

September 8, 2022

Dear Shearith Israel family and Touro Synagogue Affiliates,

All Quiet on the Upper West Side. COVID-19 infection and hospitalization numbers again dipped somewhat in the past week. Shabbat services followed the status quo of protocols (the Solomons were away for Shabbat, but I'm reliably informed). This coming Shabbat we will be on Paved Paradise Shabbat morning, indoors at other times. Our choir is set to return *next* Shabbat. We are moving through Elul, approaching Rosh HaShana.

Does it feel like New York City isn't back to its frenetic, pre-COVID self (it's not just a feeling; check out [the data](#))? I find that one antidote to feeling blah yourself is to read some great New York books or watch some great New York movies or at least some great New York scenes. Faith Fogelman reminds us of one the great scenes from and about New York ([It's a Wonderful Town](#)). What a pick-me-up! Don't despair. New York is our once and future city. Believe it!

Love and Marriage. We all remember this great [Sinatra song](#). We remember the music mostly because it was used to advertise [Campbell's Soup and Sandwich](#). Sure, the lyrics of the actual Popular Standard may be dated. But the Chairman of the Board's voice is as velvety as ever. And even today Yale is titling interesting courses using the *Love and Marriage* phrase (Lia is actually taking the course, and the syllabus looks terrific). So how out-of-date could it be?

I've been thinking about love and marriage for a couple of other reasons. One is that Beth and I had the privilege of attending a non-Jewish wedding last Friday afternoon. Because of Shabbat, we were able to stay just for the ceremony. But observing the ceremony was enough to see 1) the ceremony was way more about love than about commitment, 2) there is a beauty in a love-centered ceremony that is different from a ceremony carrying the baggage of 2,000 years of history and tradition, and 3) there is a freshness to the newness of creating and reciting your own vows. I'm not at all saying that Jewish wedding ceremonies do not have a beauty of their own. But just as joy is different from happiness, a ceremony more focused on commitment, on continuity, on faithful adherence to tradition is going to feel different from what we had the pleasure to be a part of last week. Different isn't better or worse. Just different.

Also, I'm not saying that Judaism doesn't have its love moments in the context of marriage. We learned one of the most vibrant episodes of love and marriage as part of the *Daf Yomi* cycle this week: the famous story of Rabbi Akiva and his wife, whom we know to have been named Rachel, which is treated on page 63a of Tractate *Ketubot*.

You will remember it. Rabbi Akiva was an unlearned shepherd until age 40. He then met and fell in love with Rachel, the daughter of the wealthy Ben Kalba Savua. Rachel saw Rabbi Akiva's potential (largely through his humility), urged him to leave her to go study in yeshiva, and was promptly disinherited by her rich father. Rachel patiently (and impoverishly) waited for Rabbi Akiva's return 12 years later. He returned with 12,000 students. As interpreted by a supportive comment made to another, Rachel encouraged Rabbi Akiva to return to yeshiva to learn for *another* 12 years. When he finally returned after 24 years, he was one of our greatest sages, about whom the story is told that Moshe Rabenu listened to him and was awestruck by his greatness and erudition. On his second return, Rabbi Akiva came with 24,000 students. The students tried to push Rachel away from approaching Rabbi Akiva; she had refused to put on fine raiment and was dirt poor. It was then that Rabbi Akiva told his students to leave her alone, using the immortal phrase:

שְׁבִקוּהָ, שְׁלִי וְשִׁלְכֶם — שְׁלָהּ הוּא

Leave her alone, as my Torah knowledge and yours are actually hers.

Don't tell me we don't have love and marriage stories.

I did sense one discordant note in the story, and I wonder if anyone else saw it and has an insight. The Talmud here goes out of its way to teach that, when Rabbi Akiva returned the second time, he was followed by 24,000 of his students. It is about them that the Talmud mentions that they tried to keep Rachel from falling at the feet of Rabbi Akiva. The discordance arises from the fact that the Talmud elsewhere mentions the same number of Rabbi Akiva's students, 24,000, when it identifies those who perished during a plague occurring between Pesah and Shabuot, cut down because they lacked mutual respect for each other. Are these the same students? Was this the same interpersonal behavior as exhibited toward Rachel, which, from people so great, merited so harsh a punishment?

I wonder whether, at this time of year, this discordance has as much to teach us as the paean to love and marriage that is the story of Rabbi Akiva and Rachel.

Built Back Better.

The 1% Solution. That we need more volunteers should not overshadow the number who are signing up. Thanks this week to Anna Schechter Zigler, who is using her 1% to help with child "things" in and around the synagogue.

Deaf, Dumb, and Blind. Last week's email discussed the Talmud's teaching and demonstration of the profoundly important willingness to listen to different, even divisive, positions and countering them, not with bile or rancor, but with calm and lucid arguments, not by squelching freedom of speech and thought but by dignifying the speech and speaker even when we disagree. The thought prompted Dr. Meyer Solny to send in an example where post-modernity's disregard of that fundamental tenet has led a renowned scientific journal to declare that it reserved the right to reject even sound, scientific papers out of a concern that "people can be harmed indirectly" by research that "inadvertently ... stigmatizes individuals or human groups." *Quel sad.*

Songs Happy and Sad Revisited. David Vorchheimer deserves full credit for raising the following interesting issue tangential to the fact that in Hebrew songs and liturgy we often change the meaning of the same words by using different melodies. David says, sure, but what about the many songs with the same melody is employed with very different words. David points to this phenomenon in citing the Czech composer Bedřich Smetna's piece, [The Moldau](#) (especially from about minute 1:07 through 2:07) and the very similar sounds of Hatikvah, Israel's National Anthem. Everybody knows that comparison; it is usually attributed to both composers being influenced by a cognate source, an earlier European folk melody. David cites an interesting Ph.D. thesis pointing not to any sinister plagiarism or even to that cognate source but to an even earlier tune of *tefillat Tal* by Sephardic composer R Yitzchak bar Sheshet. Now here is the great part: All of us at Shearith Israel hear that very *Tal* melody every year! David's *point*, in turn, is related to a point Rabbi Rohde has made; the melodies of some of our most pious and moving *piyyutim* started life in very different uses. We are transported by some of our Tisha B'Ab *kinot*, for example, yet some of those very melodies were taken from medieval Spanish songs of love found or lost. We should beg Rabbi Rohde to give a lecture on the topic.

The Great Word Challenge. Steve Biespel wants to add to the list with

- ReJewvenation

I – I mean the judges – would have nixed the suggestion except that they found his accompanying joke funny:

*What do you call an old Spanish speaking Sephardi like me?
A Ladinosaur*

The Great Phrase Challenge. Also, I'm reluctant to close the list for voting while really great suggestions continue to come in. Laury Frieber suggests the Ladino phrase:

- *Kaminando kon buenos*

Laury says it means "let's walk with good", or as one source put it, "we should surround ourselves with good people." What a joyous new year's phrase.

Meyer Solny offers an equally inspiring phrase, and beautiful words of Torah to support it. The entry more than makes up for his depressing thought about "Woke Science", above. In *Parashat Ekeb* (*Debarim* 11:12), the Torah says:

מִרְשִׁית הַשָּׁנָה וְעַד אַחֲרֵית שָׁנָה
From this/the year until next year

Why does "the year" at the start of the Torah's verse, with the definite article, morph into simply "year" by the end of the verse? In a variously attributed thought (but, Meyer, explains, most commonly ascribed to the Satmar Rebbe), we often begin a new year by saying or thinking that this will be The Year for self-improvement, for abundance, for blessing, for spiritual growth. Meyer continues:

But, sadly so often, by the end of the year, it turns out to have simply been yet another, undistinguished year.

And so, Meyer's phrase for us here and now is The Year. It's a beautiful thought. Kudos.

Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom.