

December 23, 2021

Dear Shearith Israel family,

Not Burning, Not Fiddling. The Roman Emperor Nero, it is said, fiddled while Rome burned (who has an early, reliable source for this?). It's not a great way to be remembered in history. It won't be said of us, will it? All metrics of Covid-19 disease spread are worsening in our area – and in many other areas in the US and elsewhere. Yet the miracle of the past year's efforts by scientists and physicians around the globe makes any analogy to Rome's burning inapt. The new and ubiquitous variant of the virus, Omicron, is more virulent (accounting for three-quarters of all US infections, in a flash) but on the whole apparently less lethal as against a heavily vaccinated population (soon to be redefined to include the third booster shot), certainly if we take serious precautions against disease spread. Government and the private sector seem to be reacting with speed and responsibility (meaning I'm reading about as many saying "ugh, too slow" as saying "ugh, too fast"). So there does not seem to be a burning platform that needs more urgent attention than the already-urgent attention we are giving it.

At Shearith Israel, the Rabbi will be moving back to virtual *Friday Night Lights*, hopefully for a couple of weeks only. That and replacing his Shabbat afternoon class with other virtual classes are the only changes that seem warranted. The irony here is that, although for those few of us who will not be able to hear the beauty of the Rabbi's live presentations, literally hundreds of us will be able to hear the beauty of his remote presentations. No, it's not the same – but for many of us, who can't or don't feel comfortable showing up in person, it is a wonderful, wondrous substitute. Otherwise, back at the in-person ranch, we will continue to offer individually portioned hot kiddush outdoors, and we will continue to ventilate our sanctuary with the invisible MERV-13 filters, the visible and somewhat audible air purifiers, and the noticeable and chill-inducing open windows. Come and help warm it up.

So the "not burning" part of my title, check. What about the "not fiddling"? It is true that we have started some new games and contests, which we catch up on in the *Half-Full Report* below. This week is particularly chock full of fun. But I wouldn't call it fiddling, would you? The fun we are having is famously fun fun, far from fiddling fun.

Bangs and Whimpers. T.S. Eliot ends his poem *The Hollow Men* with the overused but still-trenchant:

This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang but a whimper.

It bears a remote resemblance to Blue Oyster Cult's only good song, [*Don't Fear the Reaper*](#), which isn't about suicide (a bang, surely) but about the inevitability of death generally (I told you this would be a fun email!). (The lines from the song that I have in mind are, "The door was opened and the wind appeared/The candles blew and then disappeared".)

These sentiments, certainly the lines from Eliot, suggest an approach to an enigmatic discussion in this week's Daf Yomi study of Tractate Megilla (10a). The mishnaot on these pages are part of the great series of "*ayn bayn*" mishnaot, which all begin by announcing that there is no difference (in Hebrew "*ayn bayn*") between a law or practice in one area and the law and practice in another, unrelated area except for the one or two distinctions adumbrated by the Mishna. The "*ayn bayn*" mishnaot are a lot of fun (like this email), since as a group they cover vast but vastly different areas of Jewish law. The *ayn bayn* I am now referring to dictates the interesting law that there is no difference between the tabernacle built at Shiloh, erected by Joshua upon entering the Land of Israel (Joshua 18:1) and the tabernacle built by Solomon later in Jerusalem. One of the exceptions is that personal sacrifices, made in other locations on things called *bamot* (platforms), were permitted after the tabernacle left Shiloh but were not permitted once the tabernacle in Jerusalem was destroyed.

Why the difference? Consider what it is about the two centers of Judaism – Shiloh and then Jerusalem – that might justify permitting off-site personal sacrifices to continue in one case but not in the other. My suggestion, which cannot be novel but alas I cannot think if or where I heard or read it (a little help please?), is that the tabernacle in Shiloh was never actually destroyed, unlike the one in Jerusalem, which most definitely was. I understand that in common parlance (like in the various translations of Megilla 10a under discussion) the word "destroyed" is used in the English to describe what happened to the tabernacle in Shiloh. But the relevant texts do not actually say that the Shiloh tabernacle was destroyed. What we know is that Shiloh – after 369 years of use – was abandoned. Shiloh seems to have had some unseemly priests heading it. The Almighty didn't so much destroy the place or permit any human agent to destroy the place; rather, as the Psalm says:

When God heard [of the untoward doings], he was full of wrath, and he utterly rejected Israel. He *forsook* his dwelling at Shiloh, the tent where he dwelt among mankind, and delivered his power to captivity, his glory to the hand of the foe (Psalm 78:59–61).

Jeremiah (7:12) also refers to the Almighty's *departing* the place "because of the evil of my people Israel". My simple point is that Scripture and our liturgy know how to say a place is utterly demolished, destroyed, burnt to the ground. They say that about Jerusalem, which ended with a bang. It is not said – not with any clarity – about Shiloh, which ended, to be sure, but with a whimper.

Now the Talmud's dictate makes sense. Sacrifices renewing and rejuvenating the Jewish people are consistent with an abandoned state. An abandoned state is salvageable. Such sacrifices could continue after Shiloh. Once Jerusalem was totally destroyed, however, that phase of human-Almighty interaction could not be resuscitated by human acts alone. Substitutes could have, and did, replace the prior acts of sacrifice – prayer, synagogues, even learning Torah itself. But unless and until there is another two-way street created, the utter destruction of Jerusalem sealed the fate of sacrifices.

Half-Full Report. There are a bunch of open challenges that have had superlative entrants this week. We are down to semi-finalists in nearly all of them. Check out the field, and see if you can't compete and WIN!

Is the Jewish G-d All About Jews? Fred Ehrman insightfully says that I was asking the wrong question in my [email last week](#) when I asked if the German philosopher Feuerbach has a point that Jews focus a lot on the focus that the Almighty has on Jews rather than humanity generally. Fred says that it is the Almighty who had charged the Jewish People with bringing the message of Torah to the other 69 nations of the world. It's a great point. Another great answer is given by Rabbi Robinson, who enriched our Shabbat by his presence and his talk after services last Shabbat. He reminds us that the Almighty's promise, and charge, to Abraham right from the beginning was that "in you *all* the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Bereshit 12:2-3).

Feuerbach, Sympathy or Trashing? Reactions to my attempt faithfully to quote Feuerbach's descriptions of Judaism run the spectrum: Tess Solomon, who can get through the German, asks if I'm being unfair or if not then incomplete. Victor Owen, on the other hand, sledge-hammers away:

You can't teach piano to a cow.

The atheist Feuerbach does a poor job of masking his Jew-hatred with his sophistry.

Modern scientific understanding leaves Feuerbach sounding ignorant and foolish, raising more questions than he can answer with mere

words. The Big Bang. Relativity. Time dilation. The endless mysteries of atomic structure. All that we learn buttresses the Jewish conception of a Creator G-d; there was a Beginning to this universe.

Most Recognizable First Notes. The voting isn't final, but the leading contenders for songs with recognizable first notes or phrases equivalent to those of Eric Clapton's [Layla](#) or [Beethoven's Fifth Symphony](#) are:

- Roy Simon offers Peter, Paul & Mary's "[Where Have All the Flowers Gone,](#)" and The Beatles's "[Something in the Way She Moves.](#)" But then Roy decided to get strategic, cleverly smearing the competition by nonchalantly pointing to news reports that Eric Clapton has been encouraging his concert goers to attend his concerts *en masse* and unvaxed. This prompted Beth to nail that coffin shut with, well I guess he's not G-d after all. Death of an idol.
- Bill Schulder, who has forgotten more about Rock N' Roll than I will ever know, voted for [Satisfaction](#) by the Rolling Stones, over Clapton's *Layla*. With Clapton in the dog house, could Bill be right?
- Jim Nuzzo reminds us that it was Beethoven's Fifth that the BBC used to signal the commencement of Operation Overlord (what we know as D-Day) during WWII; the famous first four notes correspond to the dot-dot-dot-dash of the Morse code letter "V" for Victory. Jim, though, couldn't help voting for Bruce Springsteen's first four notes of [Born to Run](#). This is an inspired, even brilliant choice – especially because on the day the contest opened The Boss sold his collection of hits to Sony for a cool half billion dollars. (In our household, we don't begrudge even a penny of how highly others, like we, value Springsteen – not unlike our esteem for JK Rowling of *Harry Potter* fame. Many mega-wealthy give huge amounts to charity and are inspirations to the rest of us.)
- SM Rosenberg, of the tireless Shearith Israel office staff, also offers a winner: the first few notes of Deep Purple's [Smoke on the Water](#).
- Aura Bijou offers Simon & Garfunkel's [Bridge Over Trouble Water](#), and The Beatles's [Twist & Shout](#).

These are great candidates, every one. Voting is open for another week. Vote or go home.

A Personal Thank You. To Henry Salzman, who emailed a note of thanks – and so lightly, so viciously, so hilariously, described my emails as “re pandemic and just about everything else”. There I was, sitting in my office (before this week’s evacuation), laughing out loud. It felt great. Find something to guffaw about, and try it.

Great Signs and Wonders. I hadn’t gotten many responses to the contest for clever signs. Last week I kicked things off with the sign outside our neighborhood Joe and the Juice – “Be Strong (I whispered to my coffee)” – a great choice especially on a Shabbat where we actually recite those words from the end of *Devarim* to end our communal reading of Sefer *Bereshit*. But then, early this week, Ruth Lazar, who has an ear for these things, sent in the following. It at least equals if not beats the coffee bar sign and sets the height of a new mountain to be scaled – especially given the Eliot quote above:



Send in your pics, photos, drawings. Make others smile.

Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas