

December 24, 2020

Dear Shearith Israel family,

Optimism, Pessimism? Hold-your-breathism. The news is confused (I made up that catchy rhyme - but you can use it). Our hamlet is safe for now; the infection rate is up; deaths are up, though maybe total deaths are not; the vaccine is here for some, yet there may be adverse reactions to a tiny few; a new, "more transmissible" strain of the COVID-19 is spreading out from the UK; restaurants and schools are closed, no open, no closed; and everything is up in the air given travel over the upcoming holidays. It's reminiscent of the Billy Joel ballad, *We Didn't Start the Fire*, where stanza after stanza is nothing but lists of ups and downs, such as:

Little Rock, Pasternak, Mickey Mantle, Kerouac

Sputnik, Chou En-Lai, "Bridge on the River Kwai"

Lebanon, Charles de Gaulle, California baseball

Starkweather homicide, children of thalidomide

Here at Shearith Israel? Well, we are still here, still moving through time in as calm and chin-up a way as we can. Many of our congregants have experienced true tragedy and sadness this year. Our hearts go out to them, and our prayers are full of hope that they will find comfort. Our current challenges, however, are not nearly our darkest. Our community is strong, and our collective circumstances are way better than being slapped in the face with a wet fish (bonus points for sending me the actual literary reference for this - and the truth about whether you actually read the book). We will continue to be vigilant in following the few simple rules of masking, distance, avoiding crowds, preferring outdoors, keeping silent during prayer, hand-washing, and a very few others.

But how to remain chin-up while we stay in stasis? This week's recommendations: A whole generation was cheered up by Julie Andrews prancing around in *The Sound of Music*, singing:

Raindrops on roses and whiskers on kittens

Bright copper kettles and warm woolen mittens

Brown paper packages tied up with strings

These are a few of my favorite things.

A more recent generation gained some strength from the cognate rain-based philosophy of Burt Bacharach, made famous by B.J. Thomas (*Butch Cassidy*):

Raindrops keep falling on my head

But that doesn't mean my eyes will soon be turning red

Crying's not for me

'Cause I'm never gonna stop the rain by complaining

For others, head back to the Talmud, which long ago prescribed some sure-fire antidotes for psychological disquietude. Our daughter Tess taught us all -in her *siyyum*, or final discussion, of Tractate Megilla delivered during her bat mitzvah commemoration on a Shabbat morning exactly eleven years ago (Parashat Vayiggash), back when we loved crowds in the Sanctuary: When intense prayer doesn't work, and when moving around and shaking things up doesn't work, then:

"[S]ay the following: The goat at the slaughterhouse is fatter than I am" (3a).

There is timeless truth in that Talmudic tell. I'm sure that will do it for you. However, in the small chance that Aramaic aphorisms don't help fully, then my last, best, and final suggestion is to visit even the outside of our Synagogue. Walk past it as well as past the lot next door to see first-hand that as a community we

Paved Paradise during a pandemic. You'll feel great. And you'll feel even better knowing that the snow storm last week dumped a foot of snow on Paved Paradise. The snow needed quick removal in order to complete the final stages of work. To the rescue, with our great thanks, came Yitz Goldstein; Ariel, Akiva, Alexander, and Seth Haberman; Rabbi Rohde; Moshe, Sharon, and Rafe Sasson; Marc Wiznia; and the indefatigable Ari Sherizen. Helping others will work, every time, to keep us in good cheer.

The Light of the Soul. Last week's challenge, made during Hanukkah, was to suggest great examples in literature comparing Jews to candles or candle flames. I got several entries (not as many as my previous song or play contests prompted, by the way, but who's counting). All were good. Runner up goes to Alan Zwiebel, who suggested Martin Buber's "*Tales of The Hasidim*". Buber tells the story of Rabbi Mendel of Rymanov and why two tzadikim (or wholly righteous people) can't live in the same town:

"[Tzadikim] are like the lights up in Heaven. When God created the two great lights of Heaven he placed both in the firmament, each to do its own special service. Ever since they have been friends....Not so the [Tzadikim] of our day! Now no one wants to be the small light and bow to a greater. So it is better for each to have his own firmament all for himself." (at 129-30).

Sensing that his entry was a bit of a downer, and not really about candles or flames anyway, Alan tried to salvage an honorable mention by composing an admittedly "last minute" chuckler, perfect for Hanukkah:

"Has there ever been a beauteous sight like the glistening reflection of a candle's light on the oil pooling next to a great latke?

-Epicurious, Roman gourmand, 613 BCE"

As good (and funny) as these are, they don't really capture what I was looking for. The undeniable winner is ... well, me! Ha! Now I'm fair-minded, and so if you can improve on my choice you can write in. But absent that, it's E.L. Doctorow's description, out of the mouth of Dutch Schultz's hit man Irving in *Billy Bathgate*. There, Irving describes how Jews, when they pray, "nod and bow and don't keep still a minute":

"[T]here's a very reasonable explanation for that. It's the way it is with candles, the old men praying in the synagogue are the flames of candles that sway back and forth leaning one way and another way, every one of them nodding and bowing like a little candle flame. That's the little light of the soul, which of course is always in danger of blowing out. So that's what that is all about." (at 189).

Who da thunk we would hear a hit man provide such a beautiful rationale for the swaying, or shuckling, that we don't really do (or well tolerate) in our synagogue but is ubiquitous elsewhere in the orthodox Jewish world.

Fast Fasts and Cool Calendars. Before Rosh HaShana ([see my email of 9/17/2020](#)), I explained how the Jewish calendar this year (5781) was different from that of nearly 96% of other Jewish years. It seemed fitting that we deserved some rare happenings this annual cycle. Some have already occurred (this past Shabbat, for example, we read a haftarah that we read with Parashat Mikketz about once every 20 years!).

Another cool calendar concurrence comes tomorrow. There is only one fast day in the Jewish year that can fall and is observed on a Friday: The Tenth of Tebet. And even though it *can* occur on a Friday, most of the time it does not. But it does tomorrow. The Fast of Tebet commemorates the siege of Jerusalem by the forces of Nebuchadnezzar. The Jewish community there held out for eighteen months, when the walls of the holy city were finally breached. That led to the destruction of the Temple in 586 B.C.E., which we commemorate in two other fast days in Tammuz and Ab.

The fast tomorrow is, well, fast. It starts at a leisurely 5:50 a.m. and ends at 4:51 p.m. And we read the afternoon service, minha, donning tefillin, which is itself quite unusual but not limited to this fast. In our Hemisphere, the Fast of Tebet is the shortest of the year in duration. Sort of like skipping lunch. As a community, in only our ninth month of needing to hold out, we should observe this fast fast, together.

Thank you all. Bless us all. Meaningful fast. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas