

March 10, 2022

Dear Shearith Israel family,

Two for Two. With the baseball season being shortened and possibly decimated by the economic folly being exhibited by owners and/or the league, even a non-lover of baseball is searching for some stats to head-nod over. So here are a couple. First, we as a Congregation are batting 1000 in successful post-Omicron Shabbatot. Two for two. Second, if we keep pace over the next ten Shabbatot, increasing the number of attendees in the same ratios as the last three Shabbatot, we will have 748 people with us for Shabbat services (blessedly exceeding the 700 or so seats we have in our pews). That doesn't come close to the number of "listens" that Rabbi Soloveichik gets for his podcasts. Ok, you will say, "lies, damn lies, and statistics", as Twain said (Twain's attribution of the phrase to Disraeli is inaccurate based on anything published). The truth is that more of us are returning every week. Your Covid-19 Working Group is comfortable with the way services are running, notwithstanding that Omicron BA.2, the subvariant of Omicron that I referred to last week, is doubling in a neighborhood near you. We are maintaining the precautions we have in place -- including mask-optional and mask-only seating to accommodate every preference and need. Please, rejoin or join us.

Remember! This Shabbat we publicly read Parashat *Zahor*, the second 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 from Debarim 25:17-19. The reading is the second in the Torah to describe the attack by Amalek, who attacked from the rear and aimed at killing the Israelites in the desert, starting with the weakest. There is a tradition from the Talmud that Haman, of Purim infamy, descended from Amalek. The family lineage of Amalek is treated as a symbol of those whose hatred of Jews is so great that they are bent on destroying Jews and Judaism without provocation or purported excuse. The Torah commands that we remember Amalek and all it stands for. Indeed, the public Torah reading is just about the most significant "really must hear" of the entire year. I have quoted George Santayana before: "those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it". Find a synagogue, and stand in unity as we read Parashat *Zahor*.

Yevamot, and Why It Matters. Yesterday the Daf Yomi cycle began a new Seder, or Order, of the Mishna, called Nashim, or Women. Seder Nashim is one of the six major subdivisions of the Babylonian Talmud. Nashim includes seven tractates: Yevamot; Ketubot; Nedarim; Nazir; Sotah; Gittin; and Kiddushin, or, respectively, "Brother's Widow"; Marriage Contracts; Oaths; Nazarites; Suspected Adultery; Divorce; and the Acts of Marriage. The first tractate in this Order, called Yevamot, can be translated as I

said as “Brother’s Widow” (*yevamah* in the singular). Briefly, and somewhat inaccurately, the Tractate focuses on the laws of levirate marriage – that is, the practice of the brother of a dead husband to marry the widow. Tractate Yevamot is long, 122 double-sided pages. And it is difficult.

We are going to be studying Yevamot for months. So, unless I’m going to stop discussing the weekly Talmud learning, I need to do at least a passable job explaining why I at least find Yevamot really interesting. The task to find relevance may seem even harder when you understand that, pursuant to a set of rulings in the Code of Jewish Law, or Shulchan Aruch, of over 460 years ago, Ashkenazim and most Sephardim have not for centuries practiced the rite of levirate marriage (the substitute ritual of “*Halitzah*” is still practiced).

I think the Tractate is well worth learning and occasionally summarizing. Here’s my stab at why. I see four reasons:

First, does it seem odd that this whole new Order of the Mishna would start with such an obscure topic as levirate marriage, rather than, say, marriage in general or at least something more commonplace? The commentators ask that very question. One answer that appeals to me is that the principle of levirate marriage is not only ancient – it goes back to the story of Yehuda and Tamar in Sefer Bereshit; it is also really different from the “normal” rules of marriage. The laws of “normal” marriage are not affirmative obligations in the same way as is levirate marriage. Levirate marriage is an affirmative Biblical *command* in stark contrast to the affirmative Biblical *prohibition* of marrying your brother’s wife in other contexts. The Bible affirmatively prohibits marrying your brother’s wife (let’s say, after a divorce). But if the husband is dead, then there is an affirmative command to marry the widow. There aren’t a lot of examples where the same act turns from an outright prohibition to an affirmative obligation (name some others, go ahead, one point each). How the Talmud draws the many gradations and distinctions in this area is fascinating.

Second, the logic required to understand the Talmud’s approach to the dozens (hundreds, really, but I don’t want to scare you off) of different examples is quite demanding. Indeed, the Tractate of Yevamot is reputed to be among the three hardest tractates in the entire Talmud (one point for correctly naming the other two hardest, according to this tradition). Don’t you want to challenge your wits to understand how our Sages approached these issues? Don’t you want to understand the logic and other methods of proof they used?

Third, we all know the famous story of Henry VIII, who literally created a new ritual within Christianity because of a fight involving a levirate marriage (his brother’s and then

his marriage to Catherine of Aragon and his subsequent efforts to annul it). Hillary Mantel's masterpiece trilogy – *Wolf Hall*, *Bring Up the Bodies*, and *The Mirror and the Light* – depict a marvelous, “modern” version of these levirate marriage issues. Indirectly, so does the Shakespearean version of levirate marriage found in *Hamlet*, which Rabbi Soloveichik has spoken about. Let's find out what the true masters of the subject, our Sages, actually said and thought about these issues.

Fourth, to see how the Torah and later our Talmudic Sages address the infinite permutations of the topic is to glimpse how each addresses the role of men and women in Jewish Society. Judaism describes certain roles for husbands and for wives; whether the rules are unbending or immutable, time-bound or timeless, are not my issues now. The fact remains that the marriage contract itself lays out roles, and at least in many cases wives did not develop the same money-making skills in “outside” lives as did husbands. The Torah itself legislates at least 21 different marriage liaisons that men and women cannot engage in, and the very first Mishna of Yevamot lists 15 of those. Having legislated the cases of prohibition (not just the 21 but all of them), both the Torah and the Talmud otherwise left the field open to a certain degree of freedom of choice. The laws of levirate marriage are exceptions to that freedom of choice. The Torah *prescribes* that in some cases widows and brothers-in-law should exercise their freedom of choice to marry each other and not to marry any others. (If they do not wish to follow the Torah's affirmative obligation to engage in levirate marriage, the parties need to engage in the ritual of *Halitzah*, which absolves the brother-in-law of his levirate obligations.) It is fascinating to see how and in what kinds of cases the Torah and later the Talmud address the freedom/choice issues. What were the social expectations? How did the rules further or impede other laudable societal goals?

All this and more awaits us in Tractate Yevamot. I'm happy to think that we will go through some of it together.

Half-Full Report.

Two-fers. Beth Goldman came up with a brilliant example of two songs stuck together by the artist, which we were calling a two-fer: Elton John's [*Funeral for a Friend/Loves Lies Bleeding*](#). But neither she – nor anyone else – has come up with the name of what a two-song “thing” is called. I'm upping the prize to two points for the right word, and neologisms are allowed.

Guy Reiss also contributed a two-fer, but it's in German. Tess, our German speaker, is in Britain, and, truth be told, I couldn't figure out how to get the lyrics to Guy's choice into Google Translate. So, Guy, thanks, but apparently I need to remind you of that

(hilarious) actual comment yelled some years ago (two points for correctly identifying the date and source):

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

Haiku. I'm keeping the contest open, since some people are struggling with humorous haiku on the subjects of our esteemed Rabbi, returning to our Sanctuary, and the Mets. Taking a page out of Alan Zwiebel's book, Barbara Reiss tried for all three categories in one haiku. It's way harder in haiku than in limerick. I love BR's:

Don't care for the Mets
But I do like our Rabbi
Maskless faces too

Michael Schulder offers one about our Sanctuary. It's not funny, but it wins this week because of its beauty:

Leil Shabbat, night falls.
The Hazzan and choir in sync.
I feel complete peace.

Paula Van Gelder, our neologism winner with "Brisk-o-theque", sent in literally a ton of haiku. My favorite of hers are:

Semitic attempts
At Asian poetic forms?
Appropriation!

Rav S's smile broadens
As the Musaf nears its end.
He dreams of sushi.

Fresh space is needed.
If you will pave paradise,
The people will come. [this last is so clever – remember that our first movie on Paved Paradise last Summer was, yep, *Field of Dreams* ("if you build it, [they] will come")]

Virtually all the rest were about baseball, which I can understand given the withdrawal some are feeling about the receding season. Beth Goldman offers two (only the first has

a title), really insider baseball, to borrow a phrase and double an entendre. Beth's artistic side has been gloriously revealed by her deep anguish over the fact that pitchers and catchers were supposed to have started weeks ago and did not; deeper pain still over game cancellations:

Citi Sleeps [oh so clever!]

No joy at Citi
nothing to Showalter, Buck
bides his time at home.

Offseason promise
merger of Scherzer and DeGrom –
power pair on pause.

Ukraine. A sole congregant wondered if we should be publishing these emails —including mentions of joyful Purim plans — with the hostilities going on in the Ukraine. I value this person's opinion immensely. In continuing to keep our collective spirits up and united, I am not trying to be or appear insensitive. Last week our email did include a mention of the turmoil, but not more. Here, let me say that our Congregation is praying for peace and is sending very significant amounts of money and aid. May the violence end soon.

Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas