

January 8, 2026

Dear Shearith Israel family,

***Our Year of Allegiance. Touro and the Two-Fiftieth.*** We are waiting for a few more responses before setting weekend dates from May to November that might be convenient for some of us to go to Newport together for a weekend. On the *Touro Symposium on Religious Liberty*, Rabbi Soloveichik is hard at work soliciting an inter-faith group of other participants. Stay tuned for details.

***Faith for Food.*** We are in week #5 of our growing community effort to distribute food to our neighbors in Manhattan who are hungry or food insecure. This week, Masbia distributed food for approximately 70 families from our Food Annex. Our Tzadik-in-Residence, Alex Rapaport, who heads Masbia, tells us that that represents about 200 people who will have food essentials to last about a week. None of us really knows precisely how many Manhattanites are in this kind of need. But with our efforts, AND YOUR SUPPORT, we can make a dent in the problem. Please help us continue this essential but expensive project ([here](#)).

Also, our own Bonnie Barest helped out last week and this week. Soon we will be ready for volunteers; stay tuned! See the great photo, here:



***Name that Haftarah Tune.*** Last week, we began taking song suggestions for the first five Haftarot for the Parshiot in Sefer Shemot: **Shemot** (this week's parasha), **Va'era**, **Bo**, **Beshalach**, and **Yitro**.

There are two **Haftarot for Parashat Shemot**. The Ashkenazim read Isaiah 27:6-13, 28:1-13, 29:22-23. The Sephardim, including we at Shearith Israel, read Jeremiah 1:3. The Isaiah portion begins by speaking of "days to come" when

*Israel shall blossom and bud. And the face of the world shall be filled with fruitage.*

Jeremiah includes the beautiful verse that Rabbi Soloveichik often quotes:

*I remember for thee the affection of thy youth,  
The love of thine espousals;  
How thou wentest after Me in the wilderness,  
In a land that was not sown.*

Ritual Director Jay Harwitt, less in evidence on haftarot-tunes than parasha-tunes (which I understand) likes the repeated passage of *tzav latzav, kav lakav* in the Isaiah 28 and offers:

- [\*Mairzy Doats\*](#), by Milton Drake, Al Hoffman, and Jerry Livingston

My song suggestion for the Isaiah is:

- [\*Did I Fill the World With Love\*](#), here by Richard Harris

My song suggestions for the Jeremiah are:

- [\*Follow You Follow Me\*](#), by Genesis (truly one of the great refrains)
- [\*I Will Follow You\*](#), here by Rick Nelson

***Israel's Holiness in Modern Geopolitics.*** The question I asked last week about modern Israeli discourse was based on the Talmud's discussion of whether the holiness of Jerusalem or even Greater Israel survived the Temple's destruction. Claude Nadaf isn't really buying any analogy from then to now. Claude therefore answers "yes" to the question whether holiness is *irrelevant* to geopolitical discussions of today. Further, as to whether *both* sides of the relevance debate might be legitimate (אלולו דבְּרֵי אֱלֹהִים חַיִּים) Claude snipes, "both sides capture legitimate positions TO CONSIDER but not to accept both positions as simultaneously true unless each is in a parallel universe". Ok, we know where Claude stands.

***A Talmudic History Lesson.*** The global Daf Yomi learning cycle is this week studying Tractate Zevachim pages 112-118. Tractate Zevachim ends on page 120, so by next week we will be studying Tractate Menachot.

Page 112a of Tractate Zevachim begins Chapter 14, which, like the previous chapter, discusses when sacrificial offerings may be brought outside the Temple. The Mishna itself is long, more than one entire (long) page of text. First, we learn which animals are not subject to the location prohibition. But then the Mishna goes into the periods in history when that prohibition *didn't* apply. The Mishna is a rarity, I think, interesting in that it presents a historical perspective.

Beginning in the middle of page 112b, the Talmud summarizes six periods in Jewish history:

- From the beginning of the world to the time when the Tabernacle was erected in the desert during the Israelites' wanderings, private places of sacrifice (call *bamot*) were permitted. Interestingly, the Talmud records that during that period the service was performed by first-borns and not by priests.

- From the erection of the Tabernacle to when the Jews came to Gilad (during the settlement of the Land of Israel), private *bamot* were prohibited, and the sacrifices were performed by priests.
- From the time the Jews settled Gilad, private *bamot* were again permitted.
- From the time the Jews settled Shiloh (where they went after Gilad), private *bamot* were again prohibited.
- After Shiloh was abandoned, and the Jews centered their worship in *Nov* and *Giveon*, *bamot* once again became permitted.
- And from the time Jews settled Jerusalem and built the Temple, private *bamot* were again prohibited.

I've omitted a lot of fine, intricate, and interesting detail, but the outline is itself noteworthy. On pages 119a/b, the *gemarra* shares specific years for each of the periods (this is one of the primary places where we learn that the Jews were in Shiloh for 369 years ([see my email of 12/23/2021](#))). The *gemarra* also gives rationales for why private *bamot* were and were not permitted (for example, was there intrinsic holiness in a place, as was the place of sacrifice in close proximity to the Torah or Ark or other holy object).

My list begs the obvious question of what happened after the destruction of the Temple? Pages 119a/b leave no room for debate, however; private *bamot* are not permissible.

**The Yitro Game Show.** Especially since we are only a few weeks away from **Parashat Yitro**, I can't pass up mentioning the aggadata on pages 116a/b of Tractate Zevachim. It is really quite interesting. It relates to Yitro and begins with the question:

מָה שְׁמוּעָה שָׁמַע, וְכָא וְנִתְגַּיֵּר

What did [Yitro] hear that made him come and find Moses and the Israelites and, ultimately, to convert?

The Talmud offers three answers: (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.

What is the Talmud driving at? It is asking what kinds of things motivate someone to get up and move and maybe even convert. Is it the moral clarity of fighting pure evil, as in the war against Amalek? Is it the framing of the good life, acquired by following the precepts and commandments of the Torah? Is it the perception of the power of the Almighty, as in the splitting of the Red Sea?

The Judges are willing to part with a major two points for insights into what the Talmud is getting at by listing each of these three events as a reason Yitro might have joined forces with the Israelites. Think, and write in.

**Siyyum HaTwain (#14).** Last week, we kicked off our group's summary of book # 1 on our list (see [email of Dec. 25, 2025](#)). This week, Twain Club Reader Warren Stern expertly summarizes and reacts to ***The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson (1894) (#14)***. In fact, Warren wrote a good deal more than what I've excerpted; his treatment is really excellent, and if you want to see the full version, email me or Warren. But in summary, says Warren:

*It is a terrific book — compulsively readable, thematically complex, deeply ironic, seriously satirical, and profoundly unsettling. . . . [I]t is set in a Missouri town on the Mississippi River, and the action unfolds between 1830 and 1853. It adapts the narrative device of changelings — a child from one group switched with a child of another — to the setting of American slavery, and leads the reader to be repulsed by the cruelty and moral depravity of that way of life. . . .*

*On the surface, Twain's view of man and society could not be more removed from Hebraic conceptions. The story begins with a biblical trope: an enslaved woman giving up her son because she wishes to spare him the torment that comes with life as a slave. The outcome, however, is entirely different. . . .*

*The story does invoke a kind of moral order that we might ponder as we celebrate the 250th anniversary of our nation. Twain wrote the book in the 1890s, some three decades after Abraham Lincoln, explaining the horrors of the Civil War, reminded us that "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether." We might understand the ignoble and even horrible fates of the book's malefactors as illustrating the inevitability of punishment for our moral trespasses, but then we might despair because it seems to offer no exit. It is a dark tale but one worthy of the attention of our community.*

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