

February 3, 2021

Dear Shearith Israel family,

One More Week? Covid-19 numbers are improving in a locality near you! And did you see the new data on the efficacy of boosters? Boosters are amazingly effective. With these encouraging data, we should be ready to return to where we were during the ebb in the virus post-Delta and pre-Omicron this past Fall. As a Congregation we do seem ready. But still we have to wait another week, until New York State lifts the current requirement of masking indoors.

Alas, ours is not to reason why. We can bear up one more week as a community, can't we? This Shabbat, we will be warm inside. We are returning to normal kibudim and aliyot. The Choir is back. Friday Night Lights will be online for what we hope is only one more week. Please, come to services on Shabbat (no snow storm expected this week). Who knows, maybe there will be a surprise sermon by Rabbi Soloveichik (shhh).

Remnants of Israel and the Holocaust. A congregant scolded me for omitting from my email last week a discussion of International Holocaust Remembrance Day. I hadn't forgotten it; I was rather waiting for the observance of Yom HaShoah, which Israel established in 1949, immediately after its founding and 56 years earlier than the UN established last week's commemorative day, and set for late April. The thoughts I have for both days arise from my recent reading of Martin Gilbert's *Auschwitz and the Allies* (1981). The book should be required reading and re-reading for all of us everywhere all the time.

The two-fold thesis of the book is that, when focusing on the identification and destruction of Auschwitz *as a Death Camp*:

1) it was the Allies who failed the Jews by failures of imagination, of response, of Intelligence, and many other things by permitting the Auschwitz Death Camp to go largely undetected *as a Death Camp* for years; and

2) the Nazis are the only group who can claim success of their unspeakably evil mission, "the killing [of Jews] themselves, and in a series of bizarre deceptions which enabled those killings to be carried out on a gigantic scale, for more than three years, almost without interruption" (p. 341).

It was Gilbert's work that led the Washington Post to acknowledge that "The war against the Jews is the war Hitler won."

I recognize that Gilbert's thesis is agonizing to internalize and may be controversial – but that is not my focus. My focus instead concerns how a particular word, the word "remnant", was used in original telexes, memoranda, and other documents during the war. I apologize if you think this is a trivial or trivializing inquiry. I do not think so. I think there is lesson in this irremediably painful topic.

"Remnant", as used to describe the Jewish people or a portion of us, is a word dear to our hearts. It is the translation of *Shearith* in Shearith Israel. The term has an illustrious history of use in the Bible. So, for example, it is used in Jeremiah (31:7), Isaiah (10:20, 46:3), Ezekiel (11:13), and Judges (21:17). As used in these passages, and I think as used in our name, "remnant" has a slightly positive connotation in that it refers to the value of what is left and not to what was lost. This is a subjective point, and maybe I'm reading too much into these citations. I'd love your view.

In reading *Auschwitz*, I was struck with how people, Jews and non-Jews, used the Biblical term "remnant" but applied it throughout the war to different things and in different ways. The connotation was not positive, meaning in most cases the reference is to what has been lost, with the remainder being the "remnant". Gilbert quotes formal war-related documents for the following:

- Richard Lichtheim was the Jewish Agency's representative in Geneva from 1939 to 1945. *Auschwitz* quotes dozens of his telexes and memoranda. They alone are an extraordinary record of what was known and suspected at key moments during the war. In 1942, which was relatively early in the systematic carrying out of Hitler's outspoken plan to kill all Jews, Lichtheim urged that "some special warning" should be issued by Churchill, Roosevelt, and the Governments-in-Exile to threaten those carrying out the mass murder with reprisal after the war. In one missive, Lichtheim says that he did "not know what action the Jewish organisations in England and America have taken so far to save the *remnants* of European Jewry". But, he added, "I feel that the present moment is a favorable one". In the end, no warnings were in fact made. Lichtheim's reference to "remnants" was referring generally to European Jewry. (p. 69).

- Shortly thereafter, later in September 1942, Lichtheim again refers to “remnants”. But at this point he is referring to the plight of the Jews in Bulgaria, Rumania, and Hungary. The reason for this focus, he said in a letter, was that, by then: “The total destruction of the Jewish communities in Belgium and Holland is nearly complete” (p. 71).
- Gilbert memorializes efforts made by three Jewish Agency representatives in Britain, Professor Namier, the head of the Jewish Agency’s Political Bureau in London, Berl Locker, and Blanche Dugdale, the niece of Lord Balfour, this time to save children, especially Bulgarian Jewish children who stood some small chance of escaping Nazi terror and death through the common border with Turkey. The Jewish Agency representatives are quoted as referring to “remnants” twice (p. 98). Their efforts, which included finding even temporary asylum for these children in Cyprus, Kenya, or even Mauritius, all failed. (The devastation wrought by the Holocaust on Sephardic Jewry is another subject that I hope to treat sometime.)
- 1943 brought schemes to try to exchange German Jews with valid Palestinian passports for German POWs. The effort failed because reports showed that the “last remnants of the Jewish community [in Germany] have now disappeared” (p. 120).
- Similar phraseology was used to describe the population of Bulgarian Jews still alive in 1943. The efforts being made were not to save the millions or the hundreds of thousands or even tens of thousands, but rather: “here in the case of Bulgaria, there is a definite and practicable proposition. Every thousand people admitted is a thousand less murdered, and it may not yet be too late to save a remnant” (p. 125).
- The word was used again even after “the death camps at Chelmno, Belzec, Treblinka and Sobibor has now completed their evil task, with the murder of more than two million Jews between the beginning of 1942 and the end of 1943[;] at Auschwitz the gassing of the remnants of European Jewry, those still under Nazi rule, continued without interruption” (p.174)
- And again when referring to the staggering, truly unimaginable numbers of Jews annihilated from Poland and later from Hungary (pp. 189, 253, 324).

Seeing all this, one cannot but be depressed. To lift us out of it, a little, we need to remember that Congregation Shearith Israel is a remnant that preceded the Holocaust. Yet we are a remnant that has been blessed to remain even after the Holocaust as well. I have quoted before the comment of a wise mentor of mine, Robert Rifkind, who once said that if our gorgeous Sanctuary and healthy Congregation is the “Remnant of Israel”, then just imagine the whole cloth! We need to stay healthy and vibrant as a community and recapture the most majestic connotation of “remnant”. It is all we can do to honor the memory of those remnants destroyed during the Holocaust.

Half-Full Report. A few follow ups act as marvelous additions to three recent topics:

On Short But Deep Sayings. I was prepared to close the contest with Michael Lustig’s *Veni, vidi, vici* (no one got my *Finnegans Wake* reference) and Beth Goldman’s Lou Gehrig “luckiest man” alive speech. Aura Bijou, however, was not prepared to close the contest without her contributions. We thank her for two additional entries. One is the great Yogi Berra-ism,

When you come to a fork in the road, take it.

Her second, from Shakespeare (from whom we could have had found, oh, 1,000 entries), she offers Puck’s unforgettable line in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*:

Lord, what fools these mortals be

Aura is a bit like the annoying classmate in Law School (long ago and far away), who occasionally handed his exams in right at the buzzer, but was brilliant and so was tolerated. Aura joins Michael and Beth with two marks for her great entries.

On Friends. Joel Schreiber and Fred Ehrman improved on my Job reference on the indispensable need for friends. Within nine minutes of each other, each cited Tractate Taanit 23A, which we learned in the Daf Yomi cycle not long ago. The story involves Honi the Miracleworker, about whom we have talked twice before (see [my emails of July 15](#) and [December 2, 2021](#)). This particular story has Honi, the Talmudic version of Rip Van Winkle, waking up after seventy years, finding not his son but his grandson living but not finding anyone in the Yeshiva knowing who he is or believing his story. Honi gets so depressed at being without friends that

he prays for and is granted death. Referring to an adage restated by the great Amora Rava, the Talmud concludes:

אָמַרְרָבָא: הֵיִינוּ דְאָמְרֵי אֵינְשֵׁי: אִו חֲבֵרוֹתָא אִו מִיתוּתָא

Rava said: This explains the folk saying that people say:
Either friendship or death, as one who has no friends is better off dead.

“O Havruta, O Mituta” is how the Aramaic is transliterated. Either friendship, or death. This deep and timeless saying was memorialized well over 1,000 years before Patrick Henry borrowed the thought and inserted “liberty” instead of “friendship”.

On Signs and Wonders. Just look at the gorgeous sunrise that Laury Frieber captured on her recent trip to Hawaii:



Better yet was her accompanying note:

“Hope it is an omen for the post-Covid future.
Here Comes the Sun. Shabbat shalom”

Here is the [Beatles classic](#) of that name, written and sung by George Harrison. And here are just the first two lines, though the entire song should be memorized (I'm sure it has been, by nearly all of us):

Little darling, it's been a long cold lonely winter
Little darling, it feels like years since it's been here

The entire song is a fitting send-off to Omicron and a welcoming to what Laury, and the rest of us, hope and pray we have in store for us. Spring is just six weeks away. Punxsutawney Phil told me so, just yesterday. Happy Belated Groundhog Day.

Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas