

April 1, 2021

Dear Shearith Israel family,

*Safety in numbers.* This phrase usually refers to safety in larger rather than smaller groups of people. Nonetheless, it seems apt to describe where we are as a Congregation in response to Covid-19. The infection and disease spread numbers are down slightly in New York; they are up in many other parts of the country. Many doctors, including those in our Covid-19 Working Group, worry about a "Spring wave", especially of the virus variants. The wonderful news in all this is that we have in place a litany of precautions and protections that have thus far proven to be effective, and we are, slowly but slowly, making congregants feel comfortable enough to return to in-person services.

This past Shabbat and on the first two days of Pesah (Sunday and Monday), we had record yet safe numbers at our indoor and outdoor minyanim. Congregants that we haven't seen for an entire year, including some of our most dear elders, returned. We witnessed congregants quietly finding an available seat marked with a green check mark when theirs, for literally 50+ years, was occupied by someone else or otherwise not available. Ok, maybe that's to be expected. Still, I'm telling you it was heartening. Our three ritual leaders shared the leading of among our most beautiful services of the year. We felt safe in the numbers we had. And that will continue to be our goal.

*Food, Community.* Jews and eating. Rabbi Soloveichik has spoken on the topic many times. We are in the middle of Pesah, the holiday of eating, though maybe it is not unique in that respect. It is surely unique in terms of the unimaginable amount of time we spend yearly preparing for the holiday: cleaning, storing, unpacking, kashering, shopping, etc. just to get *hametz* out of our lives for eight days. I can't think of anything we do in our religion that comes close to the amount of time and energy devoted to a religious activity. Surely there must be something profound going on here. One standard and beautiful thought is about the meaning of *hametz* (leavening, inclinations, habits) and the need to take control over them in our lives. I want to offer another suggestion.

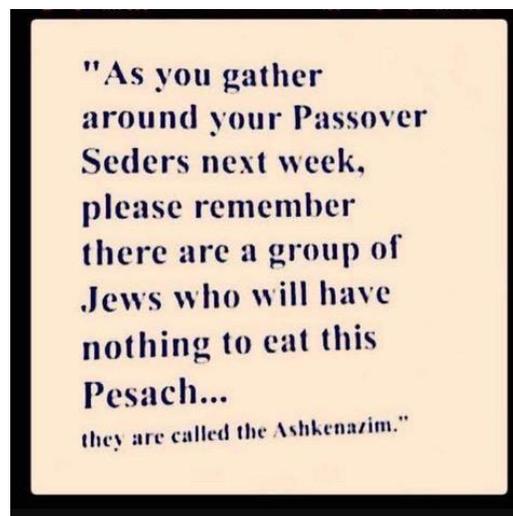
Wherever we look, Pesah teaches us about communal unity through food. In Temple times, Jews could not physically eat the Pascal Lamb (which had to be fully consumed at the Seder) without an extended but unified group, or *habura*. Plans had to be made in advance of Pesah to make sure the group was of adequate size. The Torah parasha that frequently coincides with Pesah, and which in many years as in this one is spread out over many weeks because of holiday reading interruptions, is *Shemini*, which contains among the most extensive exegeses of the kosher food laws in the entire Torah. The Talmud draws significant analogies between Succot and Pesah. Since both holidays start on the fifteenth of their respective Jewish months (fifteen in Hebrew numbering being "tet-vav"), the Talmud and later authorities abbreviate the making of these analogies with the phrase "Tet-Vav Tet-Vav" or, no kidding, "Tu Tu". Despite their similarities, one significant difference between the holidays is that, on Succot, the number of sacrifices recited from the Torah changes each day, so for example, for bulls the numbers go from 13 to 7. Yet on Pesah, the exact same sacrifice is brought each day - the showing of unity through sacrifice and then food is so strong that no change is warranted or desirable.

Because of the sanctity that can come through eating, special rituals have developed in many otherwise disparate communities that similarly show the creation of community through food on Pesah. Hillel Halkin, in his recent *The Lady of Hebrew and Her Lovers of Zion*, tells of early antagonism between disciples of the founder of hasidism, the Baal Shem Tov, and the disciples of the Gaon of Vilna, or the Misnagdim (Halkin says it's ok to use the "s" even if you speak Sephardic Hebrew). When these rival groups were not informing on one another to the authorities (!), each independently developed very similar, beautiful customs celebrating community through food on Pesah. Thus, the Vilna Gaon is said to have relished the eating of matzoh on Pesah, not for its taste but because this mitzvah is available only during the limited days of Pesah. The Gaon actually ate Seudat Shelishit (or a third meal) on Pesah, even though neither he nor his adherents ate Seudat Shelishit on any other holiday but only on Shabbat. And the Baal Shem Tov - I assure you independently - created a special meal, also in the afternoon on the last day of Pesah, called in English "The Messianic Feast". For Hasidim, the celebration was explicitly so that all Jews, as a community, might

welcome the coming of Messianic times. Isn't the image of these rivals (temporary rivals, until they stopped the internecine hostilities jointly to combat the Haskalah movement in the Nineteenth Century) each having a last-day of Pesah feast inspiring? This coming Shabbat, on the seventh day of Pesah, we commemorate North American Jewry's communal past - the opening of our first Mill Street Synagogue in 1730. Oh how we wish that we could, this Shabbat or Sunday, welcome everyone for a festive shared repast. It would be such a fitting addition to celebrate our future together.

*Half-Full Report.* Our report this week reports on three items. First, on behalf of the entire Congregation, we congratulate our young women, Cherish Greenberg, Honor Greenberg, Olalla Levi, Cecilia Roberts, Jenna Roberts, and Tess Solomon, for their beautiful reading and chanting of *Shir Hashirim*, or Song of Songs, over Zoom yesterday evening. Their mastery of our unique liturgy and the continuity of that tradition is deeply appreciated.

Second, we offer a cartoon that can be appreciated best by those of us who toil with many of the burdens of a synagogue following the Western Sephardic tradition yet do not enjoy the Sephardic benefit of eating foods with *kitniyot* on Pesah (see [my email of 3/11/21](#)). Alan Zwiebel's submission says it perfectly:



Third, I've been thinking about my swipe last week at the Seals & Crofts song, *We May Never Pass This Way Again*. I said the lyrics are wholly forgettable. They are. Still, as we are about to head into our brief reprieve from musical interludes during the part of the counting of the Omer that commemorates our grievous

communal loss of twelve thousand pairs of pupils of Rabbi Akiva in the Second Century (Tractate *Yevamot* 62b), I wanted to propose a taxonomy of the four types of son[g]s that occur to me at this time of the Seder:

I. The Wise Son[g]: Brilliant title, tune, lyrics. My entry, [\*The Room Where It Happened\*](#), from the play Hamilton, or, in the instrumental category, Mason Williams's [\*Classical Gas\*](#).

II. The Wicked Son[g]: Bad title, bad tune, bad lyrics, just overrated in every dimension. Any number of Dylan or Leonard Cohen or Madonna songs would fit this bill.

III. The Simple Son[g]: Good (if too long) title, good or better music, nothing lyrics. *We May Never Pass this Way Again* does seem to fit this category. So does *Mighty Quinn* by Manfred Mann.

IV. The Son[g] that doesn't know enough to ask: Only one of title, tune, or lyrics worthy of being redeemed. The *Girl From Ipanema* is my reluctant choice. The music is captivating; yet the lyrics, our daughter Tess says, have not withstood the test of time. Or the Squeeze's '80s classic, *Pulling Mussels (from the Shell)* - again the music. Or Genesis's *Follow You Follow Me* - great music, vapid lyrics, nothing title.

Now it's your turn. Each of my choices can be improved (with the possible exception of The Wise Son[g]).

Note: We already have BIG winners for two of our H-FR questions of last week, which I will report on next week. We still don't have any correct answers to 1) the algorithm to determine the deep question of when we will next finish Tractate *Pesahim* so close to Pesah; and 2) early Tanakh sources for the substance of the thought, "we may never pass this way again". People, try. Stardom awaits!

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

Louis Solomon, Parnas