

May 16, 2024

Dear Shearith Israel family,

Our Year of Hope. We are at Day 23 in the Counting of the Omer. The observances at the beginning of this week, of Yom Hazikaron and Yom Haatzmaut, were more meaningful for me here in the US than I can remember. That is especially true with Israel's national Day of Remembrance, Yom Hazikaron. Our Congregation hosted a well-attended program on Sunday titled *Celebrating Jewish Italian Heritage*, featuring our longstanding member, Dr. Roberto Levi, with invaluable assists from Reverend Edinger and Baruch-Lev Kelman. We added both Psalms and Memorial Prayers to our services on Sunday night and Monday. On Monday evening we co-sponsored a community-wide program marking the transition from Yom Hazikaron to Yom Haatzmaut. Since the start of these commemorative activities, as each of us entered our Synagogue, we passed, observed, and wept at the photograph of a fallen soldier, a relation to the Edinger family:



In the end, and apologies for linking to a song (even a sad song) during a time when many of us are not listening to music, we all wept – and we shall continue to weep – for the losses our people have sustained in the war. Here is Don Mclean's [Waters of Babylon](#), which could have made it into the GOAT Short Song list were it not so sad to listen to it now.

Probity in Judaism. It should not be controversial to suggest that truth is at the heart of our individual and collective moral universe. Indeed, we have many times observed that, in our Congregation's seal and motto, "truth" is one of the three pillars on which our Congregation, and the world, rest (the other two being "justice" and "charity"). Interestingly, *Pirke Avot* itself does not appear to contain an explicit aphorism suggesting that truth is at the center of our moral universe. Yet there is no dearth of support for that proposition elsewhere in our literature and liturgy (two points each for places in our corpus where truth is set as *the* or *a* primary virtue).

I would like to test the proposition whether truth is our chief virtue in Judaism. I'm not asking whether truth is *a* virtue in Judaism, to be considered along with many other virtues. Rather, the question is whether it is such an important goal that other goals – maybe not all but most -- are subject or subservient to it. Here things get interesting.

Let's begin with Rabbi Rohde's stimulating essay on the back page of last Shabbat's handout (for Parasha Kedoshim). Rabbi Rohde takes issue with a statement by the popular Rabbi Dennis Prager, who seems to say that lying is an actual sin. Rabbi Rohde nicely undermines that proposition – but in its place Rabbi Rohde argues not that lying per se is a sin but that false or deceitful dealings are sinful.

Even as watered down by Rabbi Rohde, is he right? Does Judaism, for example, condemn white lies? Send me a source that says it does or doesn't; two points await.

The Talmud not infrequently pits truth against other important goals, such as making peace between people. And it is not always clear which wins out. One doesn't have to look too far to arrive at a real challenge to the Truth Priority hypothesis. This week, the worldwide Daf Yomi community is learning pages 74 to 80 of Tractate Baba Metzia. We have begun a new Chapter in the Tractate (Six), this one dealing primarily with the relationships between employers and employees and what obligations renters have to owners. The very first Mishna on page 75b includes the following statement:

שָׂכַר אֶת הַחֲמֹר וְאֶת הַקֹּדֶר לְהַבְיָא פְּרִיפְרִין וְנַחֲלִילִים לְכַלֵּה אוֹ לְמַת, וּפּוֹעֲלִין לְהַעֲלוֹת פְּשִׁתְנוֹ מִן הַמִּשְׁרָה, וְכָל דְּבָר
שָׂאֲבָד וְנִחְזְרוּ בָהֶן, מִקּוֹם שְׂאִין שֵׁם אָדָם – שׂוֹכֵר עֲלֵיהֶן אוֹ מִטְעֵן.

*If one hired a donkey driver or a potter to bring posts [piryafarin] for a canopy or flutes to play in honor of a bride or the dead, or if he hired laborers to bring up his flax from the retting tub, i.e., the container of water in which flax is placed in the first stage of the manufacture of linen, and likewise any matter that involves financial loss if not performed on time and the laborers reneged, if this occurred in a place where there is no other person to perform the task, he may hire replacements for a large fee at the expense of the first workers, **or deceive them to get them to return to work.***

The Mishna here is dealing with how an owner or employer can react to less-than-forthright behavior of workers. It explicitly says that the employer may deceive the workers!

The principle is quite intended. Indeed, the gemara discussion on this rule appears on page 76b. It too is explicit on the permissibility of deception:

. כִּיצַד מִטְעֵן? אוֹמֵר לְהֵן: סָלַע קִצְצִיתִי לָכֶם – בָּאוּ וְטָלוּ שְׂתִימִם. נַעַד כַּמָּה שׂוֹכֵר עֲלֵיהֶן? עַד אַרְבַּעִים וְחַמְשִׁים זָזוּ.

How does he deceive them? For example, he can say to them: I fixed a sela as wages for you; come and take two. And up to what amount may he hire at their expense? Even up to forty or fifty dinars. He can pay other laborers far more than the first laborers' wages to ensure that the work is completed.

I get the fact that the employer is in extremis and, by hypothesis, can't find anyone else to do the work. Still, is this an approach of a Trust Priority legal system? Send in your thoughts; this is a profoundly important issue.

When All Else Fails, Rely on the Greatest Jewish Past-time: Complaining. I can't leave these pages of the Talmud without observing that, when the Talmud wants to explain how there is no legal basis for a challenge or claim, it doesn't say that. Instead it says that what the aggrieved party has is the right to complain. It is SO Jewish – or so deeply ingrained a caricature of being Jewish – that I had to share it with you. So for example, in the Mishna quoted above, when both employer and employees act improperly towards each other, this is what the Mishna says on 75b:

מתני' השוכר את האומנין והטעו זה את זה – אין להם זה על זה אלא פרהעומת.

MISHNA: With regard to one who hires artisans or laborers, and they deceived one another, they have nothing but a complaint against one another, and they have no financial claim against the deceptive party.

Similar terminology appears throughout these pages to indicate that there is no legal claim. Hilarious.



Lil AshkeNazX
@DrDavidInDC

Stares in Jewish



Dr. Nicole LePera  @Theholisticpsyc · Apr 18
Bonding through complaining isn't connection.

Pirke Avot. I'm hopeful that everyone recognizes the Hebrew of *Pirke Avot*; that way I can avoid our Rabbi's ire, since no one seems to get the translation right, according to him. I would go with *Sayings of the Sages*, or *Sage Sayings* to capture the double entendre, which have the virtue of being a relatively accurate translation and, best I can tell, never used before.

Having gotten over the super-hurdle of translating the title, I wanted to make a simple point about this small and priceless Tractatette of the Talmud, which by tradition we study (a chapter a week) in the 6+ weeks between Pesah and Shabuot. The simple point is that it is worth studying *Pirke Avot* annually, and not just because there is something gratifying about being part of a broader community doing the same thing at the same time. In that respect it is like *Daf Yomi* – the fellowship engendered by the act of participating is deep and abiding. But there is an additional reason supporting an annual review:

There are adages and aphorisms in *Avot* that are truly matchless in our literature, and it is marvelous to be reminded of them once a year.

This past Shabbat, for example, the Jewish world studied the Second Chapter of *Avot*. The last two statements in this Chapter include the following:

רבי טרפון אומר, היום קצר והמלאכה מרובה, והפועלים עצלים, והשכר הרבה, ובעל הבית דוחק:
Rabbi Tarfon said: the day is short, the task is abundant, the laborers are indolent, the reward is great, and the Master is insistent.

הוא היה אומר, לא עליך המלאכה לגמר, ולא אתה בן חורין לבטל ממנה

He [Rabbi Tarfon] used to say: It is not your duty to finish the work, but neither are you at liberty to neglect it; . . .

I challenge anyone to come up with simpler, more powerful, more poignant remonstrations. Also, for Chapters 3-6, I'm taking suggestions for simple, powerful, and poignant entries from them. Send them in.

Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom. *B'yachad* (united together). טוב יהיה *Yihiyeh tov* (things will be good).

Louis Solomon, Parnas