

January 7, 2021

Dear Shearith Israel family,

*Trending Unpretty.* In many geographic areas of interest to us, most every metric measuring COVID-19 spread has worsened in the past week. As our Deputy Executive Director Bonnie Barest (who just got engaged to be married, mazal tob!) describes it, "the numbers are ugly". They are surely unpretty. Upstate, we greeted a new strain of the coronavirus, B.1.1.7 lineage, now speeding to a zip code near you.

We have not been experiencing upticks or infectious spreads within the congregant pools we are able to measure. Your COVID-19 Working Group therefore believes that the protections we have in place for those attending services, especially with Paved Paradise open for business, appear to be working reasonably well. And so we will carry on for now, though we must adamantly adhere to the adage that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure (who first said that?).

In the mid-1930s, Mayor Fiorello La Guardia looked for two characteristics of New Yorkers that would help them weather The Great Depression. He identified "patience" and "fortitude" - names he then bestowed on the two lions bestriding the entrance to the New York Public Library. The names are aspirational descriptors of our community today. Unless we move to Israel quickly, most of us will be waiting awhile for the vaccines. We are taking one week at a time.

*Measured, Moderated, Modulated.* How fitting for this week's alliteration to be in the key of "M". (If you're just noticing that I often fall into alliterations, then, well, I'm a failure as an emailer, true, but how attuned are you as a reader?). The letter "M" is smack dab in the middle of the English alphabet. There are as many letters to the left as to the right (as many vowels on each side, too, if you count "y" as a vowel). "M" is also an attractively symmetrical letter - just look at it. What a comforting alliteration to start the new calendar year with.

Comforting, and apt. We saw last week that, completing *Sefer Bereshit*, the Jewish people had learned to stay in the middle lane: in between the constant

activity of Abraham's openness to the world and the greater passivity flowing from Jacob's setting of boundaries. The gentle exercise of moderation didn't last long. Within a handful of verses into *Shemot* we are already making enemies - evidently for doing nothing more than thriving in a new land and becoming numerous. A new Pharaoh assumes the throne and worries about our siding with an unknown, unidentified enemy. What is his first reaction, 15 verses in? Kill the Jews, starting with the males. The reaction strikes us as real and not surreal only because we know that our ancestors have faced it countless times in the 3,450 years since the time of Pharaoh.

Extremism does seem to chase us through history. But what I think is more noteworthy for this missive is one way to see how the Torah shows us how to react to such extremism, in this case Pharaoh's decree of death. The Torah immediately introduces us to Shifrah and Puah, the midwives. These modest, unassuming characters receive from our sages and commentators, and deserve, huge applause and accolades. They saved the Jewish people. They went about their business saving lives calmly, quietly, without aggression, extremism, fanfare, or self-congratulation. They weren't alone in exhibiting those traits. When the Almighty confronts Moses later in the *parasha*, he too is self-effacing, virtually silent. He repeats so many times, "I'm not worthy", that the Lord seems to have had to go off script to dragoon Aaron into the narrative. Even when, later still, the Almighty empowers Moses with ever-dazzling miracles, Moses's first, second, third, etc. attempts to achieve freedom are peaceable. The Jews are so numerous as to arouse hatred, yet they don't exercise the power they are said to have. Maybe some of *us* want our heroes to be big, brash, brutal. The Torah, however, teaches that, to be effective, leaders and followers should be moderated, modulated, taking the middle path unless they have no other choice. We are not to shrink from confrontation to achieve the goals that have been set for us. And we do need to achieve our goals. An "A" for effort is not enough. But the method is as much the message as is the end result.

*Beginning, Again.* *Parashat Shemot* is not just the start of a new Book of the Torah. As I suggested last week, it begins our story in a new dimension, not just of individual or even families of Israelites but that of The Jewish People as a

nation. The transition calls to mind Cole Porter; I'm sure it does for you, too, especially his 1935 "beginning" themed song, *Begin the Beguine*.

I categorically reject the suggestion that the song came into my addled brain because *Begin Again* and *Begin Beguine* (I think pronounced "BE geen") sound similar. That would be shallow and superficial word play. Rather, the great song deeply resembles us as a people at the beginning of *Shemot*. The song is slow, mellifluous, easy going -- until you try to mess with it by actually playing the harmonics. Then it becomes knotty and nettlesome. Also, the song was unpopular initially - kinda like having a lot of enemies. Indeed, the play in which the song was sung (*Jubilee*) failed. When the great clarinetist/band leader Artie Shaw tried to resuscitate the song in the late 1930s, RCA executives told him it was "a complete waste of time". The orchestration - making the song into so much more than the sum of its parts - unified the piece and made it great. The song went on to sell over 6.5 million copies (a real number back in the day) and was officially entered into the National Register in 2012 (whence my facts, from a history by Tom Nolan).

What resembles us as a fledgling nation is not the song's curious title (a Beguine is a Martinique dance, but Porter couldn't have been thinking of that). Rather, the song's strength is its stable yet enduring length. It's the longest popular standard ever written, says composer Alec Wilder. It has one unified theme of a humongous 16 bars, and the theme repeats endlessly. It has no bridge. Its essence has no end. As a nation formed in *Sefer Shemot*, we begin a new, never-ending song of our own, to take our rightful place in history. [Give a listen](#); it will not disappoint.

*Gazillions of opportunities await:* Last week's challenge promised BIG prizes when asking how many opportunity sets could we create for ourselves and our Congregation in 2021, assuming that we started with a mere 21 discrete states (like 21 dots on a throwing die). There were two right answers, and our congregational friends got them both. One entry, from Dave Marks, is simply 21!, or 21 factorial. The calculation yields the tidy sum of 51,090,942,171,709,440,000 possibilities. The other answer, also correct in my mind, is from Aura Bijou, who

excluded symmetrical answers (4x6 is the same as 6x4) but also treated each face of each die as unique. Her answer, 720, is also right. In both cases the answers prove that the rhetorical question was sound: There are essentially endless ways for us to think positively and act constructively in the face of what is temporarily a negatively charged universe. We just have to do it.

Our very next collective daily page of Talmud (*Pesachim* 48b) tells of the case of three women kneading, preparing, and baking bread in a single same oven. They were *fortunate* to have each other, just as our European ancestors centuries later were *fortunate* when all of them in same community used the same oven to keep their food warm for Shabbat afternoon lunch. That is the stuff that makes communities. Modernity, certainly post-modernity, was stealing this from us. We need to return to it. When the confusing convulsions of COVID come to a close, we will have communal bread baking and communal food warming. That still leaves 51,090,942,171,709,439,998 or 718 other ways to make 2021 a wonderful year for us as a community. Start sending in your ideas now.

Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas