

March 25, 2021

Dear Shearith Israel family,

*Neither March Madness Nor Ignorance; Just Folly.* Who can blame so many of us for acting with the Covid-19 equivalent of cabin fever? True, we just welcomed Spring, the equinox having occurred on March 20. It is also true, but not really pertinent, as Alfred, Lord Tennyson observed in *Locksley Hall*:

"In the Spring a young man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love."

As nice as these are, in a week where several New York City neighborhoods are registering the highest Covid-19 infection rates in the *nation*; where the testing that has been done attributes fully 60% of the new infections to one or another variant strain, which appear to be less resistant to the vaccines; where a full consensus of our own Covid-19 Working Group believes that we are not out of the woods yet- with all that going on, why are we seeing so many unmasked faces, too-close-standing, maskless indoor dining, movie theatre attendance, and the like?

Is it madness, not as in back-again college basketball March Madness but as in Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, where the narrator says of the knight-errant himself, "his madness being stronger than any other faculty"? Is it ignorance? It doesn't seem like either. We all *know* that we - even those of us who have been vaccinated - should keep observing the protections that a year of medical and scientific analysis predicts are the most effective. Me thinks it's neither madness nor ignorance. Rather, I wonder if it's good old-fashioned folly. We would be in good company were it that. I think of Joseph Conrad's *Almayer's Folly* (at 144 pages, a candidate for the greatest shortest book in English by a non-American). Or I think of Bertrand Russell's 1959 speech on disarmament, where he said:

"The long ages of human misery were due to ignorance and folly: hitherto, though ignorance has grown less, folly has remained."

We are headed into a period of higher travel and other more risky behavior. Covid-19 loves a party, especially one with plenty of food eaten maskless over a

long period of time. If your own Covid-19 compliance fatigue makes partaking in such festivities irresistible, do us a favor, sleep in on Pesah. As a synagogue we are doing everything we can to make sure that we can enjoy Pesah as a community together, safely. Everyone who wants to attend services will find a place, if you fill out the forms and submit them. And though our hearts ache from the fact that still too many of our congregants will have to endure isolation or limited comradery again this year, no one who approaches us will be without Pesah provisions. It should not be too much to ask that the right answer to the multiple choice question, a) madness, b) ignorance, or c) folly, we can choose d) none of the above.

*We May Never Pass This Way Again.* [The song bearing this title](#), by Seals & Crofts nearly 50 years ago, never made it to the top 10 on the pop charts. Yet the doleful melody does stick (the lyrics other than the title, on the other hand, are wholly forgettable - I bet you've forgotten them; I have). The sentiment expressed by the title, along with its endless variants (2 points for the earliest rephrasing from Tanakh), partly speaks of the need to make the most of a situation at hand. Seize the Day. *Carpe diem*, as the Roman poet Horace famously put it - which became the title later used by Saul Bellow in what is surely another candidate for the greatest shortest novel, this one by an American author.

The moment in space-time in which we find ourselves is utterly unique. (Of course I know that, once something is unique, saying it's *utterly* unique doesn't add much, and I also know that every moment in space-time is in a sense utterly unique; stop being annoying.) But the uniqueness of our present moment is not because of Covid-19, though I acknowledge that we really don't want it to pass *this way* again. As we have observed, there are countless episodes in history during which humanity was beset by far worse calamities than we are experiencing now. In fact, we must count ourselves blessed beyond merit that we live at a time when even a pandemic can be tamed by tools that include science, medicine, and sensible, disciplined behavior. That *is* unique in our history. But that's not my topic here.

The uniqueness of this moment stems from the simple yet confounding confluence of calendrical conditions happening right now. At the dawn of 5781, I mentioned that the Jewish calendar this year - in the sense of how the holidays fall - occurs rarely, in only about 4% of the years ([see my email of 9/17/2020](#)). 4% however is the stuff of excitement, but not true awe. It's exciting to observe that that Pesah this year starts right after Shabbat. There are a number of cool things that stem from Ereb Pesah occurring on Shabbat. But this is not an utterly unique occurrence. In fact it happened in 2008, will happen again in 2025, and in the last Century and this one it will occur on average about once every nine years.

What is *utterly* unique this year is that, in the daily study of the Talmud, we finished Tractate *Pesahim* this past Monday. That is just three days before the fast of the first-born for Pesah (today - and *hazak u'baruh* to Aharon Soloveichik for giving the *siyyum* on our Playground after services this morning) and five days before Pesah itself. The odds of this happening are, conservatively, one in a REALLY BIG NUMBER. Let me explain. In a modern-day miracle, two great Rabbis of the Twentieth Century, Rabbi Moshe Menachem Mendel Spivak in 1920 and Rabbi Meir Shapiro in 1923, began to persuade essentially the entire religious world to commence learning one page of the 2,711-page Talmud each day. The profoundness of the impact of the Daf Yomi movement on Jews and Judaism cannot be overestimated. Imho it ranks with other miracles of the last Century that Jews experienced (an entire people modernizing and learning and speaking a long-moribund language (Hebrew); the State of Israel itself; the reunification of Jerusalem; the Lubavitch outreach movement?). You can easily calculate that learning 2,711 pages, one a day, would take approximately 7.42739726 years, assuming a 365-day year. There are some deviations from that easy to remember number, including that when Daf Yomi started we counted the pages slightly differently; we didn't study all Tractates; and there are leap years in both Gregorian and Jewish calendar systems that are not coincident. Suffice it to say, however, that since September 11, 1923, there have been 13 full cycles of the Daf Yomi. We are now in our 14<sup>th</sup> cycle.

And now for the unique part. As best I can tell, we have never learned and finished Tractate *Pesahim* so close to Pesah. Based on [calculations made by](#)

[others](#) (for other purposes), it appears that we will not be learning *Pesahim* so close to Pesah for at least another 1,000 years. There is a pretty simple algorithm for confirming this, but there isn't enough room in the margin of this email to show you (BIG prize for sending me the algorithm; small yet still sizable prize for the source of the comment, in substance, that "there isn't enough room in the margin of this email to show you").

So is all this just dazzling magic with numbers? What would be so wrong with that? But there is more. It has to speak to us all that the uniqueness of the occurrence of learning *Pesahim* at Pesah time in 5781/2021 isn't just a coincidence. Pesah is one of our key holidays celebrating our *ahdut*, or unity. And Tractate *Pesahim* ends on the very theme of communal unity. For example, page 118b speaks of the people "who sit before" the Almighty, one of the highest accolades a person can receive. Who are they? The Talmud teaches that it is those who know their friends, look after their friends (to the point of knowing where they sit in the house of study or synagogue), and are members of a cohesive *kahal* or community. Not only does Tractate *Pesahim* end on a note of *ahdut*; the very next Tractate, *Shekalim*, begins on the same theme of communal unity. *All* Jews give a shekel for the common good. Can you name another two Tractates that do that? And even if you could, it is also significant that the Tractate *Shekalim* that we are learning is from the Jerusalem Talmud. Indeed, Tractate *Shekalim* is the only place in the entire corpus of the Talmud where the Babylonian Talmud borrows and uses as its own one of the Tractates of the Jerusalem Talmud. The unity theme is redolent, powerful, real. We really needed this utterly unique occurrence this year, and thankfully we got it!

*The Half-Full Report.* In the main, the responses to my woebegone request to improve on the provisional name, Half-Full Report, supported keeping the name. Mulligan Man Steve Smith wants to keep the name and wants the report to be half *good* news and half *even better* news. It's hard to argue with the sentiment. And Esther Ingber innocently suggested the name, *Nisht Aheen, Nisht Ahair*, Yiddish for Neither Here Nor There. The phrase is perfect, in theory. The fatal problem is that, despite the ample amount of Yiddish in our Congregation's past - BIG prizes for the first four examples - some of us today reimagine our

Congregational narrative with Yiddish playing no part of our cultural understanding. So we can't use Yiddish. Accordingly, until further improvement, H-FR it shall be.

But, you say, what *is* the H-FR this week? I would think that, for many of us, moving into Pesah is a good-sized pick-me-up all by itself. So might be the fact, observed by Trustee and Honorary Pandemic Hazan Avery Neumark, that for the first time we welcomed the new month of *Nissan* under the stars, so to speak, on our Playground. Our *Birkat Levana* service is comprised of a lovely, short set of prayers recited toward the early days of each Jewish month. It was great to recite them outdoors, in our space.

But if I can't win you with the cerebral, how about a pic of our newest member, Eliza Anne Klaber, born to our members (and new Electors and generous supporters) Jacqueline and Andrew Klaber.



Eliza was born on the magical date of March 18, more specifically on 3/18/21 (3+18=21!). May she and her family and the entire community rejoice in their and our blessings, and may we all pass *this* way again, and again, and again.

Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom, and *Moadim L'simha*.

Louis Solomon, Parnas