

Dear friends of the Harvonah Memorial Foundation—and we trust that we do have some loyal friends out there, even though they haven't been returning our calls for some time—we know that in these trying times (at least we're trying, or at least trying to avoid trial), the most important thing is to stick together, and we are nothing if not sticky (some say it's all of that spilled wine, but we prefer to believe it's our magnetic personalities). And we appreciate, value, honor, and laud (but how do we really feel?) your commitment to the important, nay (who let the horse in?) crucial work of our Foundation over these many, many, many, many years (how many is shrouded in mystery, which our lawyers say is extremely fortunate for us). And yet we suspect that even amongst our most committed supporters (or those who should be committed), there is sometimes a glimmer, a hint, even a whisper (down the lane or perhaps up) of that most pernicious of emotions, doubt. Doubt! Hard as it is for us to believe (and we've believed a lot in our time), there are those among our supporters who are beginning to feel that their association with the Harvonah Memorial Foundation might be in vain (or in the plain, or possibly in Spain, but purely for tax reasons). In the immortal traditional words that we say at the Foundation when beset by troubles: Uh-oh.

Luckily (and we do have quite a knack with those dice), we have recently had some success (usually by accident) in researching precisely the subject of the need to stick together in trying times, which it turns out (to no one's surprise but our own) has been a recurring theme in Jewish history. After trying and failing to discern if and when there were ever non-trying times (though could we interest you in some information on drying times?), we have discovered that the great ocean of Harvonah knowledge has thrown up a veritable pearl of wisdom on the importance of human connection in a heretofore unknown tractate now felicitously (just before the rent was due) brought to light, entitled *Masechet Haverai Shaveh* or, perhaps (because we're having a little trouble with our vision at the moment) *Masechet Hevrei Shav*. In the spirit (100 proof) of friendship, we offer it to you now as this year's lecture (for a minimal fee but hoping for a maximal reward), and we quote (more or less accurately – it's anyone's guess) from the text and commentary on page 29b:

"Rabbi Lo Na'im taught: From where do we know that Harvonah was the best friend a person could have? His name itself indicates it: [by rearranging its letters we get] *haver naveh* ['beautiful friend'], as it is written, *ki kolech 'arev umarech naveh* ['for your voice is sweet and your face is beautiful'] [Song of Songs 2:14]. Harvonah was not only a sweet singer and a great beauty but also the best friend of King Ahashverosh, which was why the king trusted his advice at difficult times, such as when Vashti deserted him, as it is said, *K'nei l'cha haver* [literally, 'buy yourself a friend,' but here meaning 'any port in a storm'] [Pirkei Avot 1:6]. For it is written, 'The proposal pleased the king and he acted upon it' [Esther 2:4]."

Rashi excitedly spills a lot of ink bringing 72 other verses in the Tanach that use the word *haver* ["friend"], none of which have anything to do with this text but what the heck? He notes, though, that the king's role is such that he would indeed have a hard time finding any friends, not to mention being extremely busy and having no one understand him, just like a certain vintner and Torah commentator he could name, cough cough. In that circumstance, it might indeed make sense to purchase a friend if one were available for a reasonable price, which presumably Harvonah was, and he wonders if there are any reasonably priced friends [*ami a lourer* in Old French] around in medieval France, just theoretically, if one were in the market.

Tosafot, the great medieval commentators, are uninterested in the plain sense of the text—where would be the fun in that?—but are fascinated by the idea of buying friends, leading to an extremely long cataloging of every Talmudic text that talks about slavery, with particular attention to the issue of the person who is half slave and half free. They wonder what would become of someone who was half a hired friend and half a real friend, then begin to suspect that they have no true friends and content themselves with beating up on Rashi just to make themselves feel better.

Modern commentators focus on what they feel is the implied connection in the text between Vashti, who served unwillingly as Ahashverosh's queen until she defied him, and Harvonah, who perhaps served equally unwillingly as the king's friend. Perhaps, they completely illogically posit, Harvonah was really Vashti in disguise, come to teach the king a lesson in a repetition of the Tamar-Judah trope, since the text does say that Harvonah was beautiful AND uses feminine language to describe him. Then they get really excited about having used the word "trope" in a sentence and high-five each other for a while. When they calm down, they write a few books on the subject, hold some seminars, and then publish a festschrift before admitting it was, after all, a bit of a stretch and ascribing the idea to some wrong-headed graduate student.

"Rav Kav responded: *Kashya!* [literally, the opposite of credit, but here meaning 'you missed something really obvious, dummy!']. It was not Harvonah's proposal that the king accepted and acted on but rather that of the king's servants who attended him, as it is written, 'The king's servants who attended him' [Esther 2:2]. And is a servant a friend?! Rather, [we should understand] Harvonah [as] *haverhon* ['their friend']—Harvonah was a friend of the servants, never a friend of the king. He [Rabbi Lo Naim] replied: *La kashya!* [literally, a low blow, but here meaning 'not so fast, mister!']. Harvonah was a friend to all, and the servants passed along his suggestion to the king in his name, just as Esther reported to the king in the name of Mordechai [Esther 2:22]."

Rashi slips into a long disquisition on the social structure of the palace in Shushan, but since he writes the whole thing in medieval Aramaic, no one can follow a word of it. He does switch back to Hebrew just in time to remember that Abraham was called a friend of God [Isaiah 41:8], and he takes this as a sign that friendships between the powerful and the weak are not only possible but also a very good idea and possibly one of the 613 mitzvot. He quotes a midrash from an otherwise unknown source that connects Abraham, Vashti, Harvonah, Esther, Mordechai, and the king, but then dismisses it because it departs from the plain sense of the text. Finally, he wanders off mumbling something about "wine makes glad the heart of man" [Psalm 104:15].

Tosafot get fixated on the exchange between the two rabbis, going back and pulling together every time they encountered each other, who won, what the weather was like, and which inning it was, and concluding that neither one of them was really a very good debater. Instead, they find some other sages they like better and leave the subject matter of friendship far behind, since the process of salting the sacrifices seems much more relevant and likely to result in deep insights into the Sages' minds, which, as usual, is their greatest preoccupation.

Modern commentators speculate that Harvonah represents a democratizing strain in the tradition that undermines and calls into question pretty much everything else we know about the ancient world and its social structure. They continue to babble on about the “carnavalesque” and Bakhtin until they have to be hosed down just to get them back into the faculty lounge, where they admit that given the state of historical epistemology, they really know next to nothing but agree to keep it quiet for the sake of their students, who, they feel, need their help to stick together.

The experts at the Harvonah Memorial Foundation recommend that all who want to view themselves as righteous should follow Harvonah’s heroic example by finding friends everywhere, making outrageous suggestions to susceptible rulers, and sticking together when times get tough, resulting in (we hope) a large (figurative) reward (but we’ll take cash or check). Thus will we merit the time of Moshiach, may it come speedily in our days, Amen, Selah.

This concludes the Harvonah Memorial Lecture for this year. Please always remember and never forget to donate generously to the Harvonah Memorial Foundation to continue its support of this lecture series. Note that many halachic authorities (only 99% of whom have at one time or another been paid advisors for the Harvonah Memorial Foundation) argue that this support constitutes *matanot la’evyonim* – the mitzvah of giving gifts to those in need that is mandated on Purim. As a friendly reminder, you can find the Foundation and donate on the web at: [www.withoutharvonahwherewouldyoubey.org](http://www.withoutharvonahwherewouldyoubey.org)

Hag Sameah!