

April 15, 2021

Dear Shearith Israel family,

Neither Up Nor Down. In terms of real data, the Covid-19 news is mixed - more mixed than the fatigue-cum-nonchalance of even some of our highly sensible neighbors would seem to indicate. I want to share something with you. It is of singular importance, to me, anyway. As welcome as Kiddush is to all of us - and it is - our Congregation's fundamental purpose transcends communal noshing and need not include the post-musaf collation when the safety of our Kahal is at stake. And as welcome and even necessary as social gatherings are for all of us - and they are - our Congregation's fundamental purpose goes beyond social gatherings. As a Congregation, we carry out our fundamental purpose by having safe places to participate in the communal recitation of services and the communal reading of the Torah. We carry out our fundamental purpose by continuing to be available for safe ritual events, including beginning and middle and end of life observances. That is not to belittle the other aspects of in-person participation. In fact we are pining to be able to renew them. In due course we will, when we are confident that it is safe for all our congregants to do so.

In the meantime, zoom-in, call-in, and even come in, after you fill out the forms and continue to observe all appropriate safety precautions. As a Congregation, we continue to feel that we are in the safe middle when it comes to Covid-19 compliance and that we are going to stay there. I've used, oh, a zillion aphorisms, clichés, and nifty ditties to convey that same point. You think I'm running out of ways to say it? Not nearly. This week I invoke the Grand Old Duke of York of English nursery rhyme renown (any child who wants my very own, non-copyrighted tune for the rhyme, email or call me):

Oh, the grand old Duke of York,
He had ten thousand men;
He marched them up to the top of the hill,
And he marched them down again.

When they were up, they were up,
And when they were down, they were down,
And when they were only halfway up,
They were neither up nor down.

We are neither up nor down. We are in the middle, where we should be. The alternative is that we can take some knowing risks, which we won't do if the risks are at any level of seriousness. Or, we can rely on miracles, assuming all will be safe since, after all, we've really had enough! This is the folly I've written about.

Wonder of Wonders, Miracle of Miracles. My point here is not profound. But it has a friend who is profound. And the friend is the treatment given just this week to the famous topic of relying on miracles. In the daily Talmud study that is done by literally tens of thousands of Jews - and is instantly and easily accessible to every one of us via the internet - we finished Tractate *Shekalim* and began Tractate *Yoma*. In Aramaic, the word "yoma" means "day", and the Tractate is essentially about THE Day - that is, the Day of Atonement, or Yom Kippur, or, at our Synagogue, just Kippur (I have yet to see an authoritative source for pronouncing "Yoma" as "Yuma" - anyone?). The very first Mishna in the Tractate legislates that the *Kohen Gadol*, or High Priest, begins preparation for the Kippur service seven days in advance of Kippur. The Mishna explains further that there was also chosen a back-up *Kohen* to step in to replace the High Priest in case, for example, the High Priest has a disqualifying bodily emission during the week leading up to the holy day. Right there the commentators ask, hey, wait a minute, aren't we told in Pirkei Avot (Ch. 5:5) that one of the miracles that happened in Temple times was that a *Kohen Gadol* never had a disqualifying bodily emission in the days leading up to Kippur? If that is so, then why in the very prominent first Mishna on the very first page of the new Tractate do the Sages concern themselves about preparing a substitute in case of such a disqualifying emission?

The answer, give the commentators, is that we do not rely on miracles. That is a principle often stated in the Talmud and, so far as I'm aware, is not challenged by other or later authorities. (Anybody got anything to the contrary? And don't challenge me with definitional semantics about what is/is not a miracle. That is a super-interesting topic, but not this one.) Not relying on miracles is a fundamental part of our theology.

Yet don't we make much of the miracles bestowed on us by the Almighty? There is barely a day much less a holiday that goes by without mentioning and rejoicing in them. Don't we pray for miracles every time we say any number of our prayers? In the Pirkei Avot citation just referenced -- by tradition we study one chapter of Pirkei Avot every Shabbat between Pesah and Shabuot, so get started! -- we list and glorify the miracles that the Almighty embedded in nature at the time of creation of the world (Ch. 5:4-5). And in some of the most famous parts of our Haftarah readings of the Prophets, we narrate the miraculous feats performed by the Almighty through human emissaries. Really, don't we ask for miracles often? So what's the deal? Can we, or should we not, pray for miracles?

One can try to distinguish between praying for a miracle in advance and rejoicing once it arrives. But that seems a bit, well, cowardly. If we are allowed to be grateful for a miracle after the fact, then why not also be able to ask for a miracle beforehand? The distinction that I have seen is therefore *not* between not asking on the one hand but being darn happy when they arrive on the other. Rather, one fundamental distinction our sages have understood is whether we are praying for a miracle for ourselves or for a relevant collective or community. This is not an inconsequential difference. Indeed, to paraphrase Robert Frost in *The Road Not Taken*, it makes "all the difference". Jews literally for millennia prayed for the reestablishment of Israel in a land securely theirs. We collectively celebrate that miracle *today* (Happy Yom Haatzmaut everyone). (If you don't consider the advent of the State of Israel at least a candidate for a miracle, even one with a lower case "m", then please tune into Rabbi Soloveichik's seven lectures happening now; you will be disabused.) Communal prayer asking for a collective miracle appears to be fully consonant with our religious precepts.

The first daf in *Yoma* importantly teaches that we as individuals need to be reliant on our own "brains, energy, courage, and wit" (I'm shamelessly quoting a song I wrote). Indeed, shamelessly paraphrasing my own song a bit more: Alone we can lead, sure, but only together can we succeed. It does appear that we can and should be praying for miracles that are fundamental to our *communal* well-being.

We cannot take any serious risk with the health of our community. As in so many parts of our congregational life, we need to separate our individual wants and desires - even if totally legitimate - from the Congregational nature of our religion. Just because the difference is sometimes obscure does not mean it is trivial. We need to try to keep the difference in mind until Covid-19 runs its course - or at least runs enough of it to permit safe public gatherings without needing to rely on miracles.

Half-Full Report. A happy three-fer for our report today:

First, I can't remember as uniform a reaction to a comment in the H-FR as the number of Congregants who have fascinating stories about Yiddish in their lives. Many, including some of our Congregational leaders not to mention other stalwarts of our community, have reached out to me insisting on a firm promise of confidentiality before they shared this secret with me. Such is the public humiliation if not disgrace they feel they might suffer if their Yiddish skeletons are uncloseted. I will not out them. But I do want to say to them that they should reread the authoritative view expressed by Rabbi Dr. De Sola Pool quoted in my email of last week. We are a strong enough community to welcome and not ostracize you for a Yiddish stain in your past.

Second, speaking of the right use of our Sanctuary in these challenging times, this past Shabbat we were blessed to hear a young Bar Mitzvah do a beautiful job chanting the Torah *parasha* and Haftarah and to hear Rabbi Soloveichik address the Bar Mitzvah in a beautiful, masked, but fully audible, five minute talk. This week, an extended family unit wanting to observe a *Nahala* (or, as we have said for centuries, a *Yahrzeit*) used the Synagogue for minha/arbit while the rest of those attending daily minyan prayed on the portico. It all worked seamlessly. These gladden our hearts.

Finally, take a look at what Lincoln Center is doing with the Paved Paradise inspiration we gave the UWS.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/13/arts/lincoln-center-plaza-green.html?referingSource=articleShare>. As Oscar Wilde said, imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. Indeed, seeing what Lincoln Center is doing has, via a positive feedback loop, inspired us to announce our newest challenge: Send in emails, renderings, descriptions of your best ideas of what we should do this Spring and Summer on our Paved Paradise. HUGE prizes await! Warning: Barbara Reiss has a jump on you, and she is attacking the challenge as if this were her day job!

Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas