet, Yale's wonderful *a cappella* group, will be joining us two weeks from this Shabbat, on January 30. It is a not-to-be-missed, once-a-year joy-fest. It will be even more special since I think they are going to do something for our *Ner Moment* – oh please don't tell me you don't know what that means ([see my email of 9/26/25](#)). Come for services, and stay for the meal, where I think there are a few seats left. Details and registration can [be found here](#).

Touro and the Two-Fiftieth. From May to November 2026, we are hoping that many of us will be traveling to Newport to enjoy with our friends at Cong. Ahavath Israel our beautiful Touro Synagogue, the beautiful weather (for most of that time of year), and the convivial company that awaits you there. We are proposing the following weekends, *not* to preclude or even discourage other weekends but just so that people can plan to congregate with other congregants if they wish.

In 2026 (Shabbat and Sunday listed), with thanks to Warren Stern for looking up the festivals occurring on these weekends in Newport:

- May 16-17
- June 20-21 (Flower Show)
- July 11-12 (Classical Music and Hall of Fame Tennis events)
- August 1-2 (Jazz Festival)
- September 5-6 (week before Rosh Hashana)
- October 17-18
- November 7-8, the Shabbat closest to Kristallnacht, when we hope Rabbi Soloveichik and others who have made this trip before on this weekend will be able to do so again.

Let the office know if you think you can make it. We will try to schedule communal meals and other activities if we know that even a few of us are going for the same weekend.

Faith for Food. We are in week #6 of our community project to distribute food to our neighbors in Manhattan who are hungry or food insecure. This week, Masbia again distributed food for approximately 70 families from our Food Annex. Importantly, we have now installed a second food shed on our Paved Paradise (see photo below). The

placement may change, but hopefully we can help feed even more people with the bigger infrastructure. And we have now begun to take volunteers to help with the distribution.



To learn how you can show your financial support to this important project and/or to volunteer, [click here](#).

Name that Haftarah Tune. We are now collecting tunes for the first five ***Haftarot for the Parshiot in Sefer Shemot: Shemot, Va'era*** (this week's parasha), ***Bo, Beshalach, and Yitro.***

The **Hartarah for Parashat Va'era** is taken from Ezekiel 28:25-29-21. The prophesy concerns the destruction of the Egyptian empire because of its moral corruptness and the ingathering of Israel.

Andrew Druck, as usual ahead of me (and most everyone else), suggests:

- [Desolation Row](#), sung by Bob Dylan
- [Tombstone Blues](#), sung by Bob Dylan
- [Vertigo](#), sung by U2

- [*Breakdown*](#), sung by Tom Petty
- [*Straight into Darkness*](#), another by Tom Petty

My suggestion for a tune:

- [*Grey Seal*](#), by Elton John, especially the lyrics:

*Your mission bells were wrought by ancient men
The roots were formed by twisted roots
Your roots were twisted then*

The Yitro Game Show. Last week, the judges offered two sizable points for insights into why the Talmud would have described Yitro's joining forces with the Israelites and possibly converting as being the product of one of three things: (i) Yitro heard of the war with Amalek; (ii) Yitro heard of the giving of the Torah; and (iii) Yitro heard of the splitting of the Red Sea. I offered my view that the three options show different aspects of the Almighty and of Judaism: the moral clarity of fighting pure evil, as in the war against Amalek; the framing of the good life, acquired by following the precepts and commandments of the Torah; and the perception of the power of the Almighty, as in the splitting of the Red Sea.

Claude Nadaf knows a fat allotment of points when he sees it. Claude also has both sight and insight and offers the following:

The story of Yitro appears between the battle against Amalek and the Revelation at Sinai.

Yitro and Amalek advised Paroh to enslave the Israelites.

After hearing that G-d would punish Amalek for attacking Israel, Yitro distanced himself from Amalek and came to Israel on friendly terms (Exodus Rabbah 27). Surprisingly, the Torah states that Yitro abruptly leaves and returns to Midyan at the end of the narrative.

This gives credence to the Talmud answer 1 as Yitro wavers between Israel and Amalek, Yitro is impressed by G-d (Talmud answer 3), and Israel's values (Talmud answer 2) but remains non-committal, returning to his pagan home.

Sure enough, the descendants of Yitro throughout Tanakh are friendly both to Israel and to Israel's greatest enemies.

Tractate Menachot. The global Daf Yomi learning cycle is this week finishing Tractate Zevachim (pages 119-120) and starting Tractate Menachot (pages 2-6). Remember that the *menachot* offerings are of grain/flour or meal (that is, flour typically with oil and frankincense) that usually were brought by those who could not afford animal or fowl sacrifices (see my [email of Nov. 20, 2025](#)). There also exist certain grain offerings that everyone brings or that are brought on behalf of everyone irrespective of economic status (for example, the Shewbread).

I'm already liking Tractate Menachot (not that that should matter). I'm liking it because it starts very much like Tractate Zevachim started: with the most important issue arising in the very first Mishna. My [email of Sept 26, 2025](#) included a heading titled:

Tractate Zevachim and Intention

There we discussed that the Talmud's placement of profound importance on intention in our observance of commandments stands in stark refutation to the modern aspersion that our commandments are mindless acts by unthinking people.

And here in Tractate Zevachim, the first Mishna does the same thing all over again.

כָּל הַמִּנְחֹת שֶׁנִּקְמְצוּ שֶׁלֹא לְשִׁמּוֹן – כְּשִׁירוֹת, אֶלֶא שֶׁלֹא עָלוּ לִבְעָלִים לְשֵׁם חֻבָּה, חוּץ מִמִּנְחַת חוּטָא וּמִנְחַת קִנְאוֹת.

In loose translation, the Mishna says that meal offerings from which a handful was removed not with the correct intention but for the sake of another meal offering are fit for sacrifice, **but** these offerings did not satisfy the obligation of the owner, who must therefore bring another offering. The Mishna continues in nearly the exact same way as Tractate Zevachim did in terms of focusing on the specific proper intent needed for expiation of sin through a sin offering made through meal or grain.

I know what you might be thinking. Duh!, you might say – if meal offerings are the equivalent of animal or bird, then they should have the same rules. And my answer is a bit fat maybe. Maybe the rule of how key intent is was going to be the same. But maybe not! You can think of reasons why the law might be the same or might be different. The Torah's determination to make them the same demonstrates that all people, to attain forgiveness, need to focus with specific intent on the sin and on its expiation. Put another way, the fact that our Talmud interprets Biblical rules to require the actual intent to come to grips with sin and expiate it speaks volumes about the wisdom of our religion. VOLUMES!

There are other interesting analogies between animal/fowl offerings and grain/meal offerings. We will go into them in the coming weeks – including for example that there are four distinct parts of a *menachot* offering – just like there are four distinct parts of an animal and fowl offering.

Siyyum HaTwain (#4). Here is the list of the Twain works that the Shearith Israel Twain Book Club is reading ([email of Dec. 25, 2025](#)). This week, I will summarize ***The Gilded Age*** (1873).

I loved it. It will not surprise you to know that Twain, master humorist, has his tongue stuck firmly in his cheek by this title. The novel spins tales within tales unmasking all manner of people and relationships. We learn what “mark twain” actually means. It’s a term used in navigating, which Twain picked up in his years as a (licensed) steamboat pilot. To mark is to show or say something about the safe depth of the water, usually in fathoms. Twain is two. So Mark Twain is announcing that the water is about two fathoms, or about 12 feet deep, and safe to pass.

The book follows several characters in kinds of chicanery that Twain uses to characterize the entire period after the Civil War. His light touch winds up being savagely funny about speculators, gladhanders, politicians, young people in love, just about everyone. He describes, pokes fun, shows the true nature of people and institutions, but never destroys.

You finish the book thinking that, whether or not you know about the actual reality of that time in America, you certainly know about the human condition and human foibles that existed then – and since. It’s a great book.

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