

February 10, 2022

Dear Shearith Israel family,

*Get Ready, Get Set, . . .* Your Covid-19 Working Group met again earlier this week to try to avoid needing to wait for Governor Hochul to decide whether to extend the mask-required requirement for indoor gatherings. That we failed turns out to be a good thing. Why? Because as a Group, and as a Congregation, it feels like we are ready to go back to pre-Omicron precautions of masking-required during services and masking-optional for full vaccinated/boosted participants during classes and lectures. How nice of the Governor to accommodate us by lifting the restriction requiring masking all the time. I trust you all see how wonderful that is. Just a month ago Omicron was climbing the charts faster than a new Beatles song did back when (two points for the Beatles song longest at No. 1). Now, disease spread and all other relevant data are dropping, and dropping, and dropping some more.

Do not for a minute think we are about to throw caution to the wind. Won't happen, ever, not on your Working Group's watch. You will feel very safe inside our capacious space because we are insisting that everyone who can be both vaxxed and boosted; we will mask at appropriate times; we will continue to observe social distancing; and we will continue to have the filters and air-purifiers on during all indoor activities. I do want to recognize a comment made by Martin Koenig about my email last week. Martin (I think correctly) pointed out that we had not gone quite back to post-Delta/pre-Omicron levels. For the week ending October 30, 2021, the case rate in our zip code was 50 per 100,000 population, for the week. Martin pointed out that, for the week ending January 29, 2022, it was 350. However, seven-day numbers for the UWS have dropped consistently since then. Are we out of the woods? No, but the woods are getting much more inviting to stay and play in.

See you on Shabbat, I hope. Friday Night Lights is back, LIVE! The Rabbi intends to give his Shabbat afternoon class, also in person. Get vaxxed, get boosted, and come rejoin the community. There is nothing better.

*Achdut.* This Hebrew word for unity has a special resonance this week – and not just because we are all better able to get back with each other safely. In a sneak (and beautiful) sermon a few weeks ago, Rabbi Soloveichik observed that, in breaking up into weeks the communal reading of the Torah parshiot, we

sometimes overlook the connections between the end of one parasha and the beginning of the next. He was observing the deep connection between the end of Parasha Beshallach, which concludes with the story of the non-Jew Amalek, who attacked the Jewish people and eroded faith in the Almighty, and the beginning of Parasha Yitro, which begins with another non-Jew, Yitro, coming to the aid of the Jewish people and magnifying the glory of the Almighty. He had other real insights and inspirations. Come back to hear him.

I had a similar reaction on the topic of *achdut* as discussed in the two Talmudic Tractates of Moed Katan and Chagigah. This week, the Daf Yomi cycle will finish Moed Katan and begin Chagigah (in fact we finish Moed Katan today – hazak u’baruch to all who did). Right near the end of Moed Katan, the Talmud recites a Mishna proscribing the delivery of food to a mourner’s house on a fancy tray or in a fancy large bowl or in a fancy large basket. Instead, food must be delivered “in plain baskets” only. The Gemara explains that “originally” (unspecified as to exactly when) the wealthy would deliver food in baskets of silver and gold, whereas the poor would use mean materials and would feel ashamed. “Because of the honor of the poor”, the manner of delivery was equalized and the people, unified. The Talmud teaches the same rules for serving drinks in the house of mourning – equalized and unified – and indeed even ruled that all corpses, whether from wealthy or poor families, would be shrouded the same (a powerful custom still observed today), would be escorted to the burial site (usually outside the town limits) the same as well, and in several other respects (27a-b). The Talmud is teaching a profound lesson that, when the race is over, we are one – and we should treat each other with equal dignity and respect – in death.

Now turn to the beginning of Chagigah. The very first Mishna on the very first page (remember the numbering begins with 2 – by the way, does anyone know why?) begins with the word ALL and teaches that *all* Jews are entitled to participate in the nation-building, thrice-yearly pilgrimages made to Jerusalem (the Mishna then goes on to describe the very few exceptions):

הכל חִיְיבִין בְּרֵאִייה

The theme of unity does not end there. On the very next page (3a) we are taught that the entire nation – men, women, and even children – were invited to the public reading of the Torah by the King once every seven years. Finally, on the very next page (3b) appears one of the major places in all of the Talmud extolling the virtues of tolerance of differences of thought (ok, Daf Yomi learners, correct

me if you think I'm wrong). The Gemara doesn't here use the famous words used in Tractate Eruvin 13b, "eilu v'eilu divrei Elokim chaim" – meaning all the different positions and interpretations are words of the Living G-d. But the thrust is the same. Here the Talmud says (Sefaria explanation):

Lest a person say: Now, how can I study Torah when it contains so many different opinions? The verse states that they are all "given from one shepherd." One God gave them; one leader, i.e., Moses, said them from the mouth of the Master of all creation, Blessed be He, as it is written: "And God spoke all these words" (Exodus 20:1). The plural form "words" indicates that God transmitted all the interpretations of the Ten Commandments. Since the Sages invariably utilize the Torah itself or the statements of the prophets as the sources for their opinions, there is a certain *unity* to the study of Torah, despite the numerous explanations and applications.

Unity in death, unity in life, unity in the respect and dignity shown to all ways of thinking. It's right there for all of us to learn from. (Say, does anyone have a good song on the theme of being united? Here is the [Brotherhood of Man](#), but it's really not a great song, at all, imho, neither in lyrics nor melody – yet we all know it!)

*Remnants Revisited.* I welcomed, and I think we can all benefit from, many of the reactions to the discussion last week of references to Remnants of Israel in WWII communications (LINK). Bruce Bublick responded, simply and sorrowfully, with, "If only we had a Medinat Yisroel [the State of Israel] in 1937". Esther Ingber remembers the "Remnants" conference at the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., some years ago. Steve Beispel reminds us that on December 19, 1942 Dr. de Sola Pool gave a sermon called "A Remnant Shall Return" in which he called on American Jews to help in the building of Palestine in light of the ongoing slaughter of their brethren in Europe. Says Steve,

In that sermon he acknowledges that two million Jews have already been murdered and he presciently observes that Hitler may make good on his 'evil determination to wipe several million' more.

After receiving Steve's grim reminder, I got a missive from Gabriella Styler, referring to the Almighty's promise that Jews would "number [as] the stars in the Heavens and the grains of the sand being the fabric of B'nai Israel!" Says Gabriella, beautifully:

“I look forward to the Weaver’s Hand, to bring B’nai Israel together; we will probably arrive bruised, confused, chastised but oh so humble when the Weaver’s Hand begins to mend and complete that cloth. As my beloved Grandmother said, ‘A Promise is a Promise.’”

*Half-Full Report.* Short report this week, since I got no photos that the sender actually took. These emails need more of those, so get out – or stay in – and click!

*Finnegans Wake.* I bemoaned the fact that no one got my FW quote to “Lou Lou” two weeks ago. Jordan Silversmith to the rescue: “Loved the *Finnegans Wake* reference – I wrote my thesis on it in college!” I don’t think it gets more challenging, or fun, than this.

*A New Challenge: Limerick time.* Maybe it’s point inflation, but the judges have announced that THREE points will be given for the best, funny limerick about any of the following topics: Our esteemed Rabbi; returning to our synagogue after Covid; or the Mets. Remember, and I channel the recently retired Yolanda Vega, you can’t win it if you’re not in it.

Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas