

November 25, 2020

Dear Shearith Israel family,

*Thanksgiving 2020.* We await with "restless anticipation" (a phrase that you highbrows will rightly attribute to Jean-Paul Sartre; me, I think of Paul Simon, *Poem on the Underground Wall*) the festivities of Thanksgiving Under COVID-19. At 8 a.m. tomorrow (Thanksgiving Day), we are scheduled to continue our Congregational observance, done since before 1789 (the first federally "official" observance of Thanksgiving). Our brief in-person service (like all services these days, by pre-registration only) will be followed by some marvelous programming that I described in detail in my email of last week, that is open to everyone, near and far, and that you can find [here](#). I urge you to log on, and don't lose out. The one item that I did not mention last week is the more-recent scheduling of what is no doubt the best of the best of programs: an intergenerational zoom-fest during which our homeward-bound (speaking of Paul Simon) college students and our Congregational elders will be able to interact. There are few more beautiful ways to celebrate Thanksgiving. Minyan for the rest of the week, including this Shabbat, will be the same as last week. We will post the exact location of our outdoor Shabbat services as soon as we can. If events overtake this planning, we will advise you asap.

*Balaam Is Not An Ass, And the Almighty Don't Lie!* I'm reaching out to Chapter 22 of the Fourth Book of the Torah, Numbers, to remember a key line in the story there narrated. That story is about a prophet (you could also call him a diviner or seer) and his donkey. The prophet is riding his donkey, en route to curse the Jewish people. The donkey sees an angel blocking the way whereas the diviner does not. More remarkable (or at least it's a close call), the donkey also talks to the prophet. The confusion, I assume only to me, is that the donkey isn't named Balaam; Balaam is the prophet, who may act like a donkey/ass but isn't one. The real ass in the story, the actual donkey, isn't given a name by the Torah. This is unfortunate for such an enlightened and important actor in the narrative. We remember the story as involving Balak and Balaam. But Balak turns out to be the muck-di-muck who hires Balaam to do the cursing, and Balaam, we said, is the

prophet who has neither sight nor insight. Who will speak for the speaking donkey and demand that he be given a name?

But that's not why I'm reaching out to this story. I'm reaching out to it because of a line that Balaam utters, in Numbers Ch. 22 verse 19. There Balaam says:

Arise Balak, and listen; give ear to me, O son of Zippor. God is not a man, that He should lie, or a son of man, that He should change His mind. Does He speak and not act? Does He promise and not fulfill?

Maybe I'm trying too hard. It shouldn't be so hard to prove that G-D DON'T LIE! No no no. Now, I could have used a guitar pickin'/harmonica song by that title, sung by gospel/R&B artists Glenn Kaiser and Darrell Mansfield. But even the American music aficionados who usually comment on my occasional rock or folk references may not immediately know that one (does anyone have a better citation?). And it's important to prove that the Almighty doesn't lie because of this week's Parasha.

*The Lord's Promise; Jacob's Counterpromise.* This week's parasha, Parashat Vayetze is to Jacob what the prior three parshiot were to Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac. The parasha this week is Jacob's story. Jacob is the perfect Patriarch for our current travail, for two reasons. **First**, Jacob's story is one of facing adversity, basically all the time and in every imaginable way. He was wrestling with his brother in the womb (Ch. 25:22)! Then he goes through a profound episode of guile with his father (Ch. 27); then he needs to work for Laban for 20 years while mediating adversity between his wives and trying not to be outsmarted by a very astute beguiler Laban (Ch. 30); and in next week's Parasha Jacob will wrestle with an Angel of the Almighty and confront his MUCH BIGGER brother. The list of challenges goes on and on.

How did Jacob face all this adversity? Jacob exhibits three qualities: He was honest, as when he later criticizes his own sons Levi and Shimon for their role in the Shechem episode. He never loses his faith, and because of that remained optimistic through tremendous travail upheaval in his life. And, finally, he kept his promise to the Almighty:

The scene showing Jacob's promise is not as pyrotechnic as some of his other stories, but imho it leaves a triumphant legacy that defines both the Jewish people and other peoples of virtue. Jacob has just had his famous "ladder dream" (Ch. 28:12). He was just told by the Almighty that he will follow in the footsteps of his father Isaac and grandfather Abraham, witnessing the early stages of a mighty and numerous nation. The sturm and drang is then over. Just then Jacob makes a vow, a return covenant. He says the following:

"if G-d be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat, and raiment to put on, so that I come back to my father's house in peace, then . . . of all that Thou shalt give me I will surely give the tenth unto Thee". (Ch. 28:20-22).

I want to put aside the bargaining or quid pro quo aspect reflective of his grandfather's relationship to the Almighty. The Patriarchs seem to have had the moxie to get away with that, but as I've said, I wouldn't try too much of that at home. What is astonishing to me is that Jacob's ask of the Almighty is so moderated. He was just promised the world and eternity to boot. But what he asks for in return are merely bread, clothing, and a safe return. And for that he pledges a tenth of all he has.

This is the second reason why Jacob, soon to be renamed Israel, is such a fitting figure to all of us, Israelites and non-, now. Whatever our sacrifices during COVID-19, most of us have enough to eat, clothes to wear, and a safe living environment. The Torah is teaching us that, with only those bare minima in hand, we immediately need to look beyond ourselves and begin focusing on helping others. The Almighty "don't lie" and for millennia has honored the promise made to us. We need to honor the return promise that defines us as Jews. Ten percent of our earnings isn't ours except in the sense that we are entrusted with the obligation to use it to help others. This is a source of the nationally imbued generosity that I've adverted to in my last two emails. It is a generosity that has taught the world the virtue of charity. It is one of the three fundamental pillars on which our Congregation has stood since its founding ([see my Semper Fi email of 10.15.2020](#)).

*Israel Paving Shearith Israel's Paradise.* Can anyone seriously doubt that Jacob would have dug deep and donated to our project? Alas, he's not here, and I can't figure out whom to call to ask on his behalf. So for the last time - well, for *nearly* the last time - I'm coming to you. Congregants and friends have pledged about \$200k towards our goal, but we are \$50k short right now. And the last \$50k is the hardest. We are \$50k short because this is a tough year for everyone. I keenly know that, which is why we are seeking relatively modest amounts from everyone.

Please help us pave paradise. If you gave an amount but can spare a little more, [hit the link](#) and give. If you have not yet pledged, please do all your circumstances permit. [Hit the link](#). This past Shabbat, I had the pleasure of learning page 11 of Tractate Taanit with our daughter Lia. Wouldn't you guess what the Talmudic discussion was about? It was explicitly about coming to the aid of others in distress, about not separating yourself from others' hardships. You might not see the critical need for the outdoor space. Or this outdoor space might not be the outdoor space that you expect to use. But we have congregants who do and will, and my view, and the view of our Board of Trustees, is that our Congregation will need that space as it is now being configured for at least 3-5 years. Please be as generous as you can be. I promise that I will stop nagging once we hit \$250k.

*P.S.* With apologies for the length of this email, I have to add one thought, from our dear friend and Congregational stalwart and trustee Avery Neumark. I was explaining to Avery that the \$50k shortfall was putting at risk having actual flooring for Paved Paradise -- meaning that we would put the protective tent on the small stones that have been installed across the site to help drainage and even out the ground. Insightfully, and beautifully, Avery reminded me of the midrash, on this week's Torah's scene of Jacob's placing a stone under his head (Ch. 28:11), that each of the 12 stones fought for the merit of being "the" head stone. Nothing worked until all the stones fused together and became one. And it was that stone, on that very spot, that became our Holy Temple, home to all Jews forever. So too here. If we all come together as one, we can finish this

project, make a unified surface from the many small stones, and come together as one community.

Thank you all. Bless us all. Happy Thanksgiving, and early Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas