

May 13, 2021

Dear Shearith Israel family,

*Puny News.* Our Congregation's meaningful if uneventful observance of Yom Yerushalayim on Monday (the story of how we come to say Hallel on that day is fascinating; I have to leave some space to tell you about it soon); that Covid-19 disease spread numbers are at their lowest in months *all over* the City; and that we are approaching the joyous holiday of Shabuot looking forward to the Choir's "triumphant return", to quote Rev. Edinger (they sang beautifully last Friday night for the first time in over a year) - all these seemed like noteworthy factoids for this week's email. Then we needed to start worrying if family, congregants, or others in Israel were safely in bunkers or bomb shelters. We heard from various of our truly far-flung correspondents, including one of our Yoda punmasters and official cartoonist Alan Zwiebel, who is visiting Israel. Alan dispatched a request that our "venerable congregation [keep] saying Tehillim for all of us" and sent neither pun nor cartoon but rather the following image with the caption "*after the 800 rocket barrage*":



In our daily minyan, we continue to recite special prayers for the safety of those in Israel. At the same time, we collectively chant a small part of the idyllic Megillat Rut, which we read in the weeks preceding Shabuot. This has created a cognitive

dissonance akin to needing to worry that we will have to add the Jewish months of Iyar and Sivan to those we already have during which we remember, and mourn, the burning of Jerusalem. May the hostilities soon cease.

I also wish to report on three things.

First, our recent vaccination survey generated a significant response rate. It is throwing off important information that will help us plan a continued safe and hopefully increasingly enjoyable environment for all. Please, if you have not done so, get your response in. In the upcoming weeks we hope to report some of the findings.

Second, in signing up for in-person minyan, please take note of the revisions in the questionnaire. With the guidance and support of the Covid-19 Working Group, we are now trying to make it easier for those who have recently traveled to join us in communal prayer without any increase in health risk to others.

Third, this past Shabbat was another double parasha (see [my email of April 29, 2021](#)). It was a double double in that it was the second double parasha that a congregant read, fully and beautifully. Enormous thanks to Jack Daar and Avery Neumark.

*Are we too in the wilderness?* This week we begin the Fourth Book of the Torah, *Bamidbar*, translated as *In the Wilderness*. Despite the entire length and breadth of the Third Book of the Torah, *Vayikra*, the Israelites are only a year from the Exodus from Egypt narrated in the Second Book of *Shemot*. They are only a couple day's journey back to the Land of the Pharaohs, or what was left of it. In time and space they were not far in their journey from where they started. The text makes that plain - and also makes plain that psychologically, emotionally, and temperamentally Israel as a nation had not traversed far from the slave mentality that characterized the 210 years in servitude in Egypt.

The Book of *Bamidbar* opens with the *Parasha* bearing the same name. The *Parasha* begins by prescribing the taking of a census; a nation needs to know how many citizens it has. The verses make clear that *every person counts*. The text

then introduces us to the subdivisions of the population - the tribes and their chieftains. These verses make clear not only that every person counts but that every person counts most *insofar as he or she is an integral part of the whole*. What a clear, affirmative set of prescriptions!

The narrative of *Parashat Bamidbar* progresses and should have continued to describe the Israelites' swift arrival in Israel. It doesn't. As is infinitely better explicated by others, complaint and calamity intervene, and these lead the Almighty to decree that the generation leaving Egypt would not be the generation entering the Promised Land. As a result, the generation we meet at the beginning of *Bamidbar* proceeds to spend the ensuing 38 years "in the wilderness". The story of actually reaching Israel does not pick up until all the way toward the end of the Book of *Bamidbar* and at the beginning of the last Book, *Debarim*. The whole trek from Egypt to Israel could have taken 1-2 weeks. Instead it lasted 38 years. Here, as with so many travails in life, and as we learn in the Tractate Erubin (53b): "There is a long way that is short and a short way that is long".

The wilderness the Israelites wandered through was a weird one. It was not one that bespoke punishment. It seems to have been imposed more in sorrow than in anger, to paraphrase Horatio in *Hamlet*. Poet Carl Sandburg didn't capture the oddity of our wilderness years in "[Wilderness](#)." The 1970s Rock group Styx didn't capture it either, in [Man in the Wilderness](#). The Israelites, maybe three *million* strong, are in the desert, sure, but it's hardly desert living (more glamping than camping, as Barbara Reiss rhymes it). Their every physical want is taken care of by the Almighty. There is food, water, a protective cloud, and a fiery pillar to guide them. Miracle after miracle is heaped upon the nation. Still, they lacked something - and that something was so great that as a nation it was never able to overcome it. The baton needed to be passed to the next generation to continue the J-Continuum's entry into the next phase of our existence as a people.

The narrative of *Parashat Bamidbar* seems of signal moment to us now. Here we are, in our second year of the pandemic. For most of us, the physical stresses of avoiding getting sick are, at least now, fairly manageable. In our community, our physical wants and needs are basically taken care of. But psychologically,

emotionally, temperamentally, is something still lacking? Are we as a community going to be able to get back on our feet to propel ourselves forward? Will we survive the Wilderness of Covid-19? Will we thrive in its aftermath? If we do not both survive and thrive as a cohesive community then we will have failed - failed our ancestors, failed posterity, and failed ourselves. The J-Continuum will continue, but will we need to pass the baton? There is no reason for this to happen, not if each of us acts individually *and* as part of the main, to paraphrase John Donne ("No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main"). Or, to quote that equally lyrical, modern version of the teaching of Donne's famous quote: "Alone we can lead/Together succeed" (see [my email of April 15, 2021](#)). We can do this.

*Half-Full Report.* The communal activities that will be our emotional salvation are staring us in the face. We have multiple opportunities each week to listen to extraordinary lectures and classes by our Clergy. And if it's more physical activity that will lift your spirits, we are in constant need of people to attend minyan (the several who have committed to a day a week has helped a lot, but we need more). We need people to help Caring Connection, and we need people to organize and participate in our upcoming outdoor activities. And yes, tzedakah will help too. If you have not yet contributed to [this year's Spring Fundraiser](#), time is running out, and yes, we want you to be counted in the beautiful keepsake book.

You can also answer my weekly challenges, for then you win you get BIG prizes, and who doesn't love BIG prizes? Last week's challenges resulted in BIG prizewinners in three categories:

First, responding to my challenge for a quote earlier than the Seventeenth Century for "losing the forest for the trees", Guy Reiss captured first place with *Frondem in silvis non cernere*. Literally: *Not seeing the leaves in the wood*. Apparently, this is an expression coined by Ovid, says Guy, where he used it in [Tristia 5.4.9](#). Although Guy is fully entitled to a BIG prize - Guy, believe me, it's in the mail - I will note that quoting Ovid is like quoting Sancho Panza in *Don Quixote*, who, first humorously then annoyingly then maddeningly, has an aphorism or proverb for absolutely everything (has

anyone actually counted how many proverbs Cervantes offers up through Sancho Panza?).

Second, I can't thank everyone by name who sent in reactions to our discussion last week about priorities. But I thank you all. So many were heartfelt and truly wise. I do want to thank Fran Altman for her paean to her granddaughter and, separately, to Charlie Helinski, for this abiding insight:

We cannot look at the world and complain that difficult things are happening to everyone so that's why my situation is bad. Even when Shimon and Levi did the same deed that irked Gd and their father, Yaakov, and even after their father pronounced the same judgment on them to be scattered among the tribes, what happened to them was very different. Levi scattered and was elevated among the tribes; Shimon, scattered to be forgotten mainly within Yehudah.

Third, taking up the challenge of identifying and naming new things to do on Paved Paradise, Faith Fogelman hit a grand slam with:

***Tea Off [Get it? Tea-off, like tee-off on our green AstroTurf - brilliant]***

Tea before minha/arbit

***The green new spiel***

Rabbi Soloveichik's outdoor Shabbat afternoon classes

***Paradise Found (a takeoff on Milton's Paradise Lost)***

Designated times to read a book in the presence of other congregants

## ***Performance in Paradise***

An opportunity to read from a play or book in front of other congregants one designated evening

These are fantastic ideas and wonderful names. Who can top or even equal these? Along with "movie night" suggested months ago by Andrew and Jacqueline Klaber, these can all be done, safely and funly. Email Barbara Reiss or Bonnie Barest and volunteer to organize an activity. Feel the thrill of doing something for others and for yourself. It not only can work. It DOES work.

P.S. Remember the link in [my April 15, 2021 email](#) showing how Lincoln Center slavishly copied our terrific idea to create a green space? Look at what they've done. [The've got nothing on us, babe:](#)



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

Louis Solomon, Parnas