

April 13, 2022

Dear Shearith Israel family,

*Second Verse, Same as the First.* It is inconceivable that, decades ago, we listened to and actually liked the insipid Herman's Hermits hit, [I'm Henry VIII, I Am](#). Yet another shameful part of our ever present past, I guess.

This past week, we have seen infection numbers significantly increase. In our area, however, hospitalizations and deaths from Covid-19's umpteenth subvariant thankfully continue to decrease. For the upcoming holidays, the second verse is indeed the same as the first, as the song goes. Even with the hopeful expectation of a greater number of congregants in attendance at services including those who have recently traveled, the Working Group believes that the precautions we have in place are sufficient. We will again have mask-only and mask-optional sections. We will continue the air scrubbers and open windows. Weather permitting, we will have Kiddush outdoors on Paved Paradise. Otherwise, we will maintain the status quo. Should circumstances change sufficient to warrant a modification of our protocols, of course we will announce that.

*Shabbat HaGadol.* Only one of Steve Smith's claims to fame is the now famous, indeed storied, naming of our recent past, "The Mulligan Years". Steve sent in a short but [lovely explanation](#) of why this past Shabbat is called Shabbat HaGadol. Here at Shearith Israel, clearly the HaGadol descriptor was apt; over 150 people attended Rabbi Soloveichik's Shabbat HaGadol talk, titled *The Perpetual Passover of Private Schulman: A Tale of World War II and Eternity*. We had mask-only and mask-optional sections, no reports of Covid spread, and a bounty of beautiful thoughts from Rabbi Soloveichik. We intend essentially to replicate this comfortable format in other major upcoming Synagogue events, including the in-person sessions of the Rabbi's Spring Fundraiser Lecture Series, titled *Sanctuaries & Cities*. We have only two annual events dedicated to raising funds for the Synagogue's upkeep and other Congregational obligations. This is one of them. The first session is in-person and will take place in the Sanctuary soon after Pesah on Tuesday evening, April 26. So if you haven't signed up yet, [please do so here](#) – and please give as generously as your means permit. I will be saying more on this after Pesah.

*Pesah and (Constrained) Freedom.* Pages 39b and 40a of Tractate Yevamot are among the pages we learn as part of the Daf Yomi cycle this week. Indeed, we literally usher in the holiday of Pesah with these pages. Ostensibly, the Talmud's discussion tries to deepen our understanding of the status of the two people involved in a levirate marriage and tangentially in the process of *halitzah*. However, the topic ends with a discussion of the status of unleavened bread on Pesah, so I could not resist mentioning it. The Talmudic discussion also deeply resonates in this Festival of Freedom, which is another reason to pass it on, not pass it up. With everyone rushing to prepare for the holiday tomorrow night, let me apologize if this is too long or too complicated – read it next week if that's easier.

The Talmud teaches that the parties to a levirate marriage (meaning the Brother-in-Law and the Wife) are to each other in the following three-stage relationship: freedom, lack of freedom, and then freedom again, but not quite the freedom that existed initially. Before Dead Brother marries Wife, Wife is free to marry Brother-in-Law. On the initial marriage between Dead Brother and Wife, Wife and Brother-in-Law are then prohibited in any marital liaison. Then, when Dead Brother dies, Brother-in-Law and Wife are again free, but that freedom is not quite the same as in Stage 1. It is not quite the same because *yibum* is an affirmative mitzvah (which did not otherwise exist at Stage 1), and in any case to avoid *yibum* requires another affirmative mitzvah, that of *halitzah*. To understand this better, the Talmud seeks out analogies – it nearly always does. One of the most brilliant aspects of Talmudic discourse involves the analogies chosen to aid understanding.

Here, in looking for analogies, the Talmud cites what it thinks is a similar three-stage model of free-constrained-free but not as free as in Stage 1. The case relates to the eating of the *mincha*, or meal offering. Before the flour is consecrated for the offering, the flour can be eaten or not eaten by the priest. That's Stage 1. Then, in Stage 2, once consecrated, the flour cannot be eaten at all; only a small portion of it is offered on the altar, and it is not eaten. Then, in Stage 3, after some of the consecrated flour is used as part of the offering, the balance again reverts to being able to be eaten, but the Torah says that it can be eaten only unleavened, in a sacred place. (I'm leaving out a little bit of the complication, which itself is meaningful and should not be omitted.) The Talmud concludes that the Torah's locution imposes on the priest a positive commandment to eat the left-over flour. So again we have freedom/constraint/bounded freedom as part of a mitzvah.

Is it immediately apparent why we are learning these pages as we move into Pesah. In fact there are several obvious reasons, but since I already apologized for distracting you from Pesah preparations, I will offer only one. It is a fundamental tenet of our religion that the freedom the Israelites secured as part of the Passover redemption was not unbounded. How often have we learned, read, and heard that true freedom is freedom within a framework of constraint (we call it *halakha*), or a bounded freedom. Freedom without constraint is chaos and nihilism. It is without goal, without purpose, and ultimately without meaning. The flour is never again the same once consecrated. The Wife is never again the same once married. And the Jewish People did not replace the enslavement of Egypt with reckless abandonment a/k/a purposeless freedom. They replaced a meaningless bondage for one that imbues their lives with meaning.

Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* is a deeply affecting modern treatment of the relationship among bondage, freedom, and meaning. For anyone who doesn't like to be more than a few degrees of separation from reading about the Holocaust, the book is a must read. Still, Frankl's points were presaged by thousands of years and hundreds of generations of writings understanding this fundamental point. And whereas Frankl's moving memoir is content neutral as to the object of focus in pursuing his psychotherapeutic method, Judaism is not content neutral at all. Mitzvot as good deeds heal the world, as in marrying your dead brother's wife, showing true thanksgiving to the Almighty for the miracle and bounty of life, and understanding the greatness and obligation of freedom when reliving the story of the Exodus

and retelling it to the next generation. (Who remembers the Paul McCartney song [Freedom](#), which he wrote after 9/11 having been sitting on the tarmac in NYC during the attacks? The moment, and Paul as an honorary life-time New Yorker, are forged in stone and are unforgettable. Unfortunately the song itself, well, not so much.)

### *Half-Full Report.*

Oy. Our discussion last week of the Talmud's use of "oy" showed the deep humanity of Judaism in the face of inevitable tragedy in life. To kick off the spate of great responses to the discussion of "oy", Alan Zwiebel, after laying claim to "Mr. A-Z" despite the upstart "Mraz", goes on to criticize me by reminding us of the:

little-known contribution of the great posayk Reb Avraham Zvi ben Yehudah Aryeh. His paragraph on the frequently-used etymological twin of "oy", "vay", is sadly overlooked in pieces such as your very own. Would you ever be guilty of omitting "hanasheh" after the word "gid"? Not likely.

To Alan, and to all those similarly situated, who have been less able to share banter in these dark days of world events, thank you for making the exception and making me (and now many others) laugh out loud.

The more serious efforts, to respond to my promise of one point for earlier references to "oy" than in the Mishna, fell into three categories.

- The first was from our L.A. correspondent Paula Van Gelder, who chided me for asking anything with so much Pesah cleaning to do. Paula, right you are.
- The second, from the plainly well-intentioned, reported that there are many instances of the use of "oy" in the Prophets and Writings. This second group looked up the answers in a Concordance, not because they were cheating but because they were really trying to help. Chief among these is Reverend Edinger, who has our great thanks.
- The third and final category, and the one most deserving of the one point promised, knew the answer without "external resourcing". Winners here include Asher Reimer, who also coined the appealing and understanding phrase "without external resourcing", and Lisa and Rabbi Rohde, without doubt among the important mainstays of our community and Congregation. Each of the winners cited Bamidbar 24:23, where Balaam is telling Balak that nations opposing Israel will never succeed in eradicating Israel except if Israel deserves it and the Almighty wills it:

וַיִּשָׂא מְשָלוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר אֲדֹנָי מִי יִחְיֶה מִשְׁמוֹ אֵל:

He took up his theme and said:

Alas, who can survive except God has willed it! (Sefaria Tr.)

*Anticipating Holidays.* Prior to four of our holidays, beginning a few weeks in advance, we chant some verses from the megillah that we read on the upcoming holiday. So we read from Megillat Esther before Purim; Shir Hashirim before Pesah; Ruth before Shabuot; and Eikha before Tisha B'Ab. The verses can be found in our daily siddur on pages 105 to 107. The chanting, done by all of us, takes less than a minute, but the uniformly beautiful (and holiday appropriate) melodies stay with us for much of the day. It is a lovely custom, but, alas, you need to come to daily minyan to experience it.

Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom. Moadim L'simha. And may the violence end soon.

Louis Solomon, Parnas