November 5, 2026

Dear Shearith Israel family,

Our Year of Community, Together. This past Shabbat, Rabbi Soloveichik gave a special lecture after morning services. It was excellent. Book Club II members and friends also hosted Prof. Shaina Trapedo at a luncheon that was also excellent. An extra treat this Shabbat was that Rabbi Rohde's *d'var torah* on the back of the weekly handout was actually in a readable font – and it too was excellent. A trifecta! Excellence cubed!

Because One Ought. The materials handed out on Monday night for the Japan Society/Shearith Israel program are unclear about the genesis of this three-word slogan. I like it, though it reminds me of a Kant primer. The evening, however, was terrific, and our Synagogue was packed. Through Rabbi Soloveichik's magic touch, music, dialogue, and presentations were all pressed into the service of learning more about two Japanese officials during WWII (Chiune Sugihara and Setsuzo Kotsugi) who saved literally thousands of Jews, first by getting them visas from Lithuania to Japan and then by extending stays in Japan until other geographies became more safely available. It was Japan's ambassador to the US, Satoshi Katahira, who made the point that these two mid-level Japanese officials did outsized good for the people they saved, not out of any sense of personal gain but because of a combination of feelings of duty and feelings of empathy.

And don't forget Z! We do everything we can to avoid scheduling competing Synagogue events. Sometimes we can't avoid it. While the Japan event was occurring at the Synagogue, Reverend Edinger was holding forth downtown, at Fraunces Tavern, on American Jewry during the American Revolution.

Here is a photo from Fraunces Tavern on Monday night:



Jewish Schools in America. Rabbi Soloveichik tells an interesting story about how a member of another cloth ridiculed Touro Synagogue for being built with a "school" building add-on, which took away from the symmetrical aesthetics of the Synagogue edifice. The lesson about Jews and schools is deep, abiding, and unmistakable.

We don't have to go to Newport, however, for an inspiring story of Jews and schools. Our daughter-in-law, Leah Solomon, sends in this article**,** discussing America's first Jewish school, established a generation and a half earlier than Newport. Here is the relevant excerpt:

The first official school under Jewish auspices [in America] was established at Shearith Israel (the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue) in 1731 in New York City. Focusing on Hebrew studies, the school (although attached to the synagogue) operated as a separate entity with its own fees. In 1755, Shearith Israel expanded to include secular subjects, such as English composition. After closing during the Revolutionary War, the school reopened and functioned as a day school until 1821, receiving state funds as part of New York's newly created common school system that enabled poor Jewish children to receive an education.

Parasha Songs for the Unsung. The parasha this week is **Chayei Sarah**. Ritual Director Jay Harwitt reminds us that Abraham and Ketura bore Jokshan (among five other sons), and Jokshan has a son, Sheba. Hence Jay's suggestion, the marvelous:

- *Entrance of the Queen of Sheba*, by Handel

Andrew Druck, back from his trip and back in control, also thinks about Ketura and suggests:

- *Love the one You're With*, as sung by Stephen Stills
- *Back in my Arms Again*, as sung by the Supremes
- *The Second Time Around*, here sung by Frank Sinatra

In this parasha, I think of Eliezer, Abraham's servant, who finds Isaac a wife, and Laban, who features more prominently in a future parasha concerning Jacob. Alas, what songs are prompted by them? For Eliezer, nothing ever bad, and for Laban, nothing ever good? If we shorten "Eliezer", I would suggest:

- *Eli's Coming*, here by Three Dog Night

Anything else from anyone?

Pidyon Haben in Tractate Bechorot. The global Daf Yomi learning cycle is this week studying pages 44-50 of Tractate Bechorot. On page 46a we begin Chapter 8. This *is* the Chapter of the Talmudic corpus devoted to the topic of *pidyon haben*, or פדיון הבן.

Pidyon haben is the practice, derived from Shemot 13:12-15 (among many other Torah sources) that generally requires that the first-born male child be redeemed from the Priesthood, typically 31 or more days after birth. Interestingly, the actual phrase פדיון הבן does not seem to appear in this Chapter, but that is how the practice is universally known.

On page 46a we confront a Mishna, the first in Chapter 8, which begins with a riddle:

יֵשׁ בְּכוֹר לַנַּחֲלָה, וְאֵינוֹ בְּכוֹר לְכֹהֵן; בְּכוֹר לְכֹהֵן, וְאֵינוֹ בְּכוֹר לַנַּחֲלָה; בְּכוֹר לַנַּחֲלָה וְלַכֹּהֵן, וְיֵשׁ שֶׁאֵינוֹ בְּכוֹר לֹא לַנַּחֲלָה וְלֹא לַכֹּהֵן

MISHNA: There is a son who is a firstborn with regard to inheritance but is not a firstborn with regard to the requirement of redemption from a priest. There is another who is a firstborn with regard to redemption from a priest but is not a firstborn with regard to inheritance. There is another who is a firstborn with regard to inheritance and with regard to redemption from a priest. And there is another who is not a firstborn at all, neither with regard to inheritance nor with regard to redemption from a priest.

I just love these. The Mishna is simple and elegant, setting up a straightforward 2x2 matrix. The Mishna is teaching that there are two different benefits flowing to certain first-born males: redemption from a priest and a double inheritance (at least until the Jubilee year). The balance of the Mishna and the ensuing gemarra explicate these categories.

Too generally speaking, the Talmud's riddle is unpacked by first understanding that the different rules flow from the fact that *pidyon haben* is matrilineal – that is, we focus on the mother to see what exceptions and qualifications exist in the practice of *pidyon haben*. Inheritance, on the other hand, is patrilineal – that is, we focus on the father to see exceptions and qualifications. It's an interesting situation.

Let's look at a couple of the examples given in the Talmud:

- Let us suppose you have a surviving firstborn of a father but, from the mother, there was a prior miscarriage or still-birth (even with the same father). This is a case where there would not be a *pidyon haben*, but the surviving firstborn would inherit as a firstborn.

- Contrariwise, let us suppose a son is born to a father who had prior children but not from this son's mother. This son might require *pidyon haben*, but he is not a firstborn for inheritance purposes.

The gemarra goes into cases of uncertainty as well (as where a divorcee does not wait the recommended three months before remarrying and then has a child at a time when it will not be clear who the father is). The balance of the Chapter (to page 52b) proceeds to discuss myriad different scenarios.

Shearith Israel Book Club II: *Between the Wars: Jewish Characters in 1920s and 1930s American Literature.* Madelene Towne, having done a terrific job organizing both our reading list and our Shabbat

luncheon with Professor Trapedo, here reports on *Mendel Marantz*, by David Freedman (#5 on our Club II list of 22):

Mendel Marantz is an odd book – charming in many ways – but odd. The characters, almost all Jewish, are exaggerated and stereotyped, from Mendel's ditzy wife Zelde to his hapless wheeling-dealing brother-in-law Bernard. The situations [are] absurd, and the plethora of "what is" nuggets of wisdom, while clever when taken individually, quickly grow tiresome when read in succession.

Mendel, the central character, is an immigrant peddler living with his family in a lower East Side tenement. He has dreams of making millions, which his status-seeking wife Zelde would be only too happy to embrace, but there is a pervasive sense that Mendel will never be more than a dreamer. That is, until one day when one of his efficiency devices catches hold and the family is able to move on up, as it were. How Mendel chooses to live once wealthy and how he then manages to lose it all is the stuff of which comedies are made, but it does allow the reader to see finally the heart of the man, and what it reveals about him is quite sweet and moving.

Despite all the jokes and the absurdities, we see that Mendel is a loving father and husband who deeply feels his great responsibility to his family while simultaneously maintaining the inner strength to withstand other people's judgments of him. He is willing to impoverish himself to save his daughter's marriage and to ensure that his sons leave the nest self-made and self-reliant. He has a profound understanding of the ultimately limited role that parents get to play in their children's lives. As he says in one of his "what is" moments, "What is a father? The King of England. He's got the title, but not the power!" Or as he otherwise acknowledges: "What is advice? An umbrella. Take it and forget it somewhere."

The author, David Freedman, was born in Romania in 1898, arrived in this country at age four, and died young at age thirty-eight. During his brief life he wrote prolifically for the entertainment industry (Broadway, radio, and film), and was even nicknamed the "King of the Gag-Masters" of radio. Mendel Marantz began life as a series of magazine short stories, which Freedman then developed not only into a novel but also a play entitled Mendel, Inc.

It later became the source for the film The Heart of New York. Very much a product of its times, Mendel Marantz seems outdated for today's audiences but nevertheless remains an interesting insight into the concerns and humor of its era.

In Memoriam. We note in sorrow the passing of Judge Alvin Hellerstein. Judge Hellerstein was a voice of compassionate justice and a friend of Shearith Israel. He will be missed.

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