

February 24, 2022

Dear Shearith Israel family,

Everyone Back Into de Poole. I borrow (while improving upon) a line from the great Alan Zwiebel to announce a further loosening of Covid-19 precautions at Shearith Israel. Covid-19 disease spread numbers are bottoming out for the time being. Omicron is running its course. Its sub-subvariant has not taken off in NYC. The Working Group is comfortable returning to Masks-Optional in our Sanctuary. Mindful that some of our congregants prefer, and some feel they need, a masked environment, we are designating masked-optional and masked-only sections in our Sanctuary during services. Masks continue to be optional during classes before and after. Vaccinations and boosters remain required for all who can get them. Make sure to send us your latest information [here](#).

We are doing all we can to welcome congregants back. Rabbi Soloveichik will be giving *Friday Night Lights* as well as his Shabbat afternoon class in person. He will be returning Shabbat morning sermons to their “usual” length (that is, whatever length he wants). Kiddush continues to excite – and the company, comradeship, fellowship, community can’t be beat. If you don’t start coming back now, you will have only yourself to blame (though if it will get you back, feel free to blame me).

Say, Buddy, Can You Spare a Half-Shekel? The Talmud teaches that we publicly read from the Torah on Mondays, Thursdays, and Shabbat so that we are never more than three days between communal recognition of the Book of which we are People. This is a community custom going back to the time of Ezra (anyone have an actual historical citation back that far?) I too feel like we should never go more than three weeks without reminding ourselves that our mission as a community is to help support the functioning of our religious institutions and the individual charitable needs of others. This Shabbat we collectively read Parashat *Shekalim*, the first of the four special parshiot inserted at the end of the weekly Torah readings on four Shabbatot this time of year. This week’s extra reading is a simple, beautiful reminder that all of us, rich or poor, have the obligation to give to charity. The half-shekel was originally contributed for the upkeep of the Tabernacle in the desert, later, for the upkeep of the Temple in Jerusalem, and now, to support our treasured house of worship. It’s an amazing tenet – this form of charity is everyone’s obligation in equal parts. Does that exist in other cultures? Who has a citation in any culture earlier than in Exodus 30:11-16?

The “Other” Is Us. I wanted to talk this week about the role of metaphor in the Talmud, since it is sophisticated and sublime. My observations were prompted by page 10a of Tractate Chagiga, which we learned this week as part of the Daf Yomi cycle. In a Mishna on that page, in speaking of legal and practical precepts practiced by the Rabbis of the Mishna that do not appear to have strong sources of support in the Torah itself, the Mishna speaks of “mountains suspended by a hair”. It’s one of countless profound even timeless metaphors – but, alas, I will need to come back to the topic in the future.

I need to come back to it, since everything else this week in the Tractate seems (to me) to be eclipsed by the irredoubtable story of Elisha ben Abuya, a/k/a “Acher”, or “Other” (15b). The story, modernized and altered, is retold in Milton Steinberg’s solo great novel, *As a Driven Leaf* (see [my email of May 6, 2021](#)). Nothing, however, compares to actual story itself, which speaks to each and every one of us, now, today.

Elisha ben Abuya was one of the four great Sages to enter *Pardes* (in Hebrew עֵדֶן), translated as an “orchard” but in reality a realm of understanding that the Talmud describes as essentially un-understandable. Unpacking any of the mystical aspects of that story is way above my pay grade and not my issue here. I pick up the story after Elisha loses his faith. What is remarkable about the ensuing story is not anything esoteric. On the contrary, what inspires is thoroughly tangible, down-to-earth, here and now.

First, we need to remember that in terms of learning Elisha was not just your ordinary extraordinary Talmudic character. Elisha was the teacher of Rabbi Meir, one of the singular geniuses in the Talmud. (If you missed Rabbi Soloveichik’s magnificent talk on Rabbi Meir, here’s my offer – if enough of you come back, I will ask him to give a special class on it.) So Elisha taught and hence was more learned than one of our singular greats. The Talmud tells two stories as to what prompted Elisha’s loss of faith. One is retold here on 15a involving the angel Metron; the other is at Kiddushin 39b. Both are worth learning. But what is clear from the Talmud’s treatment of Elisha is that the principal reason that Elisha didn’t return to the fold after his faith was shaken was – Elisha. He heard a voice from Heaven say that all people could find repentance except “Acher”, which Elisha was called at the time. He got it into his head that he should rely on that voice (though that was unnecessary), that as a result he could not repent or return, and

that he could not recover from his questions and doubts. Every time someone quoted him a verse making it obvious that *every* human being *without exception* is capable of repentance and return, Elisha, clever as he was, would read something into the verse to make it say the opposite. The psychology of self-abnegation is powerfully on display. That itself is an important lesson – for us to learn and avoid.

But there is more to learn. What did his fellow Rabbis do in the face of Elisha's vocal doubts? Leave him? Blot him out? Cancel him? Here the story is even more amazing. They did nothing of the sort. The Gemara spends over a page of valuable real estate going through all that the Rabbis tried to do to bring him back. They talked to him, stood by him, reasoned with him, remonstrated with him. They took him to one house of study and then another, in each case trying to show him that he could return if he wished. All in all he was brought to thirteen different places. He was unwilling to understand that he was wanted back or that he could have come back.

The story of Elisha ben Abuya is sad, even tragic. And in some ways so many of us *are* him. We slip up. Instead of owning our error, putting it behind us, and returning, we rationalize. We then see everything we do as validating our poor decision. And we block out our friends and community who want us back, would welcome us back.

Shearith Israel wants everyone back. We have a great tradition of spiritual leaders who do not judge others. And we have a community that is happy to have you any way you come. Just come.

Half-Full Report.

Limericks Redux. With the vote in on last week's limerick fantastica, there is, alas, no clear winner. The greatest number of votes was cast in favor of the Parnas poking prank by Billy Schulder. Indeed, it even germinated a funny limerick by Aura Bijou – a funny limerick about a funny limerick all making fun of yours truly. I'm not about to repeat either limerick, though they are both really funny, and I love them both (the limericks and the limerickists)!

I did get some late entries, including several from Paula Van Gelder of Los Angeles. There are three reasons why the judges have allowed several of her

limericks to compete: (i) Paula lives on the West Coast, and she explains that it is earlier there. Second, the Subject line of her email, "Do the Gates of Limerick remain open?", was just the double entendre enough to sway the judges given, third, some of hers are really funny. The few from Paula that I like best are:

On Our Esteemed Rabbi

I must say it, so what the heck?
Although I may stick out my neck,
Rav S. can explain
And throughout entertain;
He's created the first "Brisk-o-theque." [editor's note: Brisk-o-theque is brilliant!]

He's learned how to make study thrive
And keep Torah learning alive.
In minutes a day,
He's got new things to say
In his podcast of Three-Sixty-Five.

On Returning to Services in Person

Returning to shul we embrace
The sanctity of this great space.
Though kissing a scroll --
I have taken a poll --
Is too hard with a mask on your face.

Final votes in please.

Beatles Redux. Esther Ingber and well after her (about five hours) Guy Reiss both correctly guessed *Come Together* as the second longest running Beatles song at No. 1 (16 weeks). And, as Guy says, it is about unity. So two marks each – and thank you to both for a song of unity. Thanks as well to Bonnie Barest, who offered the Judas Priest song [United](#). I don't like the song, but I do like Bonnie, so here you go.

More Marvelous. It is hard to believe that the savants of R&R, the geniuses of all things popular culture, were *all* stumped and didn't remember Sybil's comment to Harold Abrahams when he lost the only race he ran against Scottish evangelical Christian Eric Liddell. Sybil says to Harold: "You were marvelous. He was more marvelous, that's all".

Carry Ons. As we are all getting ready to travel again, send in your picks for the greatest "carry on" songs. To get the coasters rolling, let me offer two I've cited before but not linked, so I want to link to them here for your listening pleasure. First is the great Steven Stills (then a member of CSN&Y), [Carry On/Questions](#). Second is Fun.'s great song, [Carry On](#). I could also offer [Carry On My Wayward Son](#), but the song drops off considerably after one of the most recognizable first lines and accompanying music. We need to carry on suboptimally, but really, this time, maybe not for that much longer. So, can you beat Steven Stills and Fun.? Give it a try.

Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas