

March 24, 2022

Dear Shearith Israel family,

*We Like It Like That.* The Dave Clark Five sang an [awful song](#) in the mid-1960s with the refrain, “*the name of the place is I like it like that.*” I cite this in part to demonstrate that my addled, aging memory does not recall only the triumphs of the R&R years (now *why* I would want to demonstrate that is another question).

I think that we as a community *do* “like it like that” just now, in some respects. Two things come to mind. First, last week, on Purim, we had approximately 150 people in our Sanctuary (a two-year record, surpassed only by the High Holidays) listening to Rabbi Rohde read the letter/scroll that is Megillat Esther. The Sanctuary fits several times that many worshippers, yet still it felt wonderful. We definitely like it like that. And of that we want and need more.

Second, in general, I think most of us like the way we are handling the continued risks of Covid-19. Disease spread numbers are remaining roughly unchanged, with hospitalizations and deaths continuing to decrease slightly in our area. The Omicron sub-subvariant from Europe has arrived in NYC and accounts for a growing number of infections. The way we are dealing with it is to maintain a status quo of cautious liberalizing. We welcome the vaxxed and boosted whether they mask or don’t, but we accommodate all preferences and comfort levels with mask-requireds and mask-optionals on either side of the Sanctuary. Congregants attending services have been inspiringly respectful of each other’s choices along the masking and social distancing fronts. Kiddush Shabbat morning is returning to be the warm, convivial social event of pre-pandemic times, and better yet, the planning and organizing has been taken over by a motivated group of talented congregants. Our Congregation gravitates to this type of cautious status quo because it allows us to avoid the major gyrations that come from constantly adjusting, under- or over-compensating to the news *du jour*. I don’t think anyone has ever accused us of being a gyrating congregation. We are not about to change radically along that dimension. How to put this? Well, we like it like that.

*Partial to Parashat Parah.* This Shabbat is the third of the four special parshiot inserted at the end of the weekly Shabbat Torah readings this time of year. We as a community are partial to Shabbat Parah and to the parasha of which the reading is a part, Numbers 19:1-22. As I observed before ([email of 7/9/2020](#)), we read Parashat Parah in our Sanctuary on the last Shabbat before the Covid-19

pandemic forced us to close our doors for the first time in over 365 years. And, then, when later in 2020 we were blessed and able to return to our sacred Sanctuary for communal services, the first parasha we read was the parasha from which the special reading of Parashat Parah is taken. Happily, these are receding memories now. The special parasha, however, remains vibrant. It is beautiful and speaks about the Red Heifer and the communal attainment of purity. Please, come to services on Shabbat, and be a part of it.

*Affection and Kinship, Truth and Peace.* I am literally quoting important and related concepts from several pages of Tractate Yevamot, specifically pages 13-15, which the Daf Yomi cycle is studying this week. There is profound wisdom in these pages, resonating clearly for us today.

Page 13b reminds us of the ruling in the first Mishna in the Tractate – that there are 15 marital relationships that, because they are forbidden, have the effect of freeing the brother of the deceased's and the widows from the affirmative obligations of *yibum* (levirate marriage) or of *halitzah* (I know we haven't spent time explaining *halitzah* – for now, let's think of it as the means of gaining an exemption from levirate marriage requirements thereby remaining free to marry another). The new news in this week's pages is that that ruling of the first Mishnah – that the women in the 15 categories of forbidden marriages, or "*arayot*", exempt their co-wives from *yibum* and *halitzah* – reflects the opinion of Beit Hillel only. I'm not sure why we weren't told that right up front. I'm willing to reward a point to anyone who can explain if that deferral of essential information is common, since it seems uncommon to wait so many pages to explain so significant a difference of opinion. But in any case, Beit Shammai appears to hold that, when a woman described by one of the 15 forbidden marriages and her co-wife "fall to" a man for *yibum*, only the person with the forbidden relationship is forbidden, but the co-wife *may* be taken in *yibum*. The upshot is that Beit Shammai disputes the principle that the co-wife of an *ervah* (shorthand for the woman in the forbidden categories) is exempt from *yibum* and *halitzah*.

The implications of this difference are explored thoroughly – and brilliantly – by the Talmud. And one obvious implication is that Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai have different lists of permissible and forbidden marriageable people. That's a big deal, since being the offspring of the wrong relationship is not a good thing (it's either a bad thing, requiring conversion according to many, or a *really* bad thing, leaving the offspring irredeemably illegitimate). So there is a lot at stake.

What the Mishna on 13b then teaches is nothing short of astounding. The Mishna says that, even with these fundamental differences and their implications, Beit Shammai did not refrain from marrying women from Beit Hillel, and Beit Hillel did not refrain from marrying women from Beit Shammai. For good measure, and to drive home the point for all time, the Mishna also adverts to the different rules that Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai have in certain cases of purity of foods and appliances. The Mishna ends by saying that these differences did not keep adherents of these disparate views from eating food served by the other (something to contemplate as Passover nears).

To me, this just about says it all. Mind you, the back and forth in the Talmud tries mightily to find ways to avoid the deepest schisms acknowledged in the Mishna, including a long discussion of whether Beit Shammai actually ever practiced its different views from Beit Hillel. The general conclusion is that they did. The Talmud is left with the profound words quoted at the beginning. The words appear on page 14b: Jews with fundamentally opposed learning and practices, and severely different consequences, treated each other with “affection *and* kinship”, in fulfillment of the basic tenet of our religion, “love truth *and* peace”. These pages worry about different practices leading to “two Torahs”. We can address that at another time. Here what is so clear is that, far from being “two Torahs”, the chief lesson from these pages is that we are blessed to have a single magnificent Torah.

*Half-Full Report.* So many congregational cool things to follow up on:

*What do you call the two-fer song?* We were going to choose between Faith Fogelman’s “saga sequence song” and Stephen Tilly’s “songcatenate” and “doscant”. Guy Reiss late-entered “bisong” (“at least for country western tunes”, Guy says). The Judges have allowed the late entry on the grounds of cleverness. Now it’s time to choose.

*Contenders for Contender.* I wasted a point on an easy one. In what movie was the line, I “could have been a contender”, made famous? Gil Deutsch and Billy Schulder tied as winners. Both get a point. *On the Waterfront.* Too easy, ok, but still, a win is a win (is a win).

*Good Enough for Jesus.* Here is a great postscript to the fascinating fact that Ruth Moser Riemer heard, “Speak English, Darn it: It was good enough for Jesus; It's good enough for you”, in Israel in the early 1950, more than 20 years before the typical story about this phrase places it. David Sable reminds us of the great (late) Don Imus character, the Reverend Billy Sol Hargis, who was selling Hebrew lessons because Jesus spoke Hebrew, and when he comes back he won't understand y'all. I love it.

*Calendar conundra.* So far no one has cited a counterfactual to my calculations for when Purim actually fell and will fall on St. Patrick's Day. Carla Schein confirms it from her own experience. Master commentator Rabbi Mark Licht, better known by the email handle “Ravdoc”, furthers the discussion by an extensive series of quirks (and even a couple of quarks) about the two calendars, Hebrew and Gregorian. Ravdoc prefers the Julian to the Gregorian for comparison purposes, but that debate is too esoteric for us, and, anyway, that there are differences (measured in days) between G and J just furthers my main point that funkiness abounds in the comparison game. One really interesting observation by Ravdoc is that, when George Washington was born on February 11, it was still 1731, since the Julian calendar was used, and the Julian New Year's Day is March 1. He wasn't born on February 22 until the British Empire switched off Julian, about 20 years later. Says the great Ravdoc,

“Of course now, [George Washington is] always born on a Monday”.

Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas