

February 5, 2026

Dear Shearith Israel family,

Our Year of Allegiance. Groundhog Day came and went on Monday. Punxsutawney Phil is reputed to have cast a shadow, so there will (on this masterful marketing myth) be six more weeks of winter. Here, we seem to be weathering the weather, if not happily, then effectively.

Monday was also Tu B'Shvat, which I have more to say about below. Rabbi Licht, a/k/a RavDoc, thinks it's a rare occurrence to have both Groundhog Day and Tu B'Shvat occur on the same day. I calculate that it occurs on average about once every 15-17 years, but I'd be happy to be proven wrong. Rabbi Soloveichik, when learning that Tu B'Shvat was on Groundhog Day, shrugged and said, well, I guess it will be Tu B'Shvat again tomorrow, too.

This Shabbat, the Rabbi will be giving his penultimate Shabbat morning lecture commemorating our Squintennial. Do come.

Judaism As Green. Speaking of Tu B'Shvat, the day is our religion's New Year for Trees. And speaking of Trees, I offer the following three observations:

- In our religion, Tu B'Shvat is not merely an important legal reckoning, one of our four "new years" occurring ever year. Trees matter to us. Our Torah commands that, even in wartime, even when invading other lands, we should not destroy fruit-bearing trees and should destroy other trees only as necessary to fortify any siege. In part, Devarim 20:19-21 includes the rhetorical question:

כִּי־תִצּוּר אֶל־עִיר יָמִים רַבִּים לְהִלָּחֶם עָלֶיהָ לְתַפְשָׁהּ לֹא־תִשְׁחִית אֶת־עֵצָהּ לְגִדּוֹחַ עָלֶיהָ גִּרְזֹן בִּי מִמֶּנּוּ תֹאכְל וְאַתָּה לֹא תִכְרֹת בָּי הָאֲדָם יַעַן הַשָּׁלָה לָבֹא מִפְּגִיד בְּמִצּוֹר:

When in your war against a city you have to besiege it a long time in order to capture it, you must not destroy its trees, wielding the ax against them. You may eat of them, but you must not cut them down.

Are trees of the field human to withdraw before you into the besieged city?

- For centuries, on Tu B'Shvat, Jews have been celebrating the (early) coming of Spring and the profound importance of trees and nature. See our own Rabbinic Intern Baruch-Lev Kelman's celebration this past Sunday:



- Though statistics vary, a large majority of the world's deforestation occurs because of agricultural expansion, and about 40% of that total appears to be due to cattle grazing and feeding. We are cutting down about 2 million hectares of forest every year. That's about 16 million trees lost every *day* (if this is wrong, please write in).

Our religion is clear that its initial directive for a non-meat diet was supplanted by express permission ritually to kill and to consume cattle. And this is not the email to look for any political statement about anything. So you aren't going to get a comment about environmental sensitivities or priorities. But does 16 million trees every day seem like a big number to you?

Tu B'Shvat Poems. Many thanks to Albert Rosenblatt for sending along two poems about trees by Professor Gloria Ascher, who wrote them in Ladino and translated them into English ([here](#)). Albert himself compiled some verses from Tanach about trees ([here](#)).

Holocaust Remembrance. Last week, I said that observing both January 27 (International Holocaust Remembrance Day) and Yom Ha'Shoa later in the Spring wasn't too much. Hayyim Obadyah supplements, beautifully:

International Holocaust Remembrance Day is international. We remember how genocide was inflicted on us and also on others. Roma & Sinti, gay men, people living with mental or physical disabilities. Hatred begets cruelty. Cruelty unchecked begets horror. It is an opportunity to demand that "Never Again" means Never Again for Anyone. We can never achieve Never Again as long as hatred of any kind, of anyone, is tolerated.

Yom Ha'Shoa is for us to mourn our own. It is a nahala (a 'yahrzeit'). It is for family.

Faith for Food. We are in week #9 of our community project to distribute food to our hungry or food insecure Manhattan neighbors. Alex Rapaport of Masbia reports that this week, again in the mighty-cold, we were able to distribute food for approximately 60 families. Here is a link to help financially ([here](#)).

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

And we are also opening the bidding on the final seven parshiot of Sefer Shemot: **Parshiot Mishpatim, Terumah, Tetzaveh, Ki-Tisa, Vayakel-Pekudai** (read together this year).

Let's first consider Claude Nadaf's comment, expanding on a comment of a few weeks ago and focused on Parashat Yitro itself. Says Claude:

Sure enough, the descendants of Yitro throughout Tanakh are friendly both to Israel and to Israel's greatest enemies. Sisera had fled to the tent of Heber the Kenite (descendant of Yitro) and Yael because the Canaanites had a treaty with the Kenites. However, Yael allied herself with Israel rather than with her husband's people and killed Sisera.

The **Haftarah for Parashat Yitro** isn't about Yitro the man but about the fundamental themes of the Parasha itself (revelation, awe, reward/punishment). The Haftarah is taken from Isaiah 6-7:6 and 9:5, 6. Sephardim usually stop at the end of Chapter 6. The haftarah contains the powerful phrase so embedded in our liturgy:

קְדוּשׁ / קְדוּשׁ קְדוּשׁ ה' עֲבָאוֹת מְלֵא כָּל-הָאָרֶץ כְּבוֹדוֹ:

*And one would call to the other,
"Holy, holy, holy! GOD of Hosts—
Whose presence fills all the earth!"*

It goes on to prophesize about the destruction that will befall the Jewish people, though the haftarah's continuation by the Sephardim turns optimistic.

Andrew Druck suggests the following for this Haftarah:

- [*Magical Mystery Tour*](#), sung by The Beatles
- [*Into the Mystic*](#), sung by Van Morrison
- [*Stairway to Heaven*](#), sung by Led Zeppelin

My suggestions for this haftarah include an homage to Leonard Cohen, a strange thing for me, indeed, especially since Andrew Druck himself loves Cohen yet didn't suggest any of his (he didn't because, he said, I put Cohen in *herem*, and he is right). Anyway, I suggest these two spooky tunes:

- [*You Want it Darker*](#), here by Leonard Cohen
- [*By the Rivers Dark*](#), also by Cohen

Meal, Mixtures, Me'akev, Menachot. This week, the global Daf Yomi learning cycle is studying pages 21-27 of Tractate Menachot. We are holding in Chapter 3, which devotes several pages to hardline topics concerning meal offerings and then, as we approach the mid-point in the Chapter, moves to other "Shas Topics" (meaning fundamental Talmudic topics that relate to many other topics as well).

Here are some examples. On page 25a there is a Mishna that discusses the ritual and purification potential of the *tzitz* – the golden headband worn by the High Priest. The Mishna on page 26a discusses what happens if some of the offering becomes lost. And by page 27a we embark on what seems like a very different set of legal principles: In the case of the various commandments that contain multiple parts, which of the parts are *me'akev* or essential and which are not. So in *kometz* itself, the smaller part is essential to the larger part; in the flour/oil combination of the meal offering, the two parts are each essential to the other; and in the admixture of *kometz* and *levonah* (the frankincense), again each is essential to the other.

One can intuit how these topics were placed in successive pages of the Talmud. The opening topic of admixtures logically flows into a discussion of which parts of the admixtures matter and which do not. The discussion begins with what is essential for a sacrifice and, then, in later pages, the focus shifts to non-sacrificial "essentiality". It is all part of the brilliance of the principal redactor of the Talmud, R' Yehudah HaNasi.

Ministering Our Future. In discussing last week the Robinson book *The Ministry for the Future*, along with the fundamental paradigm shift being accomplished by the haredi/yeshivish community here in America, I seem to have left some with the need to remind me that that community is not perfect and that there are other valid approaches to committed Judaism. I acknowledge both observations. I therefore agree with much of the positive program shared by Ritual Director Jay Harwitt, with thanks for his thoughtful response.

Where I personally think we would do better as a unified J-Continuum group of committed Jews is to avoid too much focus on perceived shortcomings of the *other* subgroup rather than on the constructive and positive things about our own subgroup. One way I think about this is that we should have as understanding and respectful a view of the other as the very best, not the very worst, of those representing the other group have of us.

Siyyum HaTwain (#3). Here is the list of the Twain works that the Shearith Israel Twain Book Club is reading ([see email of Dec. 25, 2025](#)). This week, let's hear from Aura Bijou, who read and reacts to Twain's *Roughing It* (1872, and #3 on our list of published works):

A composite of stories of his travels across the United States during the Gold Rush Years, Twain gives vivid description of the dress, daily habits, struggles and preoccupations of early American lives. You can feel yourself in the room with them, smell the odors (which he describes in painful detail for someone such as I who has a very keen sense of smell) and often the exhaustion and frustration of those who risked all to seek their fortunes out West. It gives you an appreciation for what it took for those adventurers, and at the same time it is so humorous that you almost forget the gist of it for laughing so hard!...

Description of some of San Francisco's early inhabitants were at least equally hilarious, and I will probably be rereading them with some regularity when I have a challenging week. In one particular piece he describes a local who was in the habit of borrowing other people's possessions, not the least of which was a fake eyeball. I could not begin to do it justice, and suffice it to say I couldn't breathe from laughing so hard.

All told, it was a breath of (sometimes not so) fresh air and mirth in what I expected to be just an interesting travel log!

Aura, brilliant, thank you. I loved *Roughing It*, having read it last year. I found Twain's humanity inspired. It's a must-read.

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