



אור חדש

New Light Congregation

5915 Beacon Street, Pittsburgh PA 15217 • 412-421-1017 • info@newlightcongregation.org

New Light News March 2023

The Purim Piñata: A Short Story by Rabbi Jonathan Perlman

Shem Smallowitz was one wild kid. He was always getting knocked down. He was always getting beaten up. But Shem did not mind it one bit. It got him attention. He was a human punching bag. At 5 feet when he was 11 years old, getting punched got him laughs and he hardly felt the pain.

He was invited to a birthday party and every kid got to take a swing at the piñata. Shem was last, of course. He was used to it. Last to be picked for a kickball team. Last to be picked for the baseball team (“play the outfield, Shem, way out”). He picked up the bat and began swinging in the air. The father brought him a stool so he could get a boost to the ragged donkey filled with candy. He swung and got a hit. He closed his eyes. Another hit and then another hit. Because of all previous hits, the string was frayed and gave way. The piñata hit the ground and wild Shem began pounding it with gusto. The poor donkey piñata just wouldn’t come apart! “Shem,” the father said, “I think we’ve had enough. Let me give it a try!” “No, no, no!” said Shem afraid for his victory to be snatched away. “Shem,” the father said calmly, “Give me the bat before someone gets hurt.” Hurt? Shem thought to himself and paused with the bat raised in the air. He smiled a wild smile and began swinging at everything and everybody. He hit the folding chair. He hit presents on the nearby table and scattered all the boxes to the ground. The other kids tried to wrest the bat from Shem. He hit one kid on the backside. Then he took on the refreshments breaking the glass punch bowl. “Shem, you idiot!” screamed one boy, “You are ruining the party!” Four boys rushed him and pinned him to the ground. One wrested the bat away from him and smacked him but good. Then the other boys began hitting him with their fists. The father came over to break it up and Shem was laughing, clearly beaten and even bloodied like a losing fighter in the ring. The father picked up the bat, gave one look at Shem, and crossed to the unbroken piñata lying on the ground. He lifted the bat and gave it one good smack and then another and then another. The cardboard interior yielded and a gash opened; the candy spilled out. “Now that’s how you break open a piñata,” declared the father. Finally: candy for all.

Shem Smallowitz had not ruined the party. After he was contained and his wounds tended to, he stayed and celebrated eating cake and ice cream. And as the story of “Shem and the Piñata” was shared around the neighborhood and at school, Shem’s embarrassing loco fit was described as great entertainment. It was better than remembering a funny Three Stooges short. Shem was as resilient as the tough little stuffed donkey they were trying to knock down. He had become the “Human Pinata.”

As he grew older, Shem thought that he could make this piñata thing work for him. Punches and being knocked down became a kind of clowning for him. It would make up for the geeky form that his body would develop into. Instead of a jock, he would be a joke. He could make people laugh. Physical humor would win him attention and friends. It might even make him some money.

He stayed on the birthday circuit as a teen, combining magic tricks that would blow up in his face and juggling balls that would hit in the head. He even had one trick that involved setting his hat and hair (a wig) on fire which he dosed with a fire extinguisher and resulted in a face caked in white. Peals of laughter. At a time when Saturday morning T.V. featured the best in cartoon violence, Shem had become the punching bag he always wanted to be.

As he got older, Shem looked for opportunities for hilarious masochism. He tried his hand at studio wrestling dressing as a costumed character called “Mad Mitchell,” a kind of “Gorgeous George” minus the wrestler’s build with a flamboyant costume and cape who gets creamed every time he steps in the ring. It was pure acting and the audiences ate it up.

It was good money but the lumps were beginning to annoy Shem. Every December he dressed up as Santa and made the rounds at the department stores with plenty of padding and a big white beard. He could pull it off and allow any kind of child to sit on his lap.

“What do you want for Christmas little boy?” he would ask.

“I want a rifle!” he said.

“Well, I am not sure that is a safe toy for your age,” he said, “You might poke your eye out.”

“I want a rifle! I want a rifle!” screamed the boy and he began to beat his fists on Shem. The mothers standing around laughed. But when a small two year old wet his lap at Kohl’s one Saturday morning, it was getting too much even for a masochist like Shem.

Now there is a Jewish holiday called Purim that Shem did not know much about. He knew it was about twirling noisemakers to drown out the name of Biblical Persian anti-semitic named Haman. He had never heard of more vicious customs played out by Jews in small shtetls in Eastern Europe that including hanging and burning Haman in effigy and even hiring local peasants to take a beating in the garb of Haman. All of this was rumor and kept clandestine. Jews could face real trouble if they made war on a reputed anti-semitic dead or alive. These beatings were not depicted in pictures or photos. They were part of the secret stagings of Purimshpiels connected to holiday celebrations.

The Lithuanian-born Yiddish journalist Abraham Sachs recalled that in the town of his youth there was an annual Purimshpiel where the role of Haman was given to Sheikeh, the butcher’s son who “attired himself in a pair of worn out soldier’s boots with clinking spurs, a three corned hat, and huge turned up mustachios.” Sheikeh was paid for his efforts and had to endure a lot for his few pennies. What he had to endure was the pent-up rage of the entire community against the “Hamans” from whom they suffered all year. “Each and every one of us would take it out on Haman, one with a good dig, another with a wallop; this one would pinch him, another would spit at him, everyone considered it a mitzvah to inflict torture on this Haman” (Abraham Sachs, *Worlds That Passed*, p. 531).

One day Shem received an invitation to meet with Mory Blukstein, the president of the Kliskover Community, the remnants of Jews who once lived in Klisko in Belarus and still practiced their customs in the U.S. Mr. Blukstein had heard about Shem’s penchant for playful torture and was willing to pay a high sum for him to dress up and play Haman for their annual Purimshpiel. “Wow! What a gig!” thought Shem to himself. The Purim gig would pay more than three gigs combined!

The Kliskovers met in the basement of a building in a poorer part of town. Shem descended the crusty steps downstairs lit up by a single 30 watt bulb. The cellar wasn’t any different in the dim light or appearance. Its grubby below ground interior looked like it could have been used for illegal cock-fighting. And the Jews who gathered in the space – the so-called “Kliskovers”—didn’t look like any Jews that Shem had grown up with.

The Purimshpiel began. Shem was dressed with the boots and large black three-cornered hat.

He wore a silver “V is for Vendetta” mask with two slits for eyes and a mean frown. Haman’s part started on page five. The audience hushed as he spoke his first words about destroying all the Jews. That is when the eggs began to fly. He raised his voice and they kicked him. Gravel was flung. An old woman spit in his face. It got worse and more violent from there. Children in the back snapped slingshots with rolled up balls of mud. Someone flung his hat to the floor and the children came out of hiding and stamped on it. “Boooo! Hiss! Down with Haman!” came the screams. Shem was surrounded on both sides. He dropped his script. What started as ceremonial fun had turned into terror. This was worse than being a human piñata. Now Shem as Haman represented all the put downs and humiliations that the world directed at Jews. He had become the target of revenge, a necessary cathartic experience for all played by a nobody of a man. The shots from the potato guns sent him reeling. A man came after him with a hot poker. Obscene laughter rang out from all sides. Shem had to make an escape.

He tore himself away from women ripping his clothes and he skipped up the steps into the open air of the night. They were chasing him. Across the street, there was a church, indoor lights still on filtered by the colored windows made of stained glass. He forced its wooden door open and hollered “Help! Help me!” He looked up at the figure of Jesus bleeding from his wounds above the altar. “What kind of irony is this?” thought Shem. An old woman suddenly appeared. “Can I help you young man?”

“Aiiii!” Shem gulped for air. He forgot that he was still wearing the soldier boots. “Its Purim and they are out to kill me! ”

“What is this Purim?” asked the old woman.

At that moment, Shem fell on the floor. All the pain that had struck him through the years was supposed to be about fun and attention. He had managed to deflect the fury of fists and humiliation sown by the seeds of hatred into pleasure. But now the anger was about terror and trauma and he could feel the buried resentment of this people. Once a year came this expression for annihilation and the turned-in fury was allowed to fly free.

As he raised himself, he headed to the door, peeked and then poked his head out to the street. The night was chilly. The street was empty. Shem ran and ran quickening his pace, tearing off his costume, feeling for the first time that night that joy of one who has escaped pain for freedom.

Private Meetings with the Rabbi

During this critical time, as we approach the trial of the Tree of Life shooter, Rabbi Perlman will schedule private time in his office after 5:00 P.M. to counsel those who need to express whatever feelings may be on their hearts. Our rabbi is a certified chaplain who counsels patients and families for UPMC. Please write to him preferably at perlmanrav@gmail.com or call 412-421-1017 to set up an appointment.

Hebrew Class for Beginners

Beth Shalom is offering a new, virtual class starting Tuesday, March 7, from 7:00-8:00 PM. The course is 12 weeks long, the cost is \$100, and the instructor is Rabbi Sara Rae Perman. For information and to register please see <https://bethshalompgh.org/beginners-hebrew-class/>

Garden Bricks

If you would like to order bricks for the New Light brick garden please contact Barbara; she has a couple more to order.

Presidents' Report March 2023

TOLI/MEMORIALIZATION

Following an exchange of correspondence between the 10.27 Healing Partnership and, separately, with Michael Bernstein at TOLI, the Board had further discussions at its February meeting concerning its decision to step back from participation in the Memorialization Working Group. A meeting was held to try to mitigate the problem. The MWG is adamant that it will not accept the New Light appointed representatives as members; TOLI will not share information or progress about the TOL rebuild with New Light separately. The Board considered three options: appointing other representatives, re-confirming those appointed and formally withdrawing from the process. The Board voted to reconfirm its appointed representatives, Stephen Cohen and Barbara Caplan. Our involvement, if any, will only be during any public discussion of these projects.

TRIAL

The trial of the Pittsburgh synagogue shooter is scheduled to begin April 26th in downtown Pittsburgh. The trial will be in four phases:

- Guilt Phase
- Application of Death Penalty Phase (should the death penalty be considered in this case)
- Death Penalty Phase (should the death penalty be applied)
- Sentencing Phase (Victim Impact statements to be read during this phase)

The Courtroom is very small with limited seating. We are working with the 10.27 Partnership and the U.S. Attorney's Office on attendance at the trial.

A letter was sent to Adrienne Howe from the US Attorney's Office requesting information on the process for the Congregation to submit a Victim Impact Statement as part of the Sentencing Phase. A meeting is scheduled with the Attorney's Office and congressional leadership for March 1st to learn about the drafting of a Victim Impact Statement, which will be distributed to members upon request. Please send your thoughts and suggestions for inclusion in the Victim Impact Statement to info@newlightcongregation.org. The Board will craft and adopt a statement at its April meeting.

Congregational representatives have been asked to provide testimony during the trial.

As part of the preparation of the trial, we have planned a congregation-wide **Workshop on Reactivation Trauma** via **Zoom** for **March 1, 2023 at 7:00 P.M.** The two presenters will be Megan Cook, Center for Victims Therapist, and Shawn A. Brokos, Federation Security Director. You should have received a mailing about this talk. Ms. Cook will talk about the reactivation of trauma and how to navigate your feelings and reactions in an empowered, compassionate way. As an addition, we have asked Ms. Brokos to cover security – both for our buildings and ourselves – before and during the trial. This meeting is only for New Light members.

Please try to attend this March 1st session. Use the same Zoom connection as for Shabbat.

Board Meeting

The next board meeting is Sunday, March 5 at 10:30 A.M. Use the same Zoom connection as for Shabbat.

Purim Celebration

New Light's Purim celebration begins Tuesday, March 7, at 5:30 P.M. Meet in the ballroom to hear the Megillah, followed by dinner and a Purim shpiel: Esther Meets the Blues - with Julie Harris and Rabbi Perlman. Please reply to Barbara at 412-421-1017 or barbaracaplan@comcast.net.

Beth Shalom invites everyone to join them on Monday, March 6, at 5:45 PM for the reading of the Megillah, featuring Rabbi and Beth Perlman as funny readers.



March Birthdays

Roselle Solomon
Barry Werber

March Anniversaries

Barbara & Arnold Epstein

Reminders

- To purchase Memorial Plaques, Simcha Tree Leaves or Stones contact Ileen Portnoy
- To purchase bricks for our "Garden of Freedom" contact Barbara Caplan
- To purchase Giant Eagle gift cards contact Karen Coburn
- For information on our cemetery contact Stephen Cohen

NEW LIGHT CONGREGATION

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Rabbi
Co-President/Social VP/Yahrzeits
Co-President/Cemetery/Website
Membership
Sisterhood
Treasurer/Men's Club
Onegs
Recording Secretary/Simcha Tree/Plaques
Religious Committee
Corresponding Secretary/Calendar

Jonathan Perlman
Barbara Caplan
Stephen Cohen
Debbi Salvin
Sharyn Stein
Harold Caplan
Hugh Casper
Ileen Portnoy
Carl Solomon
Janet Cohen

barbaracaplan@comcast.net
info@newlightcongregation.org
dgsalvin@pobox.com

haroldcaplan@comcast.net

ileenportnoy@gmail.com

janet@newlightcongregation.org

New Light Congregation March 2023

8 Adar 5783 - 9 Nisan 5783

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
5 12 ADAR Board Meeting, 10:30 AM	6 13 ADAR Fast of Esther Megillah Reading, Beth Shalom, 5:45 PM	7 14 ADAR Purim NL Purim Celebration, 5:30 PM	8 15 ADAR Shushan Purim	9 16 ADAR	10 17 ADAR 6:01 Services, 7:00 PM	11 18 ADAR Ki Sisa Parshas Parah Services, 9:45 AM
12 19 ADAR	13 20 ADAR	14 21 ADAR	15 22 ADAR	16 23 ADAR	17 24 ADAR 7:09 Services, 7:00 PM	18 25 ADAR Vayakhel - Pekudei Parshas Hachodesh Services, 9:45 AM
19 26 ADAR	20 27 ADAR	21 28 ADAR	22 29 ADAR	23 30 ADAR Rosh Chodesh Nisan	24 31 ADAR 7:16 Services, 7:00 PM	25 3 NISAN Vayikra Services, 9:45 AM
26 4 NISAN	27 5 NISAN	28 6 NISAN	29 7 NISAN	30 8 NISAN	31 9 NISAN 7:23 Services, 7:00 PM	