

December 31, 2020

Dear Shearith Israel family,

*The News Knows*. I know what you're thinking: that I really mean to refer to Jimmy Durante's quip, "the nose knows". Durante, a popular Twentieth Century performer, singer, comedian, used that self-referential comment to describe both his own, famous "schnozzola" as well as his powers of perception. But that's not what I mean. Nor am I referring to the pseudo-science of "nasology". With serious adherents even as late as the late Nineteenth Century, nasology, no kidding, sought to draw scientific inferences from physical contours of the nose to moral character and mental abilities - not unlike what phrenology did with the shape of the cranium. To a nasologist, by knowing the nose, one knows all.

No, I really mean that the "news knows" - or at least it thinks it does. The news today seems to think that something is newsworthy *because* the news reports it. It's the application to information of what Don McLean taught us about value, in the enduring title and main refrain from his 1970s non-hit, "*The More You Pay, The More It's Worth*". Frankly, it all seems a bit backwards.

Given what the news thinks is news about COVID-19, it is getting harder even to abide the otherwise-informative weeklies; dailies have long been totally insufferable. Both give us a false sense of meaningful change. Change itself? Oh for sure. But *meaningful* change, now that's, as they said in *The Wizard of Oz*, a horse of a different color. Philip Pullman railed against measurement without imagination (in *The Secret Commonwealth* he says, "We need to imagine as well as measure"). I'm more concerned about measurement without meaning. We are inundated with data and other statistics, but we cannot process them to garner meaning in the flash of a day or even of a week. The numbers in New York aren't improving - not for infections, more serious disease attributes, or deaths. Yet as a community we are functioning nearly as well as one could expect. Rabbi Soloveichik continues to teach and inspire hundreds of us twice weekly. Our other clergy, Rabbi Rohde and Reverend Edinger, are ever-present promoters of our liturgy. Our outdoor and indoor services are operational for those in need of a minyan or simply wanting to pray in a (small) community. We will have to keep

this up for *months* longer, at least. Demanding daily or even weekly swings of meaningful data is folly -- a fool's errand that will end in compliance fatigue and dispiritedness. Let's not sink into that mire of misery.

*The end of The Beginning.* This Shabbat we will read Parashat V'yehi (so simple to write in Hebrew; so impossible to spell or transliterate in English). With it we end Sefer Bereshit, literally ending The Beginning. I know you think I'm going to reprise my Churchill "end of the beginning" quote ([see my Oct. 8, 2020 email](#)). Nope. The end of Sefer Bereshit is a true end of a true beginning (actually, "The" Beginning, if you catch my drift). The First of the Five Books of the Torah is full of narrative, but in the main it is a narrative of strife and rivalry. The stories portray the inevitable pushing and shoving of any beginning, before the pieces are set and the players know their roles. Remarkably, by this, the last of the parshiot in the Sefer, strife begets cooperation, a community is born and acts with unity. Earlier in the Sefer siblings killed each other (Cain/Abel), stole from or cheated each other (Jacob/Esau), vied for the affection of the same husband (Rachel/Leah), sold each other into slavery (Joseph, by his brothers). In Parashat V'yehi, grandfather blesses grandchildren (the only time in the Torah), and all the brothers stand together to be with their father (Jacob) on his death bed. All twelve brothers stay in the fold (or on the *derech*, as some of us say). When Jacob dies during this week's narrative, and Joseph's brothers fear retribution for the past, Joseph again forgives them, saying "G-d meant it for good, . . . to save [many] people alive" (Ch. 50:20). The entire family, as an extended unit of 70+/-, travels to Egypt to live in a separate enclave (Goshen), by themselves. So all's good, right?

Well, not quite. What's wrong is that our people, our religion, we, were not made for idyllic living off on our own. Nation-building, the stuff of Sefer Shemot, is the indispensable sequel to Bereshit's end of showing individuals and families finally able to get along interpersonally. We had individual and familial beginnings, but if we are true to our purpose, we as a people will not have an end. We will go on and on, a light unto the nations (which I don't think includes trading in a black market for the COVID-19 vaccine - but that's another story). And to be that light unto the nations we have to be exposed to the jarring vicissitudes of the world.

We have to play our roles announcing simple, strong messages. Like our own Congregation's motto: Truth, Charity, Justice. Simple, strong, enduring.

*Slapped with a wet fish.* I discussed last week a variety of ways to keep the depression demons from our doorsteps. And the challenge quiz was for the *earliest literary* reference to being slapped (in the face) with a wet fish. The entries came in overwhelmingly in favor of the famous Monty Python skit. Both Guy Reiss and Aura Bijou tie for first place for submitting that funny, but wrong, answer. Monty Python is not literature (if you disagree, DON'T email me), and the skit was written 60+ years after my choice. In Proust's 1913 *Swann's Way*, Dr. Cottard, speaking of Odette, says, "I'd rather have it in my bed than a slap with a wet fish" (Modern Library translation, 1992, p. 363). If anyone could check the original French, I might be willing to reconsider. I also admit that the Monty Python skit is funny, whereas Proust, *peut-être*, not so much.

*2021: Let's roll out, and with, the opportunities.* You're not going to get me to bemoan 2020 or hand wring our bad fortune. I'm proud that our Congregation has not fallen prey to fallen spirits. And we are realistic that we are going to be in this stasis or status quo for well into next year if not beyond. Think of it like this: 20/20 is the line on the eye chart that shows normal vision when you are young and enviable good fortune when you are older. The number measures sight, good or bad. 2021, however, is not so much about sight but about opportunities. In the roll of the dice, there is only one number that captures all the possibilities, all the opportunities. It's the number 21. Each die forming a pair of dice has 21 spots. The numbers on the six sides never add to 20. There are essentially a limitless number of possible combinations of 21 numbers (calculate it and win a BIG prize). 2021 will be what we make of it. And what we make of it will be grand-- not just good-- if we, as a community, animate our actions with the principles we all agreed to promote at the beginning of our Jewish year (5781): Help Others, and Celebrate our Blessings (see my email of September 17, 2020).

Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom. Happy 2021.

Louis Solomon, Parnas