

September 24, 2026

Dear Shearith Israel family,

Our Year of Community. What a splendid name for our new year! Especially when our Word of the Year is **together**. We are squeezing this email in between Kippur and Succot because we have lots to talk about in addition to the fact that Kippur was beautiful for us to be **together** as a **community**. Our clergy was marvelous, each and all of Rabbi Soloveichik, Rabbi Rohde, and Reverend Edinger (with a yeoman assist from Avery Neumark). As a result, our entire day was a singular communal uplift.

Now, we are looking forward to two more solid weekends of holiday. In case you are a lover of losing basically every weekend in September/October, we will be observing the High Holidays and Succot/Shemini Hag/Simchat Torah on the same days of the week next year, too – with the whole shebang shifted into October (this Jewish year is a leap year).

Biblical Verses Topping the Pop Charts. Claude Nadaf got nervous. He *knew* we had him when he said that the Byrds [Turn Turn Turn](#) had the “*unique* distinction of being a thousands-of-years-old biblical text that topped the modern pop charts.” So Claude did what Claude does. Having said *Turn Turn Turn* was “unique,” he *himself* submitted three more songs, showing that it was not unique after all. What Claude was trying to do is scoop the competition and with it scoop up two points promised by the Judges. Claude’s additional suggestions, undermining his own argument of “uniqueness,” included:

- [Rivers of Babylon](#), sung by Boney M. (1978). Annotates Claude: “This massive Euro-disco hit adapts its lyrics almost entirely from Psalm 137:1–4 (*By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion*). The song's chorus also loops lines from Psalm 19:14 (*Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight*)”
- [Gangsta's Paradise](#), sung by Coolio (1995): Says DJ Claude: “This chart-topping 90s hip-hop anthem relies heavily on Psalm 23:4. It opens directly with a modified version of the scripture: *As I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I take a look at my life and realize there's nothing left*”
- [40](#), sung by U2 (1983): Again, Professor Claude: “The final track on U2's breakthrough album *War* is a direct, modernized musical arrangement of Psalm 40. Lead singer Bono sings the scripture almost verbatim: *I waited patiently for the Lord / He inclined and heard my cry/He brought me up out of the pit*”

I didn’t take Claude’s “topping” reference as requiring the number 1 spot, though the Byrds’ version of the great Pete Seeger song did achieve that elevated status. And I think at least another of Claude’s suggestions was # 1 for at least a week. But he didn’t mention Paul Simon’s recent *Seven Psalms*, maybe because, at 33 minutes, it never made it into the Top 100.

Verily, though, Claude gamed the system, by causing the challenge and then submitting suggestions. The Judges, however, smilingly, give him full marks. FWIW, the internet reports that Spotify has played *Turn Turn Turn* 179 million times, blowing away every other candidate by multiples.

Claude, good call to mention Ecclesiastes, unquestionably my favorite Megillah that we *don't* read at Shearith Israel. It's too bad; it's a marvelous book.

That's not to say there aren't runners-up to Claude's suggestions, either. I thought of two:

- [*By the Waters of Babylon*](#), sung by Don McLean (by the waters of Babylon, we laid down and wept for thee Zion) (and predates the Boney M song, I think by several years); and
- [*The Wedding Song \(There is Love\)*](#), sung by Peter, Paul and Mary (*A man shall leave his mother and a woman leave her home/And they shall travel on to where the two shall be as one* – reminiscent of the end of Chapter 2 of Bereshit)

This is fun. Anyone else have suggestions for Scripture in R&R/Pop?

Name that Haftarah Tune. We are now collecting song suggestions to finish our year, for the haftarot of the **Succot**, **Shemini Hag**, and **V'zot HaBracha**.

The haftarah for the first day of Succot is taken from the Prophet Zechariah Chapter 14. Apocalypse is followed by the restoration of Jerusalem and ultimately good relations with the entire world. The haftarah embodies the universal nature of Succot, a holiday for all the world or at least representing how Israel is pining for peace with the entire world.

Andrew Druck, MSS, focuses on the war theme in his first two suggestions:

- [*War*](#), as sung by Bruce Springsteen
- [*Masters of War*](#), as sung by Bob Dylan
- [*One of these Days*](#), as sung by Neil Young

My suggestion riffs off of the universal feeling engendered by about the best known but least likely universal song discussed in the new book *Days of Miracle and Wonder: Paul Simon and the Trials and Triumphs of Graceland*, by Ashley Kahn, which I just finished and liked:

- [*You Can Call Me Al*](#), here by Paul Simon [I know you aren't buying – so read the book and see – you can borrow our copy]

Tractate Bechorot. Thanksgiving in September. Last Shabbat, we finished Tractate Chulin. This week, the global Daf Yomi learning cycle has begun the fourth tractate in Seder Kodshim, Tractate Bechorot,

or relating to first-borns (this week pages 2-8). Superficially, the Tractate starts with a most unlikely of discussions: purchasing the fetus of a donkey from a non-Jew. Chapter 1 of the Tractate is called

הלוקח עובר חמור

translated as **he who buys a donkey fetus**

There are subsequent Mishnaot in Chapter 1 that feel like they are closer to the logical beginning of the analysis. But that rarely gets in the way when R' Yehuda HaNasi wants the order to be different. For this new beginning, we need to ask why start with donkeys? I have an explanation.

Tractate Bechorot lays out laws affecting first-borns in what can be thought of as three major categories: kosher livestock; nonkosher animals; and humans. First-born kosher livestock (essentially the species fit for sacrifice) need to be given to the Priesthood or redeemed with a sheep or goat going to the Priesthood – if not, the animal is supposed to be killed. Non-kosher animals don't need to be redeemed except for donkeys, and donkeys follow many of the same rules as those for kosher livestock.

The Talmud itself asks why donkeys are singled out among non-kosher beasts. The Talmud explains that donkeys lent a major helping hand when the Israelites left Egypt. They played the role of pack mule, which, well, is what they are. In recognition of that aid, Jews will forever be redeeming (or finding an exception to redeeming) donkeys that otherwise fit the definitions laid out in the Tractate (male, being naturally born, no shared ownership, etc.).

And that is what brings us to why start the Tractate with them? I think it's because our holiday of communal thanksgiving, Succot, starts this week, too. The obligation to be happy (as in Succot being the festival of our happiness) is tricky, isn't it? How do you instruct that? The best way to accomplish happiness is to think of others, do something for others, be thankful to others, to see that we, and they, are part of a greater community. A people who, 3,000 years after the Exodus, still thinks of the beneficence of the donkey surely can be counted on to count their personal and communal blessings on Succot. And that's why the Tractate started with donkeys. You mean it's not?

Shearith Israel Book Club II: *Between the Wars: Jewish Characters in 1920s and 1930s American Literature*. *The Great Gatsby*, by F. Scott Fitzgerald, is #4 on our list. Dr. Michael Schulder shares this excellent, eloquent (if long) reaction to the book:

This famous book is like a bottle of vintage wine, whose value increased over time. TGG was not a great success upon publication in 1925, and only its distribution to American soldiers during World War II led to its being widely read and then culturally reassessed. The rest is literary history, as TGG became canonized as part of the high school English curriculum for much of the country.

This book is like a bottle of highly prized wine in another way. You're supposed to like it, think it's great, and any failure of yours to do so is a sign of your own lack of sophistication. Well, I don't like dry wines, and I think TGG is – ok. This was a reread for me, and I was again struck by the density of language that makes unwanted and unnecessary work for the reader. There are parts of the book that work brilliantly,

especially the portrayal of the horrid (and endless) parties that Jay Gatsby throws on his estate. The vapidness of 1920s popular culture overall is conveyed (although in retrospect it was probably Torah miSinai compared to 2020s culture). But Fitzgerald could have transmitted that, and the themes of striving for things that remain always out of reach, in a much more direct and readable manner.

As for the Jewish angle? The main such character is Meyer Wolfsheim, whom we are given to understand is some kind of mobster of questionable character and repellent appearance (his nose hairs are prominent and he wears cufflinks made of human molars, for instance). He also has an accent that brands him as “other”, and which doesn’t sound like any Jewish accent I’ve heard (several times he says “gonnegtion”, for “connection” – huh?). As his character supposedly was modeled on Arnold Rothstein, who fixed the 1919 World Series but was born in NYC, we can assume that this portrayal reflects some prejudice on the author’s part. Fitzgerald lived in Great Neck when he wrote TGG but surprise – it wasn’t the Great Neck of today. To the author’s “credit”, Gatsby’s party list includes the Cohens and the Schwartzes, mentioned only in passing and without any icky nasal hair. Safe to assume that Fitzgerald carried the “genteel antisemitism” of his background and his day.

TGG can be read in a day. If you never have, you might as well read it and decide for yourself if all the fuss is worth it.

In this, our **Year of Community**, we **together** pray that the Almighty
עֲנֵנוּ בְּיוֹם קְרָאֵנוּ, or **Answers us on the day we call.**

Louis Solomon, Parnas