

August 26, 2021

Dear Shearith Israel family,

Rosh HaShana 5782 and Covid-19 Planning. Word real estate is very limited in these emails (though probably not as limited as some of you would like). Hence you would expect the price per word to increase. Repetition of thoughts, songs, and artists is therefore ordinarily kept to a minimum. Even with that, in a sense it is understandable that the weird sights and sounds of Leon Russell would make a second appearance in these missives ([see my email of 11.12.2020](#)). This week I'm thinking of his [Tight Rope](#):

"I'm up on the tight wire
One side's ice and one is fire"

"And the wire seems to be the only place for me
A comedy of errors and I'm falling"

I had not remembered the deeply affecting Robert Frost reference in [the second line](#) of the song. What I do recall is the jaunty, Ragtime, syncopated, surreal, and essential incoherence of the 1972 hit.

If we are not careful, the song will take on increased resonance during the next month. Rosh HaShana is eleven days away, and September follows with many more occasions for communal prayer and activity. We are precariously balanced on a tight wire. We are trying to make the most of the miraculous strides in keeping Covid-19 in check. At the same time, we need to try even harder to avoid the perils of the new strains of the virus visiting a house of worship near you. None of us can for a moment overlook how blessed we are to be able to return to our Synagogue(s). Yet we need to respect the several precautions our Covid-19 Working Group has recommended, with zero tolerance for disregard.

As of now, we are scheduled to have two possibly three services on Rosh HaShana morning: one inside and one or two outside on Paved Paradise. We are planning at least four extra outdoor shofar blowings over the two-day holiday as well. Notwithstanding our commitment to social distanced seating arrangements, and well-ventilated and filtrated indoor spaces, key to the safe spiritual return of larger crowds for communal prayer are vaccination and following a few rules of prudence. We are so happy that many of us will be together. But it will only happen safely if each of us submits proof of vaccination and reads with care and adheres to the few precautions laid out in the many communications from the office. A year ago we knew so little about how to do this right. We were blessed then to have avoided any disease spread. Now we know immensely more. We can apply that knowledge, and discipline, to an even more contagious variant of the disease attempting to assault even our mostly-vaccinated community. It's a tight wire – and we can't fall. We won't.

More Than Nice Stories. Rudyard Kipling's *Just So Stories* have pleased over a century of the parents who had the privilege to read them to their children. (An even greater treat is to listen

together to Jack Nicholson narrate them.) These were more than nice stories. They were fun, diverting, expertly written – and most packed a moral of life-long importance.\

Multiply the subtlety and importance of the *Just So Stories*, oh, by ten million. You can then catch just a glimpse of the stories told in the Talmud. This week's Daf Yomi study of Tractate *Sukkot* contains a multitude of stories. Two weeks before Rosh HaShana, permit me to share one – which many of you know – but which has particular relevance to all of us today.

Yesterday's *daf*, Page 48b, tells the story of the High Priest who, as part of the fabulous *Simchat Beit Hashoava* festival during Sukkot, was required to pour water (not wine, as was usual) on the altar as a manifestation of Israel's prayer for rain during the coming year. At the time, our Sages, who believed in the Oral Law, debated the Sadducees, who didn't believe in the Oral Law, over some fundamental aspects of the ritual, including whether water should be used to anoint the altar. There is nothing explicit in the Torah that prescribes this ritual – hence the Sadducees did not believe in it. Yet it is among the most fundamental passed down since the time of Sinai. On this particular occasion, the High Priest, a closet Sadducee, misled the Sages, lying about whether he would perform the ritual properly. Instead of pouring the water on the altar he poured it on his feet. Our Sages explain that this was the third misleading act done by that Sadducee High Priest (he either lied about all three, or there were two high priests who perpetrated three separate acts abnegating the Oral Law. No matter to our story.) Well, when the Jews saw the sacrilege of pouring the water on the High Priest's feet, the assembled multitude took their *Etrogim* and pelted him. The Talmud goes on to say that either the *Etrogim* (or some rocks that apparently were also thrown) literally broke one of the corner-horns of the altar, making it ritually impure and unusable. The story ends by describing the patch-job made to the altar corner-horn by the other Priests – not so that the altar could be used but only so that it would appear whole as a result of a unified act of the Jews.

So what does the story teach? The entire incident was begot through deception; the Sadducee High Priest misled the Rabbis and the other priests in promising to carry out the ritual properly. Given that this was the third deception, the congregation threw their *Etrogim*. And why the *Etrogim*, which are citrons? Because the fact that we use citrons as *Etrogim* is itself known to us only because of the Oral Law, and the Jews were pointing out the hypocrisy of the Sadducee High Priest. Still, the violent reaction damaged the very heart of the Holy Temple, rendering the altar unkosher for any use. Seeing the deep public harm done by the spectacle, the authorities patched it up, not in an effort to fool anyone but to show some semblance of unity and solidarity.

Like the shofar sounds that awaken our spiritual slumber this time of year, this story should startle us mightily (nearly as much as the Curses in this week's *Parashat Ki Tabo*, which embodies the second full set of Curses for inhumane behavior in the Torah ([see my email of 5/6/21 discussing Parashat Behukotai](#))). In our society today, we see differences in approach, belief, dogma, and even practice. Division and discord are all around us. 99.99% of the stories in the Talmud (just wait until next week) teach the respectful listening to the views of others. It is only through such respect that the dignity of all human beings can be maintained. The Tale of

the Pelting *Etrog* – oh what Kipling would have made of it – shows what happens when we check that respect at the door, even for a moment. It shows the results of even muted, pie-in-the-face “violence”. We render profane that which is sacred. Today, we are mired in a “cancel culture”, where we are losing the elemental ability to listen respectfully even to views we do not share. We are all diminished as a result. Absent an act of unification, even a superficial one, the mire will become muck, and the muck will suffocate us. With 5782, let us pledge ourselves to a unified and ultimate cancelation of the cancel culture.

Half-Full Report.

True Greatness II. I had sort of wanted this new contest to inspire fun, uplifting, or even just diverting examples on the theme of “greats”, like my double-entendred, light, yet heartfelt entry of last week on *great-grandparents*. Several of you have surpassed me:

Great People. Esther Ingber offers no double-entendre, no silly wordplay, but something profound and wholly fitting for this time of year. It is beautiful. She writes:

“... my ‘greats’ are The Righteous Gentiles, albeit a small percentage, but they saved so many in the Holocaust and allowed many to be born and repopulate . . . and ma[k]e up for so many losses. We can never know how many geniuses, professionals, tradesmen and women, humanitarians, spiritual leaders, etc. we gained [because of] the people they hid and rescued. I have 2 such families in my tree! They have led incredible lives and produced the greatest offspring!”

Great Quotes. And if we are going to include great quotes among the “great” entries, I offer the following. It has been shown by those who know that Tolstoy had a complex and possibly conflicting relationship with Judaism. The following, however, is neither complex nor conflicting. In an essay titled, “What is a Jew?” Tolstoy emphasizes that Jews “did not succumb to any worldly temptations offered by [their] oppressors and persecutors” or “renounce [their] religion and abandon the faith of [their] fathers.” He said:

“The Jew is that sacred being, who has brought down from Heaven the everlasting fire, and has illumined with it the entire world. He is the religious source, spring, and fountain out of which all the rest of the peoples have drawn their beliefs and their religions.”

Ok, beat that for a great quote.

Great idea. And now comes Alan Zwiebel, with a great idea for how this year, we might perform the ageless custom that, “On Rosh Hashanah we dip an apple into honey for a sweet year”:



Picturing Paved Paradise. Our Trustee and Segan Karen Daar takes first place this week, reimagining Paved Paradise as [Serengeti](#). (Or listen again to Toto's so-so song and great melody [Africa](#) – you can skip the video.)



Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas