

March 31, 2022

Dear Shearith Israel family,

“THE NEXT COVID WAVE IS ON THE WAY.” Did you see how big the font was on this title, in Sunday’s *New York Times*, to an op-ed by former CDC director Thomas Frieden? In our non-synagogue lives, none of us seems ready for this. In fact, are we witnessing, in the main, an ardent antipathy to protecting against this next wave? The willing disbelief that yet another wave is coming seems reminiscent of two years ago, when the pandemic first hit. Of course there are highly significant differences between then and now. But one thing that’s the same is that most of us aren’t listening to shouts and screams of A TIDAL WAVE, even if one is coming.

Not so at Shearith Israel. I discussed this just last week, and I was prescient (ok, so maybe I wasn’t all that prescient). I said that the way we are sensibly dealing with the diametrically opposite directions that Covid precautions are moving is by maintaining a status quo of cautious liberalizing. This past Shabbat was a perfect example. For both Friday night services and for most of morning services, we had about equal numbers of people sitting in the masked and mask-optional sections. We had a nice crowd to hear the season finale of Rabbi Soloveichik’s *Friday Night Lights* talks, over 75 at morning services, and a really nice attendance at our delicious Kiddush, sponsored in honor of Reverend Edinger. The important point is that everyone on both sides of the synagogue seemed comfortable. Segan Michael Lustig passed on Jack Daar’s hilarious “mask migration” to describe the movement between sides of the synagogue of congregants who, pre-Covid, would never have been seen away from their seat, much less on the opposite side of the Sanctuary.

Covid disease spread numbers are up in our area (possibly the BA.2 variant, the sub-variant that is supposedly invading, though it’s not being tracked yet here). Hospitalizations and deaths continue to decline. We believe we have the right measures in place to satisfy, if you will, both sides of the aisle. And if the next Covid wave is on its way, we are ready for it. Come back now – be fashionably ahead of the wave.

Parashat HaHodesh. This Shabbat is not only Rosh Hodesh Nissan; in addition we read the fourth of the four special parshiot inserted at the end of the weekly Torah readings on four Shabbatot this time of year. We read from Exodus 12:1-20, which tells of the first mitzvah our Sages say the Almighty gave to the Jewish people *qua* people: to sanctify the new moon. This sanctification created in human beings an appreciation for the scarceness of time in our own lives and hence the sacredness of our role in making the most of it. Time is the most profoundly limited dimension of our lives (so far – anyone seen any new Ray Kurzweil predictions lately? And where is that new book on his technological singularity (when machines in toto become smarter than human’s in toto). Wasn’t it promised, I recollect, for last year?)

This is not the occasion to write about the limited nature of time. Suffice it now quote Paul McCartney’s great [*Ever Present Past*](#):

I hope it isn't too late
Searching for the time that has gone so fast
The time that I thought would last
My ever present past

Shabbat HaHodesh's Torah portion and haftarah of similar theme are worth a listen. Come and hear. You can even witness the rare occasion of three Sifrei Torah being read.

Jewish Geography. Learning our way to the end of the second chapter of Tractate Yevamot, which we are now doing in the Daf Yomi cycle, we come upon a discussion of Rabbinic decrees enacted as protections against Biblical transgressions. There are many such siyuggim, or "fences", built around Torah principles. (One point each for some good examples. Two points each for the example and its source in the Talmud or in later Rabbinic responsa.)

In the discussion principally on pages 21-23, the Talmud introduces the concept of "secondary *arayot*". Recall that in the Torah, and in the first two Mishnaot in the Tractate, we learn about the 21 illicit marital relations. These are not limited to people in the same generation but extend to adjacent generations (mother and son, for example), or what we can think of as the First Degree of Consanguinity. The 21 even go to a Second Degree of Consanguinity (e.g., a daughter's daughter or a son's daughter). These are what the Torah proscribes.

The Rabbis, however, went further. The general fear was that confusion might lead to transgression of the Biblical prohibitions. As a result, our Sages created the concept of secondary *arayot*. These relations went a full Degree of Consanguinity further. Examples differ depending on the rule being followed. In one, for instance, adumbrated by R' Chiya, the prohibition goes up and down three generations, for instance, the father-in-law's father's mother, or the wife's daughter's daughter's daughter. Weeks ago Larry Kobrin suggested I use display of the excellent picto-grams available. He was right. I should have. Now you simply have to imagine what the matrix looks like. Imagine further that there is an opinion expressed in the Talmud that the pattern continues ad infinitum. This opinion is not explicitly rejected, and the suggestion appears at least as recently as the Rishonim that the spandrel (thin but long) line of prohibited liaisons does not end.

With the advent of secondary *arayot*, you can imagine that there is a significant expansion of the prohibited marriages at the Rabbinic level. And it occurred to me that this may be a reason why, when Jews get together, there is an intensive (obsessive?) focus on Jewish geography. Do you know him? Wasn't his mother-in-law's sister's brother related to her? Isn't she married to the grandson of his father-in-law's cousin? I marvel at friends and family who are proficient at this. It turns out that these people may be trying to follow the trails of secondary *arayot*, which can cover as many as *seven* generations even without accepting the *ad infinitum* view.

This is not just Jewish geography. It is adroitly following the adage, made just for the occasion, “good fences make bad bed-fellows”. (Two points each for better ones describing the phenomenon at work here.)

Half-Full Report.

Two-fer finale. By popular vote, fairly tabulated ignoring hanging chads, the winners of the contest to name the category of two-in-one song are:

Bisong (Guy Reiss)
Doscant (Steve Tilly)
Songcatenate (Steve Tilly)
Saga sequence song (Faith Fogelman)

Two points each to the finalists and winner (Steve, the judges gave you two, total - you got robbed!). We intend to enter all of them in the New Oxford Dictionary Neologism contest (we will donate any winnings to the Synagogue, thanks).

The Hardest Tractates. It surprised me that no one got right the names of what are said to be the three most challenging tractates – not until I mentioned it in passing to our daughter Lia, who didn’t skip a beat before reciting the acronym, A-N-(y)l, which in Hebrew means poor or impoverished (as in how hard they are to get through). The acronym stands for the three Tractates - the (y)l is for Yevamot, which in Hebrew begins with the letter yud. You tell me the other two, and for one point tell me the source. I can’t make it much easier.

New Contests!!! Citing (and humming all day) McCartney’s *Ever Present Past* (above) reminds me that that keeper is from his album titled *Memory Almost Full*. What a fantabulous title, made even greater by reflecting on how old McCartney was when he made the album as well as the state of the IT market for memory storage at the time (2007). It’s brilliant at multiple levels all at the same time. So, we are officially offering two points for the best album title and three inflation adjusted points for the best combination of song title and album title (real or imaginary). I think you will not easily beat *Ever Present Past* and *Memory Almost Full*. That’s why I’m offering the BIG BUCKS for winning.

Rabbi Kanievsky’s Passing. With deep sorrow, we mourn this week multiple tragic losses in B’nei Brak. And last week, I was remiss in not mentioning the passing of Torah giant Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky. Our son, Yosef, attended the funeral, also in B’nei Brak, and saw countless mourners. Charlie Helinsky, whom we are very happy to hear from again, pays a fitting homage:

I [am] thinking of the great Rabbi Kanievsky, who prioritized writing correspondence even at the expense of writing more of his commentaries. Such a great man . . . put others first . . . And if Rabbi Kanievsky had shut himself away to write commentaries, he may have been a greater, holier scholar. . . .

I guess if G-d just wanted books, [the Almighty] could send angels down and dictate new ones to the angels each day, and then send angels down to protect the books when they were being burned. . . .

Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom. May the violence end soon.

Louis Solomon, Parnas