

March 16, 2022

Dear Shearith Israel family,

Crowding Out Covid. There are so many things going on in our Congregation that I'm finding it hard to find space in these emails for Covid. As it should be; the disease is still with us but more endemic than pandemic in our geographic area. No doubt, my saying and your reading, every week, ok, team, let's keep moving ahead, let's make the best of it, we're almost there, is becoming taxing for all of us. So, briefly: The safety precautions of the last several weeks will remain in place. Your Working Group is wisely not ready to drop vaccination/booster requirements for those who can get them, optional masking and mask-only sections, open windows, and air cleaners. These precautions are not inhibiting our return to our sacred rituals and long-standing customs. Last night and this morning, for example, we had in-person Purim services and megillah readings that went wonderfully. Our herringfest last night was a hoot! All we are missing now are crowds worthy of our service, our Clergy, our community. Come back – you will find us, er, pretty much the same as when you left us. But that's us!

Cool Calendrical Cycles; Happy St. Purim. I observed two weeks ago the relative rarity of near-simultaneously starting a new Book of the Torah and starting a new Order of the Mishna. I didn't think the calculation of periodicity would be so hard, but maybe it is. Even my usual math-oriented emailers haven't tried to win the huge prize of THREE points to tell me the simple fact, when did this happen before or when will this happen again. Even with inflation THREE points is a lot of points.

All is not lost, however. There are still some fun facts to share. I've talked about this before, but thanks this week go to e-friend and writer Miles Kuttler from South Florida. Miles isn't interested in the confluence of Torah Book and Mishna Order – “man-made Tractates and/or Orders is a totally different mathematical universe where serendipity reigns”, he says. Instead he just wants to look at Hebrew and Gregorian calendars. (Shhh, no one tell Miles that these phenomena have artificial, arbitrary elements and are creations of the human mind, too.) But never mind that. Given the 19-year cycle of the Hebrew calendar, Miles determined that the Hebrew and “English” birthdates of a friend of his will coincide when his friend is 76 (and not before) and that Hebrew and “English” birthdates and the actual day of the week when his friend was born will coincide only when his friend is 95.

Given the particular year when his friend was born, Miles appears right. The more general rule, however, is tricky. It's that same complicated reason why Purim and St. Patrick's Day coincide more rarely than every 19 years. Indeed, the last time it happened was 1957 (in America – those of you who said 1995 were looking at Shushan Purim, celebrated in Jerusalem). The next time it will happen after this year is 2041, and the time after that, 2079. (I wore my only “Irish green” tie today; what did *you* do to celebrate the wonderful affinity between the Irish and the Jews?)

Even though you'd think Hebrew and English calendars would coincide every 19 years, there are artifacts in both calendars that throw this off. In the Hebrew calendar, for example, there are

four well-known “postponements” of Rosh Hashana. A postponement will happen, for example, if it avoids Rosh Hashana falling on a Wednesday or Friday (the Sages/calendar geniuses avoid those days to avoid Kippur falling on a Friday or Sunday). The four postponements happen with varying frequency, calculated between 10% and more than 50% of the time for each type of postponement. A postponement could add a day(s) to the Hebrew calendar and thus throw off the straight synchronicity with the English calendar. It’s in part because of these postponements that you can’t tell with certainty that Hebrew and English birthdays will be on the same dates 19 years or indeed every 76 years. And not only are there Hebrew calendar anomalies; there are some pretty funky things with the “English” calendar as well -- like the fact that 1900 and 2100 are not leap years. Miles rightly recommends getting a copy of Spier, *The Comprehensive Hebrew Calendar (1900-2100)*. It won’t answer my initial question (though there is an introduction with some explanations), but you, like I, will enjoy endless distraction looking through the book.

Yevamot, and Teaching the World To Reason. The question in my email of [February 17, 2022](#), to find an example of rigorous logical thinking earlier than the Talmud, has stumped everybody. That’s because I’m right; our religion, far from asking for blind faith in *most* matters, demands rigorous logical thinking. I can’t even get to discussing the guts of Yevamot this week because I, like the Tractate itself, need to take a detour into just such rigorous logical thinking.

In the Daf Yomi cycle, this past week we learned pages 2-9 of Tractate Yevamot. We saw in the first Mishna of the Tractate 15 instances where the existence of alternative prohibitions of marital liaisons prevent levirate marriage requirements from kicking in at all. That is, if a widow is prohibited to a brother of the deceased husband for other reasons (like they are otherwise related in ways where they could not marry), then a cascade of consequences follow. These include that no levirate marriage is necessary, neither is *Halitzah*, and this “bye” applies not only to the wife at issue but to all other wives (at times when Judaism permitted multiple wives) and even beyond that (in turns out, according to Beit Hillel). What is instructive about the first several pages of the Tractate (starting at page 3) is that the Talmud demands an answer to the question, how is it that a *prohibition* of marrying your husband’s brother becomes, not just an ok thing to do if you want, but an *actual, affirmative obligation* – the key question I posed last week. This principle itself needs logical derivation – and it is discussed under the rubric of when a positive commandment (levirate marriage) trumps an associated negative one (you can’t marry your husband’s brother), or “*Aseh Doche Lo Taseh*”. This is a major principle of legal reasoning in Talmudic study, applicable to a great many areas of law, and these pages of Tractate Yevamot present one of the most extensive discussions in the entire corpus of the Talmud.

One needs to struggle through a page or two of the back and forth to appreciate its brilliance. The Talmud in these pages demands a logical basis for what it is about levirate marriage that permits it to trump a Torah prohibition. Numerous bases are proposed, starting with whether the trumping principle applies just to “regular” negative commandments or whether there is something special and limiting to negative commandments carrying particular penalties or punishments (the topic most under discussion is the punishment of *karet*, or being cut off from

the people, as in premature death or post-death cutting off from the Jewish people). One can't move an inch on these pages without being rebuffed for flabby or faulty logic. After extensive analysis, the Tractate settles upon the Biblical laws juxtaposing the making of *tzitzit* on a four-cornered garment and the mixing of linen and wool (generally it's prohibited, but sometimes it's required, like on the clothes of Temple priests). Many other examples are proposed, analyzed, accepted by some, argued against by others, and ultimately rejected. The rigor is astounding.

Somewhat related, Barbara Reiss sought to answer the challenge that I posed last week and that these Talmud pages grapple with indirectly: examples of outright prohibitions becoming affirmative obligations. Barbara proposes the principle of saving of a life trumping not violating Shabbat, or *pikuach nefesh*. She reports on the same uplifting story that Rabbi Soloveichik reported on during *Friday Night Lights*, from [The Jerusalem Post, 2/26/22](#):

"Rabbi Aaron Motuz fled Odessa Thursday night aboard several buses with about 200 other community members in defiance of a government-mandated curfew.

They intended to reach neighboring Moldova, where hundreds of Jews from Ukraine are already staying, but did not have all the necessary papers. The convoy is heading west to Poland and, Motuz told the Israeli news site Kikar, will continue driving through Shabbat, when Orthodox Jews are commanded to refrain from such travel unless human lives are at stake... We're afraid they'll stop us on the way and send us back. So we're driving nonstop through Shabbat. It's *pikuach nefesh*," Motuz said, using the Hebrew term for the Jewish principle that saving a life is the highest value."

Is Barbara right? Are we *obliged* to save another's life? Under what circumstances? Two points for a response even slightly as logically cogent as the Talmud displays on every page.

Half-Full Report, or what do two-fers, Jesus, and haiku have in common.

Two-fers. My simple question was, what do you call songs like [A Day in the Life](#), [Layla](#), [MacArthur's Park](#), [Funeral for a Friend](#), which to our listening ears seem really like two songs patched (sometimes brilliantly) together. The simple question has stumped everyone, though here our best and brightest have offered suggestions since I opened the contest to neologisms.

Gil Deutsch, who used to be a contender (source please, for one point) in these pages but has dropped off a bit to do something (anything) more useful, offers as his two-fer entry the Canadian R&R group The Kings and their song(s) [This Beat Goes On/Switchin' to Glide](#). Gil's thinking, evidently, is that two mediocre songs might together make one good one. Gil, sorry, but no go. This two-fer in the same list as those above? Puh-lease! On the other hand, Gil also reminds us of Wings [Band on the Run/If I Ever Get Out of Here](#), more than redeeming himself.

Faith Fogelman, consistently ranking in the Champions column of wins in multiple categories, offers the great two-fer by Leslie Gore, [*It's My Party and Judy's Turn to Cry*](#). Her neologism for a two-fer is a "saga sequence song." "A" for alliteration, anyway.

Finally, Stephen Tilly, also a multi-time winner helping with among our hardest challenges in the past, suggests "songcatenate", though he admits it's "clumsy and latinate". Way better is his "doscant", which is SO clever with its double if not triple meaning for our Synagogue especially.

At the end of the day, you choose. Or try again. I'm still thinking we haven't improved on "two-fer".

Jesus. This is a truly amazing story. I offered real rewards for coming up with an early reference to the yell,

SPEAK ENGLISH, DARN IT: IT WAS GOOD ENOUGH FOR JESUS; IT'S GOOD ENOUGH FOR YOU!

Most entries brought us back to the 1970s, and many of those can't be fact checked. Then, Ruth Moser Riemer emailed:

"Sitting in the lobby of a zero star hotel in Tzfat (Safed), Israel, *in the late 1950's*, I overheard an American tourist scream out to the Ivrit-only lady behind the desk, 'Speak English, Darn it: It was good enough for Jesus; It's good enough for you' - Thank you for bringing back this repressed memory. I needed the laugh."

This is real archeology. Two points to Ruth. But now I wonder if the quip is even older than that? THREE inflation-adjusted points to a verifiable cite pre-1950.

Haiku Finale. I kept the haiku contest open for a final week. We are all better off that I did, since just look at what another week has brought:

Michael Schulder:

A Soloveichik.
They say it means little bird.
More like great eagle.

Roy Simon:

The nickname of Rabbi
Meir Soloveichik is
Solly. That's jolly!

=====

R Soloveichik
Spells his name without a "t".
Why does he do that?

=====

Insomnia? A
great reason to write haiku
about our Parnas. [Editor's note: Ouch!]

Thank you all. Bless us all. Purim Alegre. Happy St. Pat's. Shabbat shalom. And may the violence end soon.

Louis Solomon, Parnas