

February 25, 2021

Dear Shearith Israel family,

Purimfest 5781. We've made it, as a community. A full year. A year ago, we were confused and scared by this "novel coronavirus"; even the name denoted something new. Talk about seeing through a glass darkly! We had no real idea what we were facing. Our best and brightest wanted us to wash our hands vigorously, wipe down our groceries, ration masks so as to not deprive our health-care providers, and were initially conflicted about social distancing (forget about testing/nontesting). What they told us then was right given what we knew - just as we were right to hear from our elected officials that the great "wave" would keep us out of our work places for perhaps three weeks. We grieve the loss of life, the loss of health, the loss of bearings for many of us. Yet we should have nothing but admiration for those who tried to figure things out back then. With the briefest of hindsight we know immensely more now. We are so confident and accommodated that COVID-19 is now being written Covid-19. We are blessed to be able to observe, as a community: today, the Fast of Esther; tonight and tomorrow morning, seven separate readings of the Megilla; and tomorrow morning and early afternoon sending gifts to friends and wiring in money [here](#) to help feed our poor. No one answered my question of the source for Purim's being tied for our happiest holiday. I'm giving everyone another week on that. In the meantime, enjoy this happy day.

"But that was yesterday, and yesterday's gone". The recent passing of Chad Stuart, of Chad & Jeremy fame, brought this phrase to mind from their really good song, *Yesterday's Gone* (their great song is *Summer Song*). Prof. Jack Weatherford's *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World*, in addition to much material new to me, retells the history of the Black Death, or bubonic plague. After recounting the staggering number of deaths - totaling ~200 million people over four years - he devotes the following to the plight of the Jews (p. 246):

"In Europe, the Christians once again turned on the Jews, who had a close association with commerce and with the east, from whence the plague came. Some Jews were shut up in their homes and burned; others were taken out and tortured on the rack until they confessed their crimes... On Valentine's Day in 1349, the authorities of Strasbourg herded two thousand Jews to the Jewish cemetery outside the city to begin mass burning... More than a thousand perished over the six days that it took to burn them all, and the city outlawed the presence of any Jew in the city. City after city picked up the practice of publicly burning Jews to thwart the epidemic."

The year 1349 was 672 years ago. 672 years is not so long ago in the genealogy of human civilizations. Think of it as, well, yesterday.

We hope and pray that *that* yesterday is gone. Gone but not forgotten, to be sure, but gone. Approximately 672 years ago, Jews were blamed and punished for the pandemic that scourged their world. For the pandemic that is scourging our world now, merely 672 years later, we present a very different litany. On Purim 5781, we rejoice in our own Congregants who, both last year and this, have to attend a late Megilla reading because they were and are in hospitals treating the most seriously ill. We celebrate the Jewish scientists and physicians (among others, to be sure) at the forefront of the efforts to identify the disease and find ways to treat and destroy it. A professor at the Weizmann Institute in Israel cautiously announces, "the magic has started", referring to the dramatic decline in the most serious inflictions of COVID-19 including deaths resulting from a combination of treatment, safety precautions, and vaccines. That a Jewish state exists at all is a Purim-grade miracle. That this puny Jewish state leads the world in inoculating *all* its citizens (Jews and non-Jews alike) against COVID-19, offering its ideas and concrete approaches to help the rest of the world's nations - well that is a triumph of biblical proportions. Without a doubt, this is one extraordinary, life-sustaining, life-affirming Purim.

Just 19 inches. The Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu *may* have existed, *may* have lived in the Sixth or Fifth Century B.C.E., and *may* have said that a journey of a

thousand miles starts with one step. May, may, may. This week, our *daf yomi*, or daily Talmud study, not *may* but *does* record a discussion of what it means to be "too far" away to join in the Passover sacrifice. Of the different positions taken on how far is too far, we are arrested by the view of Rabbi Eliezer. On page 93b of *Tractate Pesachim*, Rabbi Eliezer, in the Mishna, says that too far away is being in essence a single "*amah*" outside Temple courtyard. Not a thousand miles. Not in a different country, state, city, or neighborhood. One *amah*. About 19 inches.

In its time, the Passover sacrifice ranked among the most significant communal events in Judaism. Jewish law or *halakha* required that pre-formed groups be designated in which all members of the same "*haburah*" shared in one Paschal lamb as one extended and connected unit. Jews from the world over ascended on Jerusalem in this once-a-year event. Gratuitous failure to participate brought among the most serious punishments in Jewish law - "*karet*", literally being cut off from the Jewish people. Being too far away to participate meant being 19 inches out of touch. That was not the result of physical failure but of spiritual distancing. It is so easy to stay in touch. It's easy to call in to Rabbi Soloveichik's marvelous lectures, just as it is easy to zoom in to moments of communal spiritual participation offered by Rabbi Rohde and Reverend Edinger. It is easy to sign up for safe participation in communal minyan. We are having seven readings of the Megilla over Purim! Beth, my wife, beautifully observes that in most cases even those "hitting the wall" actually finish the race - though as our daughter Lia says, Beth is sometimes an optimist, being a life-long Mets fan. Please, stay in touch with us. Lean in. Join in. Six feet may have to separate us now physically. Don't let 19 inches separate us spiritually.

And the winner for renaming Paved Paradise is? Umm, there is no winner - not yet. The voting response rate was high. Thoughtful emailers from close by (congregant Andrew Klaber, "Prayground "by a country mile") and far (Paula Van Gelder from the West Coast still favors Paved Paradise, but "prayground is pretty darn clever" though she likes her write-ins of Heaven's Above and Manhattan Mishkan, both of which I think are great). "The Mulligan Years" creator Steve

Smith, whom I forgive (barely) for his unflattering comments about Paved Paradise, poetically writes about "prayground":

"Prayground is earthy and genuine
It's the place where we swing for the fences
With blessings, *bakashot* and bourbon
Prayground invites comradery, and they hope this season will be better

Go Prayground!"

"Beit Bitumen," while only getting a few votes, did get the backing of some of our heavy hitting winners of other contests.

Executive Director Barbara Reiss rightly observes that chances are that this space, as time goes by and our needs evolve, will take on a life of its own and will naturally acquire a moniker to match. But for now, especially as we usher in the indisputably fun and spirited holiday of Purim, let's keep the fun funning. We invite you to participate in the final four. Rank them, and let's pick a BIG winner:

Beit Bitumen
Heaven's Above
Paved Paradise
Prayground

Thank you all. Bless us all. Purim Alegré! Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas