

May 5, 2022

Dear Shearith Israel family,

*Slouching Toward Blessing.* In our Covid-19 recovery, we continue our return to a normalcy that is mindful that there remains “out there” virulent strains of a nasty virus capable of doing some harm to many of us and great harm to a few of us. As a Congregation, we are blessed in innumerable ways, including: (i) with sanctuary space that can accommodate a great many people safely; and (ii) with outdoor space where we can take advantage of the beauty of a Paved Paradise and offer additional safety to some of our congregants who are elderly or at risk.

Slouching – as in the end of Yeats’s *The Second Coming (slouching towards Bethlehem)* or Peter De Vries’s hilarious *Slouching Towards Kalamazoo* – bespeaks a slow but prodding coming to a new place, a new end. Our new place and new end will look very much like our old place and old end. But there will be two exceptions: First, what we’ve learned about remote teaching, lecturing, and learning will enable Rabbi Soloveichik to continue to reach literally thousands of people we did not reach before. Second, as important, the beauty of the tolerance we are showing each other – even letting others sit in our seats! – adds an additional virtue to our Congregation’s many already. We will get through the pandemic and the endemic stronger, healthier, and more unified. It is truly a slouching toward blessing.

*Skulls Across the Waters of Time.* Jack Schenker recently paid these emails the most undeserved of compliments, calling them “realistic, optimistic, and Jewish all at the same time”. I would like to apply at least the third of those appellations to reflect on the ambivalence that many have written and reported on recently: the fact that so many in Ukraine did so much violence to Jews during the Second World War, yet so many Ukrainians today are in horrible circumstances deserving of our sympathy and support. There is no single or right “Jewish reaction”. I hope what follows can in some way be considered *a* Jewish reaction.

The scenario is not unfamiliar. As a people, Jews have a collective memory through time as well as space. We are told to see ourselves, even today, as actually having been delivered from Egyptian bondage. We are enjoined to think of Amalek’s Jew-hatred as a clear and present danger to Jews living in each generation, including ours. We feel a deep personal connection to the Spanish Inquisition, followed by that of Portugal, and then Brazil, and then the pogroms, and then the Holocaust, with innumerable calamities in between and since. We hear and read stories of past atrocities towards our fellow Jews – even the use of “fellow” here collapses past and present.

We see past and present as one, each integral parts of the J-Continuum. As a result, it is tempting to judge intergenerationally as well. One may think that Spain deserves its fate in the Twentieth Century given what it did to Jews and Jewish property in the Fifteenth Century. The Holocaust by Bullets – which is how Father Patrick Desbois describes the killing basically one and two and three at a time of over a million Jews in Ukraine during WWII – haunts us still, and

so we feel for the modern victims of Russian aggression but secretly wonder whether what is happening is in some fashion retributive.

As understanding as these feelings are, I wonder if our religion teaches a different path. That different path is illuminated by the light of three dictates: First, we speak the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. My proof text for this is the rude honesty of our religion in countless stories from the Torah to the present. Sinners can repent, but we don't say they didn't sin. It is because of our unbending adherence to truth that I find pieces like Sara Bloomfield's ([JTA 3/4/22](#)), director of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, and Jeffrey Gettleman's ([NYT 4/15/22](#)) to be asking the right questions. (Thank you to Beth for sharing them with me.) These writers do not shy away from a clear and accurate description of the past. I'm less certain about Ruth Wisse's comments ([Commentary May 2022](#)), including that Ukrainian centuries-old antisemitism features "the greatest heroes of Ukrainian independence" as incidental "arch-villains of Jewish destruction" and that "in none of these instances [of Jewish slaughter] did Ukrainians set out to conquer *or eliminate* the Jews". So, first, we seek, and speak, the truth.

Second, we believe that human justice-dispensing institutions must focus on the conduct of individuals, here and now. We do not condemn intergenerationally. That is the fundamental teaching of our annual recitation of The Martyrology, or the *Eleh Ezkerah*, which we say on Tisha B'Ab and Ashkenazim say on Kippur. We remember how a Roman Emperor used the failure of Joseph's brothers to be punished for selling Joseph into slavery as a retroactive excuse for torturing and murdering ten of our greatest Sages well over a thousand years later. As I discussed in my [email of 7/1/21](#), the Talmud says that we are to judge the *legal* effect of conduct by the laws in effect at the time of the conduct, applied to people who acted at that time. The events continuing to unfold in Ukraine and suffered by the people of Ukraine are horrible. They should be condemned, and with the help of the Almighty they will soon cease.

Third, we leave reward and punishment over time to the Almighty. There is no human institution capable of meting out *justice* intergenerationally. Whatever is being meted out, it is not justice. There is no more fitting example of that teaching than what we study this very week in Pirkei Avot (2:6). There, after Hillel reminds us not to judge others unless and until we are in exactly the same situation as they were in, Hillel goes on to say:

אַף הוּא רָאָה גְּלִגְלֵת אַחַת שְׂצָפָה עַל פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם. אָמַר לָהּ, עַל דְּאִטְפָּתָּ, אֲטָפִיךָ. וְסוּף מְטִיפִיךָ יְטוּפוּן

[H]e saw a skull floating on the face of the water. He said to it: because you drowned others, they drowned you. And in the end, they that drowned you will be drowned.

Hillel does not say that our reaction to seeing skulls is that we, fallible human beings, should be *doing* anything to those alive today because of earlier murderous conduct. Hillel teaches that we are to observe, and note, and comprehend that there is a seeing eye, a listening ear. But it is not our place to decide that generation 2 deserves what it is getting because of what generation 1 did.

“Hands across the waters” is a wonderful line predating but used by the Beatles in a great two-fer [Uncle Albert – Admiral Halsey](#). It refers to international cooperation, I think between the US and UK, through time and space. *Skulls Across the Waters of Time*, the clunky title of this short digression, is similarly about how to think about justice through time. Hillel’s skull principle, aspirational though it might be, teaches us to bury intergenerational hatred and attempts at retribution and justice over time. It is the capstone of a three-part way of describing a Jewish way of seeing world events through time.

*Half-Full Report.* Loads of fun entries this week:

*Snowdens of Yesteryear.* Let’s start with our abject, collective failure. No one got this reference. It’s in *Catch-22*. How could you all miss it? Yosarian’s play on words is taken from a French poem, *where are the snows of yesteryear*, in speaking about his friend and fellow-flight companion Snowden who gets killed. It’s plainly time to re-read this timeless, modern classic.

*A Band of Brothers.* I mentioned that Michael Schulder surpassed brother Billy in the points column, given Michael’s home runs in the new contest to coin or quote funny or poignant idioms responsive to some suggested topics. I was hoping that goading Billy would at a minimum bring forth some good old fashioned sibling rivalry, maybe even some Cain-and-Abel type stuff (metaphorically, that is). Do you know what I got? I got an email from Billy to Michael saying: “Mazal tov in surpassing me”. What a mentsch!

*And A New Winner.* One of the three new challenges, for a story or idiom about hearing an old joke one time too many, did bring forth a terrific quip by devoted trustee Oliver Stanton:

When he/she told that story again for the 100th time, I bust out laughing, for the first time! I had finally understood the joke! Oh come on, it took Moses 40 years to get to Israel!

We miss you, Oliver, since you moved down to Florida and hope that you and Stacey visit us soon in NY.

*Great Talmudic Sayings.* Here we are starting to get some great ones. Anonymous brings us, from Baba Metziah:

איסתרא בלגינא קיש קיש קריא

“a small coin in an empty barrel rattles loudly”

It’s a perfect response the next time some nudnik tries to show off smartness.

*Profiting from the Prophets.* Identifying the prophet with the most haftarot, it is Isaiah, by a wide margin. Fat profits of two points each go to David Vorschheimer and Jim Herstoff. Jim is a Touro Synagogue friend, who during his life-time has run the tables (or hit for the cycle), having had the privilege of chanting every single haftarah. Jim reckons that we read Isaiah 18 times a year (counting holidays) – an auspicious number indeed.

Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas