

February 11, 2021

Dear Shearith Israel family,

*Rounding Second?* Football has passed into Super Bowl LV history. Pitchers and catchers are reporting for Spring training this week. Yet we are not rounding third, and we are not heading home. It seems obvious why the saying is "rounding third", not "rounding second". When rounding third, the next stop is the last; you're home. "Home", said George Carlin, in his matchless monologue on baseball vs football, "is where you go to be safe". Rounding second feels like there's too much left to go, too many more times to be picked off or run down or tagged out.

"Down in [COVID-19] Land"? (Yes even Bruce The Boss Springsteen had a Super Bowl commercial!) In terms of infection data, what can I say, "the Bronx is up and the Battery's down". The COVID-19 vaccines are each Variations on a Theme of Modern Miracles. These truly awesome human achievements are sadly getting lost in the tedious job of inoculating millions, no tens of millions, no hundreds of millions. These manifold miracles are the more muffled by the fact that, for now, even with successful vaccination we are being told not to change *any* of our good but tedious habits of masking, now multi-masking, social distancing, staying out of crowds, hospital-grade hygiene, and attending communal tefillot outdoors -- or indoors but where it's so breezy and cold that it might as well be outdoors. Some of us don't care whether Punxsutawney Phil saw his shadow last week on Groundhog Day (he reportedly did) or whether we are going to have six more weeks of winter as a result. We don't care because, when winter leaves us, we will have gone a full calendar cycle saddled by COVID-19, yet we are feeling like we are still on second base. As I'm writing you this email, the Wall Street Journal needed to interrupt to tell me, literally, "Experts are increasingly convinced that Covid-19 is here forever."

I've cautioned before about trying to predict the end of the travail. It's folly. It's disheartening. And it's unnecessary. It's unnecessary because we can, and will, live sanguine, happy, productive lives as communally connected congregants if we

exercise the will to do so. In *Flowers Never Bend with the Rainfall*, Simon & Garfunkel sing:

No matter if you're born

To play the king or pawn

For the line is thinly drawn 'tween joy and sorrow

We knew that millennia ago. "Therefore *choose* life", we are exhorted in Debarim 30:19. When rounding second, even if only half-way home, you are still in the game. Let's stay in the game, together.

*Black Boxes*. The term "black box" has varied meanings, especially in describing how much information is known or knowable in the box. At one end of the spectrum we have our *tefillin*, or phylacteries. We adorn our arm and head with the two black boxes. The information in the boxes is not only fully known (passages from the Torah); one of the very purposes of wearing the *tefillin* is to display or publicize our commitment to the very well known Torah passages. Airplanes also carry "black boxes". In that context, the term describes a hopefully indestructible machine containing actual information that is accessible under extreme circumstances (such as after a failure or crash). Maybe it's called a black box because it is a black box. In any case, a plane's black box contains knowable information, but unlike *tefillin* it is not the purpose of a plane's black box to show off the information inside. The use of "black box" in common parlance seems to mirror this one: hard to access, unknown, and possibly random information, even if theoretically and conceivably knowable.

"Black box" has other usages. It can connote something not quite unknowable but so beyond our capacities that it might just as well be not just unknown but unknowable. *Darwin's Black Box: The Biochemical Challenge to Evolution* is a great book by intelligent design theoretician Professor Michael Behe. (Or read his more recent *Darwin Devolves*. Or read Professor Alvin Plantinga's *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, & Naturalism*.). The "black box" in Behe's title seems a fair asseveration directed at evolutionary biologists, the charge being that evolutionary biologists waive away truly snarly problems with

Darwinism and Post-Darwinian theories since otherwise they would have to confront intelligent design evidence that is challenging to refute. In this sense, "black box" suggests that there are answers but that very clever people can obscure them so that they become essentially unknowable. But even here we have to concede ultimate knowability, if only we were smart enough or tried hard enough.

The science-based uses of "black box" reflect what human beings are on this earth to do: make sense of reality as best we can, and use that understanding to improve the world. But then there is another connotation of a black box phenomenon - something that is absolutely unknowable, no matter how hard we try. Think of this as the Big Babba of Black Boxes. It describes something so strange that you would expect to find it in some distant black hole or wave irregularity or alternative multi-verse. Yet in fact we experience it every single day.

I refer to that period of time after sunset and before darkness, known in Hebrew as *bein hashmashot* (between the Heavenly lights), or twilight. Yes I know you are all thinking of those fantastic talks Rabbi Soloveichik has given on The Twilight Zone. In fact, *bein hashmashot* is treated in yesterday's daily page of Talmud study (*Pesachim* 81a), where events occurring during *two* successive twilights are treated in law as having occurred *three* times in *three* days. Jewish law *defines* the essence of the time period as undefinable, ineffable, forever unknowable. It can't be fixed, solved, or clarified no matter how strong the telescope or how powerful the microscope. In our religion, *bein hashmashot* is the ultimate black box.

Black boxes in Judaism are remarkably life *affirming*. Diurnally, the Almighty reminds that there are things beyond our ken. But in 24 hours it's just a few minutes (don't pester me with the twilight surrounding the dawn; even still it's only a small percentage of the day). The good news about the ultimate black box is that the whole rest of the day, week, month, year, and lifetime is for us to figure out, to master, to mold, to sanctify and improve. If given the choice, isn't that a trade-off we would all accept, with joy and gladness, every time? Think

about that when next confronted with the utter inexplicability of some COVID-19 conundrum.

*Pot Pourri.* Several fun things to follow up on:

*First*, we have entered Steve Smith's The Mulligan Years as Shearith Israel's choice in the International Name That Decade contest. However, my whining about there being no Jewish Mulligans has not brought forth any sightings, even from our friends in the U.K. and Ireland. Honorary Parnas Peter Neustadter reports that, at golf courses in Israel, "taking a Mulligan" is actually called "taking a Goldberg". Really? Really. What a hoot! This rights the wrong fully, and as usual breaks all of us into wide smiles. Thank you Peter. Tampa Bay has Tom Brady, the winner who just keeps winning. We have Peter, who simultaneously lifts spirits in two countries at the same time, all the time (and also appears to defy the realities of aging in his athletic pursuits).

*Second*, I keep trying to find *first* uses of sayings, adages, aphorisms. I will continue to. But sometimes first is not best. Let us thank Trustee David Sable for reminding me that the singularly greatest use of "Door", greater even than actual doors, is The Doors, the legendary Rock band led by Jim Morrison, whose grave in Paris still attracts homage-payers. We can now close the door on "doors".

*Third*, no one has come close to beating the incorrect reference to Zeno as having coined, "We have two ears and one mouth, so we should listen more than we say". Are you kidding? Team, come on!

*Another Contest: Name That Parcel!* I feel like I need to give a few of you more chances to win BIG prizes, more chances to join the elite pantheon of two-fers or indeed achieve three-fer-dom (congregant Aura Bijou is already close and is my choice for the 2021 contender). So here is another: I'm content in continuing to call our new outdoor space adjacent to our Synagogue "Paved Paradise".

Everyone who helped conceive, design, and pay for it has heard the reasons for the name many times. At the same time, some - let's call them blaggards -- have wondered if we need a new name, a name perhaps more clearly associated with Shearith Israel. Do we need another name? And if so, what's your vote for what

it should be? Assume the tent will return for at least most of the year and that tents never bend with the snowfall.

Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas