October 29, 2026

Dear Shearith Israel family,

Our Year of Community, Together. Rabbi Soloveichik's *Friday Night Lights* kicked off this season in New York last Friday night. Our Friday night service is beautiful. Honorary Parnas Peter Neustadter calls it New York's best kept secret. With Rabbi Soloveichik's FNL added to the end, it's about the most uplifting hour-and-a-quarter you will experience. The sense of community is strong. You should really come and enjoy it.

Shabbat Lunch (Oct. 31) With Professor Shaina Trapedo. For Book Club II members and any others who have signed up, Professor Trapedo, of Yeshiva University's Stern College, will be joining us for lunch this Shabbat, October 31. We will report on the proceedings, but if you didn't sign up, well, you should have; I think it's going to be great.

***Parashat Songs for the Unsung*.** This Shabbat we will be reading **Parasha Vayera.** We will read about Abraham and the angels, Abraham and Hagar/Ishmael, Isaac, Sodom, and the ultimate test of faith in the Binding of Isaac, the *Akeida*. Like last week's parasha, it is hard to find less-than-central characters.

Faith Fogelman suggests riffing off two parts of the parasha. First, "Abraham welcomes three guests at the beginning of the parsha" (the angels, which also caught my eye). For this Faith suggests:

- *Be Our Guest*, from *Beauty and the Beast*

Second, "Abraham needs to always be aware that G-d is watching; we all do." Faith therefore suggests:

- *From a Distance*, "made famous by Bette Midler, 1990," with the lyrics:

G-d is watching us, from a distance

Andrew Druck is traveling with his wife, Beverly. He is sufficiently concerned with the poor quality of my own tune suggestions last week that from Japan he sent in the following for what Andrew rightly calls this "enormously rich Parasha":

- *Let Me In*, as sung by the Sensations

- *Who's that Knocking*, as sung by the Genies
- *Gimmee Shelter*, as sung by the Rolling Stones
- *We Gotta Get out of this Place*, as sung by the Animals
- *Fire and Rain*, as sung by James Taylor
- *Into the Fire*, as sung by Bruce Springsteen

On the knocking theme, I remember the great

- *Who's that Knockin'*, here by Pousette-Dart Band, with the great chorus:

Who's that knockin' on my front door?
Loneliness, you can't come in anymore

Though a little on the corny side, Ritual Director and Songster Aficionado Jay Harwitt identifies *Buz*, or *Bootz*, whom the Torah lists as the second son of Abraham's brother Nahor. For *Bootz*, Jay offers:

- *These Boots Were Made for Walking*, here by Nancy Sinatra
- *Bourbon Street Parade*, here by the Preservation Hall Jazz Band, and its reference(s) to booze (argh!)

Like Faith, I too was thinking more along the lines of the angels:

- *Blue Angel*, here by Roy Orbison

Physiognomy or Practicalities in Tractate Bechorot. The global Daf Yomi learning cycle is this week studying pages 37-43 of Tractate Bechorot. These pages complete Chapter 6 and, on page 43a, begin Chapter 7.

The end of Chapter 6 identifies dozens of different types of blemishes that will/won't disqualify a first-born or *bechor* (remember that, in the case of disqualification, the animal in many instances can still be sold – so in that respect it is not such a bad thing to have a blemish, of course depending on the blemish).

Interestingly, Chapter 7 begins by declaring that all the blemishes that Chapter 6 taught would disqualify a *bechor* also would disqualify a human being from performing priestly service in the Temple. The first Mishna of the Chapter adds a few more disqualifying traits applicable to human beings, such as a head that is pointed, turnip shaped,

hammer-like, dented, or protruding. Humpbacks and the totally bald are also disqualified.

Our question this week is why. The Torah contains the main principles (Vayikra 21:18-23):

כִּי כָל־אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר־בּוֹ מוּם לֹא יִקְרָב אִישׁ עִוֵּר אוֹ פִסֵּחַ אוֹ חָרֵם אוֹ שָׂרוּעַ׃

No one at all who has a defect shall be qualified: no man who is blind, or lame, or has a limb too short or too long;

אוֹ אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר־יִהְיֶה בּוֹ שֶׁבֶר רָגֶל אוֹ שֶׁבֶר יָד׃

no man who has a broken leg or a broken arm;

אוֹ־גִבֵּן אוֹ־דַק אוֹ תְּבַלֻּל בְּעֵינוֹ אוֹ גָרָב אוֹ יַלֶּפֶת אוֹ מְרוֹחַ אָשֶׁךְ׃

or who is a hunchback, or a dwarf, or who has a growth in his eye, or who has a boil-scar, or scurvy, or crushed testes.

כָּל־אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר־בּוֹ מוּם מִזֶּרַע אַהֲרֹן הַכֹּהֵן לֹא יִגַּשׁ לְהַקְרִיב אֶת־אִשֵּׁי יְהוָה מוּם בּוֹ אֶת לֶחֶם אֱלֹהָיו לֹא יִגַּשׁ לְהַקְרִיב׃

No man among the offspring of Aaron the priest who has a defect shall be qualified to offer G-d's offering by fire; having a defect, he shall not be qualified to offer the food of his G-d.

לֶחֶם אֱלֹהָיו מִקָּדְשֵׁי הַקֳּדָשִׁים וּמִן־הַקֳּדָשִׁים יֹאכֵל׃

He may eat of the food of his G-d, of the most holy as well as of the holy;

אַךְ אֶל־הַפָּרֹכֶת לֹא יָבֹא וְאֶל־הַמִּזְבֵּחַ לֹא יִגַּשׁ כִּי־מוּם בּוֹ וְלֹא יְחַלֵּל אֶת־מִקְדָּשַׁי כִּי אֲנִי יְהוָה מְקַדְּשָׁם׃

but he shall not enter behind the curtain or come near the altar, for he has a defect. He shall not profane these places sacred to Me, for I G-D have sanctified them.

Two things seem to stand out: First, at least some/many/most/all(?) of these defects would appear to interfere with the performance of the Priest's duties, which we have

noted elsewhere are complex and physically demanding if not arduous. So maybe the Torah is trying to protect the Priest as much as the service.

Second, even a blemished Priest retains the benefits of being a Kohen ("he may eat of the food"). This seems significant. You could see a set of rules that would cast out the nonconforming. Not only does the Torah not do that; there are priestly roles (like having to do the sacrificial wood) that even a blemished priest can perform.

The gemarra does not really explain the reasons underlying disqualification. In a few cases, we learn that the same disqualifying characteristics/attributes apply to being on the Sanhedrin or High Court. Since the Priest is not defrocked and remains entitled to the benefits of priesthood, can we persuasively embrace a functional or utilitarian explanation? The fundamental question is whether we are a religion where, as Pirkei Avot (4:20) admonishes, we look not to the bottle but to the wine inside?

So which is it? Physiognomy? Practicalities? Does anyone have a reaction, positive or negative, or by way of explanation?

Shearith Israel Book Club II: *Between the Wars: Jewish Characters in 1920s and 1930s American Literature.* Warren Stern read and here wonderfully (if lengthily) reports on *A Peculiar Treasure*, by Edna Ferber (#20 on our Club II list of 22):

Edna Ferber. a prominent Jewish American author, wrote an autobiography in 1938, which she called A Peculiar Treasure. She took the phrase from Exodus 19:5, where God promises that the Jewish people "shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people" if they "obey" His "voice" and "keep" His "covenant." Ferber adopted the text for the book's epigraph and then again for the final words of the book.

Title aside, the book has little to say about Judaism. Ferber makes no claim to a specific religious conviction or a strong commitment to Jewish peoplehood; in fact, she disclaimed being a Zionist or knowing much about it. Yet, she cared deeply about the plight of European Jewry and the future of the Jewish people. In dedicating the book to her nieces (Ferber never married and had no children), she expressed "the hope that my reason for writing this book may soon seem an anachronism." What was that "reason"? She was determined to oppose growing Nazi power and antisemitism, not only in Germany but elsewhere, including the United States and Palestine.

The book is not a political tract. Ferber devotes most of it to recounting in vivid prose her growing up in a Jewish but not religious middle-class household in the Midwest; her early career as a journalist; her remarkable success as a novelist and playwright whose work concentrated on American themes and ideals; and her many friendships with the leading theatrical personalities of the day. She also recounts childhood encounters with antisemitic bigotry, which "probably gave me a ghastly inferiority" but "out of that inferiority doubtless was born . . . a fierce resolution" to "become rich and famous."

"Rich and famous" was precisely what Ferber became. She wrote A Peculiar Treasure when she was in her early 50s. By that time she had long been one of America's most popular writers, whose fans included President Theodore Roosevelt. She was a disciplined writer but enjoyed the trappings of wealth and fame — beautiful homes, elegant clothes, luxurious travel, and entree into elite social circles. Her protagonists exemplified the American ideal of overcoming social and economic barriers to achieve great success. These characters came from various backgrounds and only one was Jewish, Fanny Brandeis, the heroine of Ferber's semi-autobiographical 1917 novel, Fanny Herself.

At least two aspects of A Peculiar Treasure might be of interest to our Book Club. First, given our "Jewish Characters" theme, one might consider Ferber as if she were such a character. Ferber writes novelistically: her prose is colorful; personalities are vivid; and the narrative arc takes the protagonist from adversity to triumph. It is a tale of a small and unprepossessing person from modest circumstances who by dint of hard work and innate talent rises to the pinnacle of success and then devotes herself to doing what she can to save the world from looming disaster. In other words, a theme of a Jew "making it" in America.

More importantly, it is impossible to read Ferber's account of Nazi power in the 1930s without thinking of what is happening to Jews today. To quote Ferber, "As though under some evil spell the countries of the world have stood by a while this latest savagery has gone on." Her book, it is sad to say, does not seem an "anachronism" after all.

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

Louis Solomon, Parnas