

December 17, 2020

Dear Shearith Israel family,

*Neither the worst nor the best of times.* I have the inestimable privilege of being Parnas of this great institution. Less well known, and certainly less well regarded, is the fact that I also Chair the club "Promising to Throttle the Next Person Writing . . ." The Club is widely known by its catchy and easy-to-pronounce acronym, PTNPW. PTNPW's mission this week is directed against comments such as, oh it's been quite a year, or "a year like no other" (from the New York Times, ashamedly), or something else equally banal. What's the *chiddush*, the great new insight in telling us, "Breaking news!", "This just in!", "This has been quite a year"? None whatever. We've all lived through it. We all experienced it up close and personal. Do we really need somebody telling us the blithely obvious? We all get it.

This race to the bottom is wrongheaded for another reason as well: The suggestion that the end of our current challenges will coincide with the end of the Gregorian calendar year may help sell newspapers or propel us through internet ads but is almost certainly wrong. I said two months ago that maybe - maybe - we might be approaching the end of the beginning (quoting Churchill, [Oct. 8, 2020 email](#)). That was before communities near and far exhibited the stunning ineptitude in following simple rules designed to keep all of us safer. The new calendar year is as likely to bring more lockdowns as any easing of restrictions. We are going to be together in this for a long while yet. It surely doesn't make me feel any better constantly to read that it's been Hell but come the sound-track cheering at Bowl games on January 1, whew, it will all be behind us. Neither is true.

Jews are charged with bringing the world light in the midst of even deep darkness. That is one of the insights of Hanukkah. This is not our darkest year. In the Northern Hemisphere, at our latitude, we did just pass the earliest nightfall. So in that respect our part of the world is at its darkest. But we are slowly coming out of that - sunset is getting later each day now. The flickering of the Hanukkah

candles help us and others see that. (Send me your best example in literature comparing Jews to candles or candle flames. BIG prizes await (hint, American, Twentieth Century - but I'm open-minded).) In our little corner of the cosmos, we at Shearith Israel are blessed with three things: continuous teaching and lecturing by Rabbi Soloveichik, the uplift that even a muted participation in our cherished rituals gives us, and the benefits to each of us of helping others. In combination, these show us the way to stay as optimistic as we can while we wait patiently for the numbers to improve and for effective vaccines to be distributed and administered.

*The Burden of Being Joseph The Righteous.* The Parasha this week is Mikketz. It opens with the words, "And it came to pass at the end of two full years". At first glance, the phrase is prosaic; on analysis, it's astonishing. The Torah narrates that Joseph, having already spent as many as ten years in prison (if you want the possible calculations, email me), spent two more "full years" in prison after he correctly interpreted the dreams of the Butler and the Baker. Why, having spent so much time in jail already, did Joseph have to spend two *more* years before Pharaoh took him out to interpret Pharaoh's own dreams (the two-in-one dream of seven kine and seven corn). Our commentators explain that, by asking the Butler to remember him when the Butler left prison, Joseph did not show sufficient faith in the Almighty and hence needed two more years before his story could continue to more dream interpretation, this time of Pharaoh, Viceroy-hood, saving Egypt, the brothers' big reveal, and so on.

Is the idea that Joseph lacked faith something that only those with great faith can understand? At age 17 the poor kid was thrown into a pit full of snakes and scorpions, essentially left for dead. He was then kidnapped by Midianites, sold to passing Ishmaelites, schlepped to Egypt where he was re-sold and further enslaved, falsely accused by Potiphar's wife of unwanted sexual advances, and then thrown into prison where he spent years. During all this we do not read about so much as a flinch in his faith. Nor, on the face of the verses, is there evident lack of faith. By trying to use his own wits and initiative in asking the Butler to help him get out, wasn't Joseph doing what he was supposed to?

The Talmud teaches that the righteous are held to very high standards. Maybe that helps us understand this. But can you imagine if we were held to anything remotely like that standard? Joseph was steadfast in a way the rest of us aspire to and I certainly can't even imagine achieving. For those of us who can't go a day without whining about our current plight, think about Joseph, what befell him, was expected of him, and what he achieved.

*When monotony is majesty.* Our Clergy have spent hours - yes hours - trying to achieve a minyan at services for each of the eight mornings and evenings of Hanukkah (even on a day with a foot of snow). Why, you might ask? Is Hanukkah so much more significant than just a regular, say, Tuesday. True, we say Hallel each day of Hanukkah, and saying Hallel as a community is a great moment of publicizing the miracle of Hanukkah. Still, as our Rabbi teaches, one can say Hallel even when praying alone. Ok, you'll say, what about the fact that we listen to special Torah portions on Hanukkah. This is true - but is it enough of an answer? We publicly read from the Book of *Bamidbar*, or Numbers, *Parashat Naso*. Each day we read about the gifts that each of the twelve Tribes gave when dedicating the *mishkan*, the sanctuary that traveled through the dessert with the Israelites. Each paragraph is identical, and we read the same meticulous and detailed set of gifts over and over. Only the names of the heads of each Tribe differ. Literally, that is the only difference. Not another word is different in describing the gifts. The Torah repeats the repetition over and over. It does not even use a ditto, ibid, id., or whatever similar abbreviation, phrase, or emoji your particular profession or walk of life uses to indicate repetition.

What's going on? Perhaps the monotonous repetition of the gifts, every one exactly the same, is a monumental statement of the importance of community. No Tribe felt the need to "one up" any other Tribe. No one felt the need to outshine his brother or sister. This is profoundly important as a template for building and sustaining a community. And it is for that reason that we read these paragraphs, over and over, when commemorating the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem during Hanukkah.

Every night of Hanukkah we recite a blessing that thanks the Almighty, not just for doing miracles for our ancestors, but for those we experience in our time as well. What does the Torah's repetitious repetition remind you of in our day? Isn't it very much like the fact that we Paved Paradise with over a hundred gifts of relatively equal size (with some notable exceptions, for which we are deeply grateful)? This year, gifts were not easy for *anyone* to give. In Paving Paradise, the power and glory came from our community coming together *as a community* to support a critically important project. In the Torah dedicating the *mishkan*, during the Hanukkah story rededicating the Temple, and now - in each case monotony manifests majesty.

Thank you all. Bless us all. Happy end of Hanukkah. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas