

March 18, 2021

Dear Shearith Israel family,

*Plateaus.* The peril of a plateau is not its challenging spelling. Rather, the peril of a plateau is that it's a higher base from which to increase, should an increase occur. The Covid-19 disease spread numbers aren't at this moment increasing in our little area. But they aren't falling either. We are still viewing the vectors of those vexing virus variants. And we are headed into the Pesah season, when many of us will want to have Seders with loved ones and friends and when many of us will be traveling or gathering with travelers. These are risk-attracting behaviors, even if done responsibly. Our Covid-19 Working Group would prefer not to be seeing a plateau. Because of it, Shearith Israel will be staying the course of the past several weeks in terms of synagogue activities. We will continue to offer outdoor and indoor minyan options, including during the upcoming holiday, all with the now-familiar precautions. If you have family traveling in for the holiday who would like to join us, please fill out the sign up forms so that our team can responsibly assess the safety issues.

In the meantime, we just finished *Sefer Shemot*. At the synagogue this past Shabbat, we read two *parshiot*, *Vayakhel* and *Pekude*, plus the special *Parashat HaHodesh*. Together, these made for a long reading. Special thanks to Rabbi Rohde, who indefatigably read these three *parshiot* not once but twice, once outside and once inside. We now embark on *Sefer Vayikra*. There is a notion that there is little meaning for us post-moderns in the upcoming *parshiot*, devoted to sacrifices, holiness, and priests. If you wish to be forever disabused of that notion, please read Rabbi Sacks's extended Introduction to his third volume of *Covenant & Conversation*. You will first be mesmerized and then inspired by the depth of thought and exposition. And you will stay on that plateau of inspiration as you proceed through Rabbi Sacks's treatment of the particular *parshiot* in our Third Book of the Torah. The blessing of a plateau is that it is indeed a higher base from which to increase, should an increase occur.

*Two Can Play at That Game.* I have many times extolled the virtues of the number 3 (e.g., [my email of palindromic 1/21/21](#)). Three being so great, so

mighty, so versatile, but also so orderly and intrinsically good, it is obvious why it is so ubiquitous, my mentions of it so frequent. Three is the Gryffindor of numbers. But what say ye of the number 2? Two, grasshopper, is a trickier business. Two is something of the Slytherin of numbers. By that I mean, as in *Harry Potter* itself, it's a number that can be used for great good or great ill; it depends on the inner strength and outward conduct of the person(s) involved.

Let us examine the number 2. In its basic arithmetic form, 2 is the only even prime, which is unique. And is it the only number whose double is also its square (don't count 0 or 1, since they cheat)? The checkered history and reputation of 2 is ancient. Indeed, both of its Slytherinian extremes are on display in our daily Talmud study. Last week, on page 110a of Tractate *Pesachim*, we learned of bad tidings brought about by what the discussion calls "*zugot*", or pairs. In Chapter 1 of Pirkey Avot, "*zugot*" pairs are good things: the pairs of generational leaders who sustained Torah and our traditions for centuries. Contrariwise, among the bad *zugot* pairs discussed on *Pesachim* 110a are eating pairs of foods and drinking even numbers of glasses. The Talmud does not shrink from warning that "one who drinks in pairs has his blood on his own head". (The Talmud has differing opinions on which odd numbers are unlucky, though *all* agree that the number 3 is the best.) That was last week's discussion. Yet next week's discussion, on page 119b of the very same Tractate, discusses the doubling of passages and phrases in our liturgy as something that brings great beauty and benefits. 2 can be bad. But 2 can be good.

Part of the reason why 2 is so potent, for ill or good, and the real reason I'm focused on it, is the power of 2 when 2 becomes a power, that is, when we square numbers. Great thinkers have written on this, including in the recent masterful treatment by Geoffrey West in *Scale*. Who can forget the stories from our childhood, where some lowly and humble soul wins a wager or reward from the king or queen and asks meekly for a single grain of rice doubled each day for as many squares there are on a chess board (64). The resulting number of grains of rice, 18,446,744,073,709,551,616, effectively gives the value of the entire kingdom (along with the rest of the world) to the supplicant. It is the same message as in the story of the pond owner who sees the lily pads increasing very

slowly, from 1 to 2 to 4 to 8, and lacks the comprehension that when the pond is only 50% covered the owner has only one more day before the pond is totally covered with the beautiful-cum-suffocating plants. (The example is used a lot, including in Ray Kurzweil's *The Singularity is Near*, winner of the international award for most brilliant futurist manifesto with the worst title.) Our epidemiologists have been railing for a year that when the infection rate doubles the exponential rate of disease spread can become uncontrollable. It is this exponential growth that is a signal source of peril in an unchecked disease. The power of doubling is well, exponential!

But "toil and trouble" is not all you get from "double double" (*Macbeth*, the Witches Song, Act. IV, Scene 1). Doubling for good can create just as potent a force. Our Sages recorded that one mitzvah begets another one (Pirkei Avot 4:2). What a forward-thinking notion! Since if you roll the practice forward and generalize it, the result can be that 2 are doing mitzvot, then 4, then 8, then 16, etc. If each congregant calls even one lonely fellow congregant a week, and if each then follows suit every week thereafter, or if each of us finds one helpful thing to do each week or month, like attending minyan (yes, that's really helpful!) or delivering food or contributing to our *maot hittim* food insecurity effort that helps many of our congregants in need and our neighbors beyond, the miracle of exponential good will take hold. It will overwhelm every negative being created by the Covid-19 pandemic. Two *can* be the loneliest number since the number one. [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d5ab8BOu4LE>] But it doesn't have to be. And, like taking two to tango (as in [the great dance number Hernando's Hideaway from Pajama Game](#)), 2 can also be the exponent that ultimately blankets the world with the positive and constructive.

*The Half-Full Report*. I received no proposals to improve on this title. I understand how clever the double entendre is: Half-full describes our synagogue life at present, when our sanctuary is less than half full; and half-full, as in the optimistic adage seeing the glass-half full (while we are here, can you come up with a third entendre and maybe even a fourth - they exist). But surely the congregants and friends who coined The Mulligan Years and Prayground, those of

you who answered much harder right-brain math riddles and word games, surely you can come up with something better than Half-Full Report. Try!

In the meantime, we had a surfeit of winners answering the question who sang "Make 'em Laugh" and in what musical? The correct answer is Donald O'Connor in *Singin' in the Rain*. Just look at the star-studded cast of winners, listed in the order in which they responded: Bill Schulder; Faith Fogelman; Paula Van Gelder; Gil Deutsch; Francine Alfandary; Steve Beispiel; Carla Schein; Esther Ingber; Fortuna Calvo; and Marvin Schildkraut (who was technically late, but gets extra credit because he actually sang it over the phone). Even though there are many winners, the Judges have decided to award *each* the full two marks.

Congratulations to these champions. But there's more to our Half-Full Report, oh much more:

First, in responding to the challenge above, Francine Alfandary attached a video of Laurent Nahon, her husband. Laurent is one of our Pandemic Minyan Mainstays (PMM) along with their twin sons, Louis and Raphael. In his "Covid-19 instructional" video, Laurent sings an excerpt from, you guessed it, Make 'Em Laugh. It's great. Enjoy it [here](#).

Second, speaking of heroes among the teenage/20s set, it is important to record the fact that the Nahon twins are not the only ones who have accepted the mantle. Enormous thanks to Jesse Lipschutz and Rafael Lipschutz, also twins, who are truly PMMs, with indispensable contributions from Jacob Aufzien, Jeremy Feder, Sam Freilich, Reuben Frieber, Akiva Haberman, Alexander Haberman, and Isaac Haberman, Aharon Lauber, Jacob Seligson, Scott Soifer, Aharon Soloveichik, Pinchas Tanchum Soloveichik, and Daveed Soloveichik. You are our future, and you do us proud!

Third, last week's Half-Full Report (oh I feel an acronym comin' on) asked how many minutes of Torah and teaching Rabbi Soloveichik gave us in Mulligan Year 1, and to how many people. No one got this close to right, though Aura Bijou gets one mark for being least close to wrong (though still an order of magnitude off). At least she knew the direction of her error (understatement). The best estimate, as certified by Barbara Reiss, is that the Rabbi, having spoken over 130 times to

more than 400 listeners on average, had given us over three *million* minutes of Torah and learning in Mulligan Year 1. I hope you saw that Rabbi Soloveichik is going to be doing another lecture series after Pesah, titled *Providence and Politics: Zionism from Herzl to Begin*. Do not miss it.

Fourth, when Aura was at least *trying* to get to the right estimate for Torah minutes taught, she also mailed in her "Covid Sculpture", which is a great pic.



Winners galore, young adults sustaining our minyan, singing congregants, great photos -- now that's what I'm talkin' about in our first congregant H-FR! Send in more!

Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas