

November 11, 2021

Dear Shearith Israel family,

*New Contests Away!* We are in a good place communally in staying safe from Covid-19. We are basically back to pre-Covid rituals, though if it stays too cold inside the Synagogue on Shabbat morning, with all our windows open, we are going to revert to a shorter service. *Force Majeure*, as they say in the biz. This doesn't affect Friday night services, or *Friday Night Lights*, which have been glorious. There has been no reported spread of disease from within our Synagogue or Paved Paradise. Frankly, all that we are missing is, well, YOU. In the Synagogue's upcoming Winter Bulletin now going to press, I speak to this briefly. Now all I want to say is that, if you are comfortable joining us in person, please do. Warm and happy, convivial community-building needs your help. And as much as I enjoy writing to you, greeting you in person is even better!

The new contests/challenges announced last week have been fun – at least for me. In the first, I solicited suggestions for neologisms and new usage of old terms fitting for the Covid-19 world we are now inhabiting. A number of great responses were received; I think two are excellent, one from Aura Bijou and one from Dr. Jim Nuzzo. In the neologism category, Aura offers “Coronation”, which she defines as “a country that is ripping itself apart over the constant mask/vaccine policy changes.” Her point is dour but SO insightful. In the new use of an old term applied to Covid (like “breakthrough” cases), Jim (as a “double doc”, he has some credibility), says that “when I was in med school the worst thing, if you were a patient, would be to hear the team outside your door say you were a ‘great case’. That is NEVER EVER great.” (Jim offered another really funny observation that I want to share with you. Referring to my reference last week to the great Dire Straits classic, [Sultans of Swing](#), Jim says:

“I always thought the ‘Sultans of Swing’ was the Yankees’ Murderer's Row...ah to be young and only baseball mattered.”

Jim's great reference is to the Yankees of the 1920s – thought to be among the greatest baseball teams of all time. Relatedly, the term is also used to refer to the greatest hitters in the 1927 team lineup: Earle Combs, Lou Gehrig, Mark Koenig, Tony Lazzeri, Bob Meusel, and Babe Ruth. Yes I had to look these up; in our family only Beth knows these by heart. Jim, great!

Send in more.

In our second challenge, I sought the source of our Sages' saying that there is no joy like the removal of doubts. It is an adage that requires careful internalization and introspection. Dr. Meyer Solny – who is deeply learned in Jewish teachings and also a fiend at finding things on the internet that no one would believe were actually there – cites to a source finding the original source of the saying in the Book of Proverbs, or *Mishlei*. But Meyer and I agree that the source in Proverbs does not really say “no joy like the removal of doubts”. The closest Meyer comes is in citing a Seventeenth Century commentary called *The Citadels*, by Rabbi David Altshuler. The citational reference is solid, but that's way too late, and so the contest remains open – though Meyer gets two full marks for his finds.

*Happily, Some Things Never Change.* We are speeding to the end of Tractate Rosh Hashana in the daily Daf Yomi cycle. If you want to join in daily learning, these are great Tractates to begin with. Nowadays, the Daf Yomi cycle in general is quite accessible given clear and lucid translations as well as abundant on-line learning websites (I have my favorite four – happy to share them with you). The current Tractates are especially good ones to sink one’s brain into. Tractate Rosh Hashana is only 35 pages (double-sided). It is followed by four relatively short Tractates as well, so there is a real sense of forward movement. Try a few; you will not just be participating in singularly one of the greatest communal enterprises on the planet. You will also be able to observe some of the greatest insights into the human condition and the most extraordinary feats of logic, legal reasoning, and erudition, just to name a few of the benefits.

Or, if you are busy, you can continue to read my kibitzing about particularly interesting topics that the week’s Talmud learning brings to life. It is a pale and inadequate substitute. Nonetheless, this week there are two vignettes that I want to share. In the end, the two are one – and the one is the unity of the Congregation that is Israel, or *Klal Yisrael*.

First, on page 23b, the Tractate addresses how the governing Beit Din made sure that people came to testify when they sighted a new moon. Before the Jewish calendar was set (certainly by the Geonic period in the Seventh Century), witnesses were needed to declare a new moon. So our Sages needed to find ways to incentivize witnesses to take the trouble to come and testify to what they saw. If witnesses thought that their testimony would be redundant and cumulative, and thus of little or no interest to the scrutinizing judges, they would not bother to show up. The Talmud teaches us that the Beit Din did two things. First, even though two witnesses were sufficient to declare the new moon, the Beit Din would listen to testimony (or at a minimum ask questions of) every set of witnesses who came, even if there were many times more than was needed. Second, the Beit Din would be sure to have food for the witnesses. These acts created an incentive for witnesses to show up. And it is just too extraordinary that 2000 years ago Jewish institutions were feeding Jews to ensure attendance at community events.

Second, on page 32b, the Tractate contains what I think is among the shortest Mishnaot in the Talmud. It is one line long, and it addresses the temporal question of when during Rosh Hashana the shofar is sounded. The Mishna rules that the shofar is sounded during the additional service, or the Musaf. The Gemara’s discussion immediately explains why. You’re not going to believe the answer. The answer given is because there are more Jews in Synagogue by Musaf.

How can you not be tickled by these stories? So much has changed, yet so little has changed. Over a year ago, I reminded us all of the truism that *plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose*. “The more things change, the more they stay the same”. The epigram is attributed to the Nineteenth Century French novelist Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr (I admitted last year that as of then I had not read any of his novels. Truth be told, I still haven’t. Has anyone?) Surely we have Karr beat by nearly two millennia. If you want Jews to attend services, FEED THEM. And as much as we might all want to get to services on time, the fact remains that we will continue to blow shofar only during Musaf, which is when people actually get to shul.

*Half-Full Report.*

*Reimagining Paved Paradise.* Here are two new suggestions for what we might do with our fabulous green space. One won't work; the other might. The one that won't work, from anonymous congregant, is for us to collect all or at least many of the magnificent statues now being removed from various important and hallowed spaces around the nation and put them in Paved Paradise. One that comes to mind is the statue of Thomas Jefferson that the New York City Council is removing from its Chambers. They haven't figured out where to put it. So why don't we take it? We are apolitical about so many things; we can do that here, too. After all, our congregant [Uriah Phillips Levy](#) spent time, energy, and a fortune renovating Jefferson's Monticello home.

The suggestion that might work is to hang our favorite signs in Paved Paradise. Recall last year our contests for the best two- and three-word slogans (see my emails of [Aug. 27](#) and [Sept. 3, 2020](#))? Here are finalists in the two- and three-word categories. How about great signage on Paved Paradise? Can anyone do a mock-up or rendering or Photoshop?



Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas