

April 22, 2021

Dear Shearith Israel family,

*Better News On the Rise*. With just a little more than a week until Lag La'Omer, I will continue to refrain from linking to rock n' roll songs out of respect for those observing Omer music restrictions (see [my email of April 1, 2021](#)). But turning such songs on their head, well maybe that's ok. I'm thinking about the great late-60's CCR hit, Bad News On the Rise, which begins:

I see the bad moon a-rising

I see trouble on the way

I see earthquakes and lightnin'

I see bad times today

I'm not feeling that way this week. Covid-19 spread, disease, and virulence numbers are down or stable in our area. Neighborhood parks are glorious with the simultaneous re-appearance of green leaves and the fast-vanishing blossoms. City bridges and tunnels are back to pre-Covid-19 normal traffic (which is a silly statistic for once-reputable papers to lead with, since the world's most populous subway system is operating at about 40% capacity, so of course car traffic is up). We need the rain, and boy are we getting it.

With more and more of us getting vaccinated, many synagogues and other houses of worship are starting cautiously to re-fill - yet, fortunately, we are not hearing reports of spreading events. Here in our tiny corner of the Covid cosmos we are welcoming more congregants returning to Shabbat and daily minyanim. We are restarting Junior Congregation (outside, with the now-usual precautions). And we are busily and optimistically making plans for a very special series of services, for Rabbi Soloveichik to begin in-person sermons and classes, likely after Shabuot, and for a gaggle of giggles in making use of our Paved Paradise this summer (see below). Will we suffer some setbacks or hiccups as we try to implement some of these things? Undoubtedly. But on the whole, and with our sister congregations on the UWS, we are looking forward to some better news on the rise.

*A True Leaning In.* Happily, we do not have to debate the quality or merits of the literature that may have given rise to the recent popularity of the phrase "lean in" or "leaning in". We don't have to debate it because for nearly a millennium we have been "leaning in" with respect to a fundamental Jewish observance that finds clear expression in the Torah and is literally thousands of years old. I refer to the mezuzah and its placement on the doorposts of our houses, apartments, rooms, etc.

I didn't reach for the topic; today's daily Talmud study includes one of the places where the Talmud gives extended treatment of mezuzah -- the law, the lore, and so much more (Yoma Daf 10-11). There are at least two other places in the Talmud offering similarly brilliant Talmudic insights into the mezuzah. Tractate Avodah Zarah 11a retells the story of the Roman luminary Onkelos, who is likely but not certainly the famous Onkelos whose translation of the Torah into Aramaic is read (as part of the thrice-reading of the weekly Torah parasha) by many Jews. In this story, Onkelos leaves Rome, travels to Israel, and converts to Judaism. The Roman Caesar then sends three successive sets of troops to bring Onkelos back to Rome. Each group is unsuccessful; in each case Onkelos, simply by explaining the differences between the Almighty and Roman deities, persuades the troops to convert to Judaism as well. In the story of the third set of troops, Onkelos touches the mezuzah on the doorway to his house. (To this day, that touching is thought of as the source for the custom of many to touch or kiss the mezuzah while entering or leaving a room or house.) In response to the question what is the mezuzah for, Onkelos explains, "the way of the world is that a king of flesh and blood sits inside his palace, and his servants guard him from the outside, whereas the Almighty stands guard on the outside, protecting those inside". After the third set of troops converts and doesn't return, the story concludes, Caesar stopped sending emissaries to bring Onkelos back to Rome.

It is the third discussion of mezuzah, in Tractate Menahot 33a, that together with the current discussion in Yoma make my point about "leaning in". In these discussions, the debate surrounds the placement of the mezuzah, that is, the specific positioning of the object on the doorpost. Based on the Talmudic discussion, which speaks of positioning the object like you would a "peg", Rashi

and his grandson, Rabbeinu Tam, perhaps a millennium after the Talmudic discussion, debate how a peg is placed (more accurately, how it is not placed). The disagreement is whether positioning "like a peg" indicates that the mezuzah should be positioned any way but horizontally (Rashi) or, alternatively, any way but vertically (Rabbeinu Tam). Phrased this way, it is clear that there is one position that satisfies all sides of the debate: leaning it, on a diagonal. And that is the beautiful compromise, the "leaning in", that remains the prevalent custom to this day. We affix the mezuzah to the doorpost at a slight diagonal, with the top part of the mezuzah leaning in to the inside of the abode.

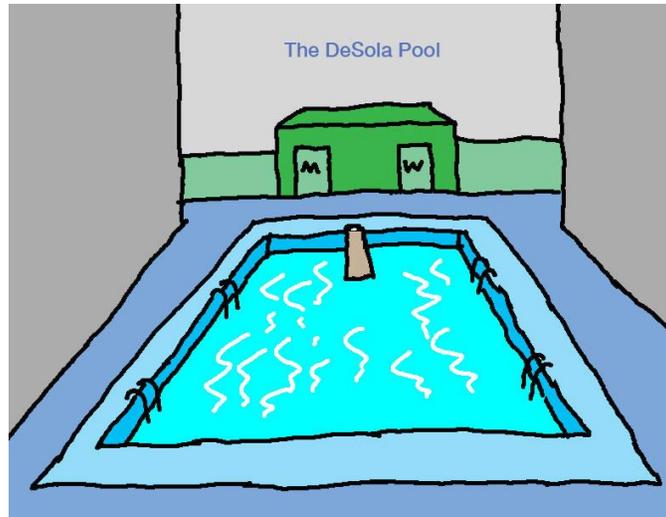
The result reached by our tradition is a perfect example of the lamentably, nay, the tragically, waning art of compromise. In the Talmud, the art of compromise, called "p'shara", is given respected even vaunted status. The greatest of the sages engaged in endless efforts to arrive at p'shara between people. The extent of the genius of achieving p'shara reflected in our tradition deserves its own email. For now, we will all be called upon to lean in to compromise as we come out of the saga of Covid-19. We can do it. After all, we have seen its benefits in the placement of the mezuzah in every Jewish doorway for nearly a thousand years.

*Half-Full Report.* We've had a bountiful bevy of beautiful ideas for what to do with Paved Paradise during the upcoming warmer months. I think we are a week or two premature in awarding final BIG prizes; the electronic cards and letters are still being received. But it's not too soon to list just some of the great suggestions (leaving the humorous stylings of their titles for later as well). Consider the following:

- Movies, movies on the wall
- Rabbi Soloveichik's resumed Shabbat afternoon class
- Book, poetry, play readings
- Games on the lawn (scrabble, chess, maybe even lawn games)
- Just for our kids, how about a petting zoo or a bubble show?

- And, when it's safe to do so, how about serene tea before minha/arbit? Or a lively *kaffeeklatsch* at "Café 1654"!? Or bringing your own dinners, and sitting, socially distant and safe, on Paved Paradise where you can see other congregants?

Nor is it too early to share with you Alan Zwiebel's hilarious cartoon and pun-gallery:



As Alan explains it,

"The DeSola Pool" would be a wonderful tribute to the late Rabbi Pool, a mikveh, a real "prayground", a new landmark and might be "A New Wave" of innovative worship, finding new depths of insight as we dive into scripture in refreshing new ways. Might be a stroke of genius... Rabbi Soloveichik will be the "Life Guard" on duty. He would likely arrive early for his morning "Brisker" swim.

Oh where are the pun-giants Rachel and Jonny Herlands of yesteryear to compete with Alan (see [my email of December 3, 2020](#), quoting them). Who else can top these pics and puns?

Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas