

November 4, 2021

Dear Shearith Israel family,

Break, Through. The slow and steady return of communal activities reported last week continues. Last Friday night in our Sanctuary, with the choir singing from the loft and Rabbi Soloveichik's live *Friday Night Lights* talk, was special to the point of magical. Shabbat morning services welcomed back the glorious Rossi *misheberach*, our prelude to taking out the Torah. After a year-and-a-half+ it was glorious. Kiddush was on Paved Paradise. And it was paradisaical, as more of us were there, safely enjoying a convivial moment. The colder weather is bringing us indoors for Shabbat services and for weekday morning services; we remain outdoors for weekday evening services. Come to where you are comfortable. But come, please come.

We are neither too far out in front nor in the rear. We are exactly where we are – and quite plausibly where we “should” be. Larry Kobrin captures something important in observing that Shearith Israel's cautionary approach to getting back to a Covid-19 normal “puts a wrap of reality on some of the euphoria we now see.” I love his turn of phrase – especially since he spells “wrap” with a “w” and not with just the “r.” “Rap” would feel more brittle or harsh than I think is warranted.

Words in the time of Covid-19; that could be an email unto itself. So many neologisms – and so many new uses of previously familiar terms pressed into service to mean new things. “Breakthrough” was invariably a good thing, no? Breakthroughs in science and technology, or through a defensive line. Who doesn't think of The Doors masterpiece (vapid lyrics), [*Break on Through to the Other Side*](#). Covid-19 has robbed most of us of all that positivity (and come to think of it, positivity is no longer a good thing either). Now we use the term “breakthrough” as the infectious disease docs and epidemiologists have long been using the term, to denote Covid-19 disease in vaccinated people. I for one think it's high time for a new contest! Send in your best neologism or new usage for what we are going through now. So for example, “damndemic” might be one that rhymes with “pandemic” and “endemic”, has an obvious meaning, and doesn't get read to the *kinder* but still might amuse. Or, if you are really tired of not being able to get back into work, or just mighty fed up with how long it is taking to get back to pre-Covid routines, you might announce “break through”, rather than “breakthrough.” Can you beat these? Probably. So try.

Master and Disciple. No, not the great Patrick O'Brian novels – that's *Master and Commander*. I mean the stirring punch line of surely one of the great stories in the Talmud. In this week's Daf Yomi, or daily Talmud study, tens of thousands of Jews worldwide (who has a more accurate estimate?) learn a lively tale on the famous page 25a of Tractate Rosh Hashana. The story is told in the Mishna. This is rare; unlike the Gemara, the Mishna is not typically known for complex stories and narratives; it is a source of law, of halacha. The story on 25a is studded with our greatest Sages. Both the story and its teaching of unity are profound.

The Talmudic discussion opens by teaching that witnesses to a new moon must surely have been in error if they testify to having seen the new moon on day 30 of the previous month but then not to have seen it on the next day. As only our Sages could so colorfully put it (and get

away with it), such testimony is like saying that a woman on one day gave birth but on the next day her stomach is still so large that it is “between her teeth.” Rabban Gamliel, who was head of the Beit Din who heard the testimony, believed the witnesses, since their testimony comported with other celestial calculations and intercalations he had made. To Rabban Gamliel, it was quite possible for witnesses to see a new moon on day 30 but not see it the next day (because of cloud cover, for example). R’ Yehoshua disagreed and was confident he could disprove the witnesses. If he did, then *rosh hodesh* would not be on the same day that Rabban Gamliel’s Beit Din announced. Confusion would reign. Rabban Gamliel felt he needed to exercise the authority of the Beit Din. As a result, Rabban Gamliel directed R’ Yehoshua to “come to me [in Yavneh] with your walking stick and your money” on the day that Kippur would fall on R’ Yehoshua’s reckoning. This is the famous story that many of us know.

But the story on 25a continues along two significant paths. First, it is at this point in the story that yet another great Sage, Rabbi Akiba, enters the fray. R’ Akiba tells R’ Yehoshua that he might indeed be right, but that in all events the Rabbis needed to follow the lawful decisions of the governing Beit Din. Who remembers R’ Akiba as part of this act? Second, R’ Yehoshua actually makes the trek to Yavneh, as Rabban Gamliel directed, on the day that was Kippur according to R’ Yehoshua. And when he does, it is Rabban Gamliel who rises in respect, kisses R’ Yehoshua, and says, “Come in peace, my master and my disciple! My master in wisdom, and my disciple in that you accepted the ruling of the Beit Din.”

What a powerful story – and not just a nice story, as it might be in the Gemara but as a source of normative law, in the Mishna. The Sages in the story are not some nobodies; they are Titans of Talmud (not to be confused with the [Sultans of Swing](#), the great Dire Straits classic). These are among our greatest thinkers, teachers, leaders. They are working through the making of the halachic system itself. Had the story gone the other way, chaos – or certainly indeterminacy of halacha – would have ensued. So not only did R’ Yehoshua show courage in creating unity; R’ Akiba showed courage in siding with process rather than “correctness” in some cosmic sense. And Rabban Gamliel showed magnanimity and greatness in victory by showing humility – the greatest sign of greatness. And with the kissing and hugging at the end – it’s a perfect story of solidarity.

Our Sages say that there is no joy like the removal of doubts (for a lovely [d’var Torah](#) on the subject, see an audio file excerpt of Rav Zev Leff, who, when I was young, I had the inestimable privilege of learning a bit from). (Two points for the actual source of this adage; I can’t find it in Yerushalmi Sanhedrin 4:2, where another source points me, but I can assure you that, if Rabbi Leff says it’s from our Sages, then it’s from our Sages.) But one can remove doubts with a hammer or with humility. The Mishna itself, as a source of law, has shown us the way – with kisses and hugs and humility.

Half-Full Report.

The End of Alliteration. Faith Fogelman thought she would give me a shock treatment to cure my Excessive Alliteration Syndrome, or EAS. Her strategy was to come up with an impressive

alliteration with *twelve* Ps! Poor Faith; I'm not cured, any more than the Evil Alex was cured after that unforgettably horrible scene in *A Clockwork Orange*.

Reimagining Paved Paradise. I was sitting pretty smug, thinking I vanquished any competition with my three Paved Paradise reimaginings last week. My first entry was the famous Hieronymus Bosch painting, *Garden of Earthly Delights*. In fact no one sent in anything as famous. Alan Zwiebel, however, stole the show, sending in, simply, hilariously, the one-liner:

“ShabBosch shalom.
AZ”

Thank you all. Bless us all. Hodesh tov (tonight). Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas