

October 1, 2026

Dear Shearith Israel family,

Our Year of Community. Moadim L'simcha to all. Succot is a beautiful holiday anywhere, and at Shearith Israel *and* our Touro Synagogue especially. Both synagogues had reasonably nice attendance on yom tov considering the monsoon-like weather in New York and Newport. Rabbi Soloveichik's talk in New York on the second day – including the reference to our Beit Hamikdash (or Temple in Jerusalem) as *the House that Ruth built* – is one for the ages. The Rabbi reports that his and his family's visit to Touro Synagogue on chol hamoed was just terrific. There were about 75 people to make afternoon minyan at Touro earlier this week.



The constant rain over yom tov dampened only our clothes. Our three succot are each beautiful (see the photos of the succah and davening at Touro Synagogue, and of Rabbi Soloveichik at the Touro Cemetery). There are few rituals more **community**, more **together**, than Four (disparate) Species being taken, held as one, waved as one, while doing a unifying circuit around the Sanctuary. Our Rabbinic Intern Baruch-Lev Kelman headed up to the women's section during services – part of an ancient tradition of ours to make sure that everyone can hold, shake, and bless the lulab/etrog. He gave the set to Bonnie Barest. Bonnie then shared it with Faith Fogelman, who thanked her with the comment: "From him to you, from you to me- now that is community!" Yes indeed it is.

The closing of the holiday this weekend (yes, another weekend) will bring new joys. Nobody does an ice cream party like we do. Do join us. And then after our festivities, consider trekking up to W. 88th for UWS community-wide hakafot that we are co-sponsoring (see our weekly emails for details). Can't get enough community.

Swansong for Haftarah Tunes. We arrive at our final haftarot in our year-long cycle. This Shabbat, Shemini Atzeret, we will read from 1 Kings 8:54-66; and Sunday, Simchat Torah, the haftarah is taken from Joshua 1:1-18.

Andrew Druck, our indefatigable Master Song Suggester, sees in the haftarah for Shemini Atzeret King Solomon finishing the dedication of the Temple in Jerusalem and a blessing for the People of Israel. Andrew therefore suggests:

- [*My Sweet Lord*](#), as sung by George Harrison [truly a timeless song]
- [*You Really Got a Hold on Me*](#), as sung by the Beatles (!)
- [*Words of Love*](#), as sung by the Beatles [Andrew likes the Fab Four better than Mama Kass]
- [*Heart of Gold*](#), as sung by Neil Young
- [*I Can't Stop Loving You*](#), as sung by Ray Charles

For **Haftarah Simchat Torah**, Andrew summarizes: “Joshua assumes leadership after Moshe dies, and the Almighty tells Israel to prepare to leave the desert and cross the Jordan”. Andrew therefore suggests:

- [*A Day in the Life*](#), as sung by the Beatles
- [*New Kid in Town*](#), as sung by the Eagles
- [*I Believe in You*](#), as sung by Neil Young
- [*Slip Slidin' Away*](#), as sung by Paul Simon [short listed for my epitaph]

Andrew ends his final suggestions for these final haftarot with *Chazak, Chazak, ViNischazek*. We forgive him the Ashkenazi farewell. His sentiment is spot on. He, and we, deserve a *chazak u'baruch* for sticking with the Haftarot challenge and finishing it.

And For Our Next Song: We are getting ready to *start all over again* with the Torah parshiot, and this year we will be suggesting tunes for lesser-known or not as famous Biblical characters in the parshiot. The genius has begun; I have already received some excellent suggestions from some of our best song suggesters. So read Parashat Bereshit, and send in some great tunes with a brief explanation. The fun starts here, next week!

Disraeli, Succot, and the Jews' “Indomitable Spirit.” Last week I observed how fitting it was to be learning about donkeys (in Tractate Bechorot) on Succot. I said that a people who, 3,000 years after the Exodus, is still thankful for the beneficence of the donkey surely can be counted on to count their personal and communal blessings on Succot.

Claude Nadaf vastly improves on my thought by reminding us that Disraeli's famous observation about our People's “indomitable spirit” concerned how Jews, in Claude's summary, “continued to faithfully celebrate Succot even while exiled in cold, dreary European cities far away from their ancestral lands”. Much the same could be said for finding joy in the holiday even where a rare Nor'easter bashed New York City with close to three solid days of rain.

Said Disraeli:

The vineyards of Israel have ceased to exist, but the eternal law enjoins the children of Israel still to celebrate the vintage. A race that persist in celebrating their vintage, although they have no fruits to gather, will regain their vineyards. What sublime inexorability in the law! But what indomitable spirit in the people!

Tractate Bechorot and Juggling into Bethlehem. The global Daf Yomi learning cycle is this week studying pages 9-15 of Tractate Bechorot. Until page 13a we remain in Chapter 1, after which we leave the discussion of donkey redemption and focus next on redemption of kosher livestock. Chapter 2 also starts with the words of buying a fetus, but whereas Chapter 1 begins with the fetus of a donkey, Chapter 2 is about fetuses of cows.

But none of that engages like the unique and extraordinary discussion on pages 8b and 9a, which is where I would like to spend a minute. In the famous *The Juggler and the King*, Rabbi Aaron Feldman explicates the Vilna Gaon's discussion of the stories laid out on these very pages (8b and 9a of Tractate Bechorot). Here, twelve questions are asked of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananiah by the "Elders of Athens" (though much of the discussion seems to relate to the elders of Rome). There seems to be much esoterica and allegory in the questions and answers, or so these great Rabbis and exegetes explain. Without the esoteric embellishments, it has been suggested, the questions and answers would seem silly or border on the nonsensical.

I'm fine believing that there is more than meets the eye in these 12 diverting questions and answers. But there is something just plain fun about them too. It's at that level that I share a couple of favorites with you.

Let's consider first this one:

מִילְחָא כִּי סָרִיא, בְּמַאי מַלְחִי לֵה? אָמַר לֵהּ: בְּסִילְתָא דְכוּדְנִיתָא. וּמִי אֵיכָא סִילְתָא לְכוּדְנִיתָא
וּמִילְחָא מִי סָרִי

[The sages of Athens then asked another question:] When salt is spoiling, with what does one salt it to preserve it? Rabbi Yehoshua said to them: With the placenta of a mule. They said to him: But is there a placenta of a mule? Rabbi Yehoshua said to them: And does salt spoil?

It's a great vignette, no? I'm sure there is a lot more going on, but at the level of a good verbal spar, what do you think? The Sage is asked a question about salt spoiling. Is he being fooled? Of course salt doesn't spoil. But instead of getting agitated or huffy or angry or snarky, the Sage simply fights silly with silly. Is that enough of a lesson for the Talmud to record it? Respectfully, to me it seems like a really important lesson to teach and learn, even without anything deeper going on.

Let's look at a second one:

זָקָפָה לְאַצְבָּעֶתֶיהָ, אָמַר לֵהּ: הֲכָא. אָמְרוּ לֶיהָ: וּמִי יִימַר? אֵייתוּ אֲשָׁלִי וּמִשְׁחוּ:

[The Sages of Athens] said to [the Sage]: Where is the center of the world? Rabbi Yehoshua raised his finger and said to them: Here. They said to him: And who says that you are correct? He said to them: Bring ropes and measure.

What's going on here? Is R' Yehoshua anticipating a Joan Didion quote that has recently become popular with Beth and Tess:

Every day is all there is.

Is the Rabbi just saying that the center of the universe is where we find ourselves, not in an arrogant way but to say seize the moment, make the best of what we have? Or, as I hope was true, was R' Yehoshua explaining that the earth was round, so every part of it was at a center, and the best way to prove that is to measure from any point along the end of the globe. Or was he just doing what he did with the salt question, poking fun at those poking fun at him to calm nerves and have a teaching moment? All three candidates seem worthy of being taught and learned. They certainly make for fun learning in the middle of the protracted discussion of first-born redemption of livestock.

Shearith Israel Book Club II: *Between the Wars: Jewish Characters in 1920s and 1930s American Literature*. Francine Alfandary read and here expertly reports on *Arrowsmith*, by Sinclair Lewis (1925) (#6 on our list):

Arrowsmith is a social commentary about the medical profession. As a student, Martin Arrowsmith is awed by the shambling, brilliant, German Jewish professor of bacteriology, Dr. Max Gottlieb. Throughout the novel, Gottlieb is Arrowsmith's moral compass. Lewis depicts Gottlieb as a fully-realized character, his integrity and flaws both on equal display. He is not a practicing Jew. His wife is the "wordless daughter of a Gentile merchant." But his devotion to pure science is unwavering.

Gottlieb leaves the Midwestern medical school to join the McGurk Institute, a fictionalized version of the Rockefeller Center. Gottlieb arranges for Arrowsmith to join him at the McGurk Institute. When Gottlieb is promoted to head of the McGurk Institute, the place falls apart. Gottlieb shines in the lab, not at fundraising dinners.

Two other Jewish characters make brief appearances in Arrowsmith. When Martin Arrowsmith is working as a public health official, one of his few supporters is the local reform Rabbi. At the McGurk Institute, a fellow researcher is a "Russian Jewish high church Episcopalian."

In a novel filled with drunken doctors, greedy doctors, social-climbing doctors, and incompetent doctors, only one professional is treated with respect: Dr. Max Gottlieb, the German-Jewish scientist.

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

Louis Solomon, Parnas