

December 30, 2021

Dear Shearith Israel family,

The Waiting Game. No one actually knows where we are on the Omicron disease curve. We know that Covid-19 disease spread data continue to worsen in our area, nearly doubling in a week in several categories and now in double digits. We know that in these parts the vast majority of the worsening is due to the Omicron variant. But we don't know where the peak is, and without knowing that we can't tell how much farther we have to go to get to the other end. Analogies to the run of the disease in other countries make us feel better, briefly – until we consider all the ways we aren't like those other countries in the ways that matter. The CDC has painted our entire country red. I think that tells you what we need to know for right now. Too many of us have gotten out of the habit of referring primarily to the data, trending back to nonscientific, nonstatistical anecdotes. That way lies both folly and madness, as I've said before.

Accordingly, we will repair to the sensible approach taken by our Working Group. At this point, there is no need to discontinue communal prayer as we did in March of 2020. We are taking some extra precautions there, though, so keep your winter coat at your seat, and be mindful of how far those stealth aerosols can travel when you are exiting our Sanctuary, ascending and descending the stairways, or talking when you're not supposed to be during services. The Rabbi's classes will continue to be given remotely, but outdoor Kiddush has been great, really, and will continue. We are one more week without the choir, so please come and help us sing (softly).

When Reports of "Fiddling" Were Fiddle-Faddle. Last week, in explaining the middle path that we are again taking to Covid-19 precautions – it *is* a middle path, but the extremes have moved differentially, and thus so has the middle – I asked for an early source for the quote attributed to Nero, who is said to have fiddled while Rome burned. Alan Zwiebel made me laugh with his response that the quote was first recorded in The Juilliard School "Alumni News" column. More seriously, a newish commenter, Dr. Henry Watkin, emailed almost immediately:

The report that Nero sang of the fall of Troy while watching the fire that destroyed Rome in 64 CE appears in Suetonius' *Life of Nero* (early second century) ch. 38, and ... Dio Cassius' *History of Rome* (published after 229 CE) bk. 62, ch. 18, sec. 1. Tacitus, *Annals* bk. 15, ch. 39, sec. 3 (also early second century) presents the story as a mere "rumor."

Rumor! Ha, I knew it! Henry, impressive indeed, and thanks. Your Ph.D. in ancient history has enriched us all.

Lo Titgodedu and Masonry. As we spin through the Daf Yomi cycle, we are this week in the mid-to-high teens of Tractate Megilla. Recall that the first Mishna in the Tractate identified one of five days on which in certain locales one could and would read the Megilla (between the 11th and 15th of Adar). This is an interesting point in itself; can you name a lot of other mitzvot the observance of which today differs depending on where a Jew lives? By the time we get to page 19 of the Tractate, we learn what happens when a person moves or travels on the day of his or her reading. Says the Mishna:

If he is destined to return to his original place, he reads it according to the *halakha* governing his own place, and if not, i.e., if he is not destined to return to his place, he reads with them, the residents of his current location.

What is clear from the discussion is that people in the same place could be reading the Megilla at different times and, by extension, observing some of the other important rituals of Purim at different times. Is this troublesome? Jews sometimes feel passionately about “when in Rome do as the Romans do” (who has got an early source for that one? Dr. Watkin, I presume?).

Commentators discuss how much differentiation in practice and ritual is tolerated within the same community (a little help here for sources – I know the Sifrei). Some even refer to the Biblical injunction of *lo titgodedu* in support of their views. *Lo titgodedu* is from the verse, “You are children of the Lord your God. You shall not gash yourselves (*lo titgodedu*) nor make a bald spot on the front of your head for the dead” (Deut. 14:1). This is a serious Biblical injunction concerning self-inflicted harm. Yet it has morphed into something quite different and pressed into service both to encourage conformity within a congregation or locale and to encourage tolerance for differences in legitimate approaches to observance. These are amazing concepts; were we as a society to practice them today.

Here at Shearith Israel, we are blessed with a great and long tradition of trying to strike the right balance between adherence to our ritual tradition and tolerance of the rituals of others. Until this week I had supposed the roots of those tenets were largely religious and partly the fact that, in early America, tolerance was in the air (see Russell Shorto’s superlative *The Island at the Center of the World* (2005)). But there is a more concrete, non-religious basis for the importance of tolerance of diversity. And for this I want to thank the keen eye and keener wit of architect and congregational friend Stephen Tilly. Stephen was enjoying Ruth Lazar’s photo from last week, which I repaste here for a reason:



After stating that Ruth's image was "all too apt", Stephen observed that above the marquee is the symbol of a Masonic lodge. That got Stephen looking for the role Jews played as Masons, and he sent me [a terrific \(if long\) piece](#) by Samuel Oppenheim, *The Jews and Masonry in the United States Before 1810* (found in proceedings of the American Jewish Historical Society, 1910). Oppenheim says of the Masons that they had "enlarged views and liberal minds; and by the exercise of a tolerant spirit and a courteous bearing towards those who differed from them in matters of conscience" (at p. 1). What is so interesting about the piece is that it lists many (and I mean many) Shearith Israelites, including our Honorary Parnas David Nathan's great great great great grandfather Simon Nathan. We have so much to be proud of, so much to emulate. The guideposts are there for all of us to see.

Twisted Tirlul. In the semi-final listing of most recognizable first notes or phrases of great songs, I cited Aura Bijou's suggestion of [Twist & Shout](#) by The Beatles. Aura told me afterwards that what she meant was Chubby Checkers [Twist](#). *Twist* is one of the grand-parents of all great R&R, but I don't find the first few notes so immediately recognizable that I thought it was a contender for this particular contest. However, to twist things still further, Marlene Sperleng, from the Holy Land, reminds us that The Beatles's rendition of *Twist & Shout* is actually a re-do of a great and earlier, 1962 version of the song by the Isley Brothers, [Twist and Shout](#). It turns out that the Isley Brothers didn't write the song either. It was written by Phil Medley and Bert Berns, a/k/a Bert Russell (no not that Bert Russell). The song was sung initially by the Top Notes in 1961, was made famous by The Isley Brothers in 1962, and was made eternal by The Beatles in 1963. I can't get to the bottom of "and" vs. "&" in the title. Someone help please.

What I can say is that “twisted”, not in the sense of sick or demented, but in the sense of unpredictable, chaotic, even a little lunatic is a perfect word to describe where we are now with Omicron and, well, to describe the whole Gregorian calendar year that we are just a day away from finishing. In fact, “twisted” is so perfect that it is not surprising that its Hebrew variant, *tirlul*, was just voted the Hebrew Word of the Year. “Thanks for the tip” goes to our dear congregant, Avi Toledo – who seems to get into Israel from the US when no one else can and get into the US from Israel when no one else can – Mossad? Anyway, the Hebrew word *tirlul* is translated by Israeli newspapers as “lunacy” in English. But what do they know compared to me?! Certainly one translation of *tirlul* is, or should be, twisted.

So our twisting has come full circle. 2021 was *tirlul*. 2022 will not be. Why not? Well, that’s what you have to tell me, in our opening contest of 2022.

Half-Full Report.

Hard Day’s Night. When I sent my email of last week, I thought we were nearing the end of our contest for most recognizable first notes or phrases in songs. We had a bountiful bunch of brilliant bidders. Alas, we need one more week, since some late contenders have come upon the scene, and their suggestions are excellent and merit consideration:

- Three independent sources have suggested [Hard Day’s Night](#). One is Bill Schulder, who, I’ve said before, is an R&R maven.
- Esther Ingber rightly suggests [Crying](#), by Roy Orbison; and [Runaway](#), by Del Shannon.
- Other strong contenders, thanks to Faith Fogelman, are The Surfariis, [Wipe Out](#) (I can play intro and background on the bongos, by the way), Benny Goodman’s [Sing, Sing, Sing](#) (oh yeah!), and [Close To You](#), by The Carpenters.

Ok, we now have this week’s contenders, and we have last week’s:

- Eric Clapton’s [Layla](#).
- Beethoven’s [Fifth Symphony](#) (how this got on the list is one of those happy quirks of life – it stays!)

- Roy Simon offers Peter, Paul & Mary's "[Where Have All the Flowers Gone,](#)" and The Beatles's "[Something in the Way She Moves.](#)"
- Bill Schulder's [Satisfaction](#) by the Rolling Stones, over Clapton's *Layla*.
- Jim Nuzzo suggestion of Bruce Springsteen's first four notes of [Born to Run](#).
- Sarah Meira Rosenberg -- Deep Purple's [Smoke on the Water](#).
- Aura Bijou offered Simon & Garfunkel's [Bridge Over Trouble Water](#), in addition to Chubby's [Twist](#).

That is likely too many for a clear winner without a run-off, but let's try. Time to vote.

Great Signs and Wonders. I am not surprised that there has been only a modest effort to unseat Joe and the Juice – “Be Strong (I whispered to my coffee)” or “The World Is Temporarily Closed” sign on The World theatre. Both of those signs are clearly colossally clever. Daniel Chazin has an earlier citing than The World. As he explains it, his Rebbe, Label Dulitz, at MTA told the story of a synagogue in New Orleans called the [Gates of Prayer](#), which decided to close one summer and posted a sign: "The Gates of Prayer are closed for the summer."

Thank you all. Bless us all. Happy 2022. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas