

January 28, 2021

Dear Shearith Israel family,

So Close and Yet So Far Away. It's really only that one line from the 1970s single hit made famous by Frankie Valli (*My Eyes Adored You*) that comes to mind when trying to assess how we are navigating the pandemic. Three weeks turned into three months turned into a full year. This week we observe the fated anniversary of the first observed case of COVID-19 in the U.S. in Washington State. Instead of light at the end of the tunnel, we are witnessing two or more mutant strains wreaking havoc anew. Both are more contagious *if* less deadly (a debatable proposition with current data from the U.K.) than their progenitor. Israel portrays the extremes: world record vaccination coverage, dramatically lower serious illness and deaths already being observed, yet (even ignoring the painful civil unrest) spikes of the disease have led to a travel embargo such that visitors and citizens alike can neither leave nor enter the country.

As a community, we have learned that successful avoidance of COVID-19 weariness and despair requires three things (**three** again!):

- First, follow the paths of safety that our medical experts have mapped. These paths were not well trodden a year ago. They are ingrained in the mature and serious now. Tire of the simple tasks of masking (soon to be double-masking?), distancing, hygiene, etc. at your, and our collective, peril.
- Second, resist the urge to try to calculate when things will be back to normal. We *will* best this beast. Even at two steps forward, one step back, one will finally reach the destination - on average though it will just take twice as long at that pace (do the math). If we don't know the pace, and we don't know the retrograde motions that will face us along the way, then we cannot calculate the end. Trying to will only frustrate more.
- Third, in the meantime, actively pursue the two goals we set for this Jewish calendrical year back in September 2020, at Rosh Hashana time

[\(Sept. 17, 2020 email\)](#): Celebrate our Blessings, and Help Others. Two simple tasks; one monumental psychological effect.

And you think we are complainers!? I've spilled many a keystroke on the virtue of Helping Others. Here I want to say a word about the other pillar of our year: Celebrating our Blessings. I am really not embracing Pollyanna (what would Beth say!). I'm not asking that we rejoice in "more time with the kids", "more quality time with loved ones", more time to smell the roses and the cleaner air or to do quality projects left undone by the hectic pace of pre-pandemic post-modernity. Those are silver linings to the worst economic downturn since WWII. Walk down Broadway and behold the empty stores; you will need the uplift of Paved Paradise to avert depression. *Erewhon*, the great utopia idyll of Samuel Butler's masterpiece, is an anagram for NOWHERE! One problem with the silver linings is that they are forced. Who loves enforced time with our kids, for example, when those same kids are being derailed from pursuing their own lives? The forced nature of even good things runs counter to the mental well-being that arises from being human, with a semblance of control over our destinies.

This week's parasha, *Beshallah*, makes the point clearly. In Egypt, towards the end of the bondage, the Israelites experience the blessings of amazing miracles. The world to that point has never witnessed such feats of direct intervention by the Almighty on such a grand and communal scale. The Israelites are literally escorted out of a country that first had enslaved them for 210 years and then began killing them. They then witness the parting of the Red (extra "e" optional) Sea, the vanquishing of their enemies, and the supernatural salvation of the entire people (certainly most of them according to our Sages). How could any human being not be changed, profoundly and permanently, by that state of awareness of Truth?

Yet the celebration of blessing lasted only briefly. Within three verses, the Israelites are complaining (*Shemot* 16:1-3). I mean really complaining. They complain about the water. Then about the water again. Then about the food. Then about everything, literally reminiscing that the killing fields of Egypt were preferable to having their every need cared for by the Almighty. Our destiny as a

People was reshaped - a whole generation needed to wander and die out - because we just couldn't see the blessings as blessings. Why not? Could it be because these were enforced blessings? Could it be because these manifold blessings emanated from grace and not even partly from our own deeds? This is what Rabbi Soloveichik is talking about when he differentiates our initial receipt of the Ten Commandments -the Almighty did all the work, we were passive, and the happy story lasted but a few hours before being despoiled by the Golden Calf - from the second set of Tablets, where human agents quarried the stone, carved the Tablets, and were in part responsible for their destiny "under God". Those Tablets lasted.

That doesn't mean there aren't blessings worth celebrating this year. Oh my Lord there are! Blessings aplenty have arisen from the Almighty-human partnership that is the very basis of our creed. Within months of COVID-19's outrageous outbreak, "we" figured out how to avoid being killed by the mad coronavirus. "We" have developed a worldwide vaccine in less than a year that will save literally billions of lives from serious sickness or death. As a community, we must celebrate these and other real blessings. Our Clergy and others who are giving classes and other programs are phenomenal. Celebrate them. The friends we can't hug but can call and video with are precious as well. Celebrate them, too. Our communal institution, our sanctified *Esnoga*, will bring us all lasting pride and joy if it remains functioning even if mutedly during this scourge. Help make that happen. Celebrate our blessings, and we *will be* close even when our ultimate goal is yet so far away.

Brief postscripts. There are three (!) short items I want to follow up on:

Transitioning Power. Given the mature, orderly, proud-to-teach-our-children example of the transition of power that we in America have just witnessed, I would like to summarize a story in this week's daily learning of Talmud. *Pesahim* 66a tells the story of Hillel's arrival in Israel from Babylonia. He is sitting in the House of Study long-controlled by members of Ben Betera family. A *halakhik* question arises concerning an event that takes place about once in 14 years - how to handle the Temple service when Pesah falls on Shabbat. Now the Ben Beteras

has had a firm grip as heads of the House of Study and indeed Heads of the People. And when Hillel answers the question and demonstrates his mastery over that and other subjects, what do the Ben Beteras do? The Talmud teaches that immediately, without dispute or rancor, they hand the leadership over to Hillel. How did the Talmud know that we would so desperately need this story this week?

Through a Glass Darkly, Illumined. I knew that if I demonstrated my ineptitude glaringly enough, a real scholar would step in to help figure out who had the saying first, our Talmud or Paul in Corinthians ([see my posts of Jan. 14, 21, 2021](#)). Rabbi Dr. Richard Hidary (former Shearith Israel Distinguished Rabbinic Scholar and dear Congregational friend) to the rescue. Rabbi Hidary traces the clear/cloudy imagery all the way back to the Fourth Book of the Bible, *Sefer Bemidbar*, and in particular Moshe's prophecy and his sister Miriam's reaction to it. Rabbi Hidary believes that the specific language used in the Talmud and paraphrased in Corinthians, "*aspaklaria meirah*", is first used by Paul, but "Paul is deriving it from [earlier] Second Temple sources that build off of Moshe". Brilliant.

Now that we have that settled, who wants to tackle how a door swinging on hinges, a metaphor also used in this week's Talmud study (68b) but clearly used in Proverbs (26:14) long before the common era, shows up as "I am the Door" in John 10:9?

Name that Decade: When posting the winners and runners-up last week, we did say that the Judges would consider votes for reordering and for a resoundingly better choice. We received a bunch of votes to keep The Mulligan Years at # 1. I did get a suggestion of another winner, the Ground Hog Years, from our Trustee and Segan Karen Daar, who had already tied for second place with The Rising Twenties. Karen doesn't love the Mulligan metaphor; she feels it's a bit of a downer. She prefers her new entry, Ground Hog Years, as a take-off on Ground Hog Day - the monotonous repetition of monotony that I've written about too repetitiously already ([May 11 and Nov. 5, 2020](#)). Karen feels that her choice signifies not being able to move forward until we get it right. Of course she is

right in a sense. But I'm sticking with The Mulligan Years, since TMY is a modern abbreviation for Tell Me Why (don't believe me? Ask the kids). To paraphrase P.T. Barnum, that abbreviation nicely captures the feelings of all of us, at least some of the time. GHY, on the other hand, is a modern abbreviation for Go Hang Yourself. That one, well, is yucky. Say, does anyone know any Jewish Mulligans?

Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas