

June 24, 2021

Dear Shearith Israel family,

*Maskless in Manhattan.* Our corner of the globe continues to show improvement in Covid-19 disease spread metrics. Thankfully, a lot of the rest of the world is showing improvement, too, with some dreary exceptions. Our indoor and outdoor minyanim are functioning, each below capacity but proportionate to the fall-off that typically occurs this time of year. (We aren't the only Congregation with a "season", but I still find it interesting.) Use of our outdoor space for lots of activities continues and grows.

This coming Shabbat, and likely for the next several weeks, we plan to combine our outdoor and indoor minyanim. If the weather cooperates, we will alternate outdoor and indoor, starting with outdoor. I'm confident the re-merge will work wonderfully. The building of community that results from a collective *not*-complaining will be a comforting contrast to the epic complaining that nearly each weekly Torah portion brings us in the Fourth Book of the Torah, *Bamidbar*. (Indeed, this week's *parasha* needs to go to a famous non-Jew to get what I think is the first blessing by a prophet of the entire Jewish people in the Torah (can you identify an earlier one, and by whom)! And the blesser, the prophet Balaam, then went ahead and orchestrated the first and largest communal abdication of Jewish morality and modesty in sexual conduct by Jews in our history until then as well! (See Chs 24-25).)

It is wonderful to be reapproaching normal. Congregants are getting *aliyot* again. Today was the first day that our outdoor policy of masking/masking-optional was used indoors, to beautiful and harmonious effect. Next week would have marked a full year of our being always-masked during communal services. To many of us, removing our masks feels like we are wearing strapless *tefillin*. (For a BIG prize, who can give me a reliable citation to the coiner of "strapless *tefillin* for evening wear"? I want to say Danny Siegel, but I just can't remember. A little help, anyone?)

Plans for *Tisha B'Ab* are being finalized and will be announced next week. In the meantime, Rabbi Soloveichik will be delivering a lecture in each of the next three weeks leading up to *Tisha B'Ab*. Please call-in for those.

*The Greatest Thank You Ever Received.* Bonnie Barest and I had the inestimable good fortune of being our Congregation's representatives to receive from the Manhattan Day School a binder filled with pure gold: thank you notes from among the 70 Seventh and Eighth Graders who used our Synagogue building this past year for school (see my **email of September 10, 2020**). The gift was presented by Raizi Chechik, the Head of School, and three graduating Eighth Graders: Matea Frieber, Reuben Frieber, and Rebecca Mero, together with our dear friend and congregant Laury Frieber. The cover note from the school reads:

“We the Manhattan Day School class of 2021 dedicate this yearbook to Congregation Shearith Israel who so generously opened their doors to us and welcomed us into their home. Your kindness will forever serve as an inspiration to us as we embark on our life journeys.”

I'm not talented enough to fashion the words to capture the blessing to our Congregation from our collective willingness to inconvenience ourselves so slightly this past school year in order to help this great school.

*No Price Too High.* Twice this week (Tractate *Yoma* 71b, 73b), our daily Talmud study discusses the fascinating topic of the *Urim V'Tumim*, or as the Yale logo writes it (in Hebrew!):



It's a toss-up, or perhaps a race to the top, which story is the more intriguing, i) what the *Urim V'Tumim* were in antiquity or ii) how these words made it on to the Yale logo. I would love to tell you both, but since there is no time, let me sum up:

*Urim V'Tumim* (roughly translated as Light and Wholeness or Perfection – or Truth, as it came to be translated in America) appears eight times in the Torah. Among the places is what one count maintains is the verse smack at the center of the Torah, in *Varikra* 8:8, suggesting a central importance. It is therefore remarkable that, as the Schottenstein commentary on Tractate *Yoma* 73b elucidates, “At no point does the Torah, or even the [Talmud] describe what the *Urim V'Tumim* were.” Three major explanations given by our Rabbis 800-1,000 years after the Talmud include a piece of parchment on which was inscribed the ineffable name of the Almighty; gemstones on the High Priest’s breastplate; and simply gold and silver forms. In each case, *it appears*, the use was to light up the gemstones in a sequence that, when deciphered correctly, gave answers to questions posed by select few Jewish leaders in history. The gemstones were associated with the Twelve Tribes. However, the Rabbis, observing that there are letters of the Hebrew alphabet not accounted for in the names of the Tribes, added that there were additional words (names of the patriarchs, one of the names of the Almighty) in proximity to the gems sufficient to get all the letters of the alphabet and thus make words and phrases. The arrangement of the letters into words and words into comprehensible, punctuated phrases still needed the acumen of the High Priest. You know the story told of the early days of transatlantic cable telegrams. One American spouse visiting England cables the other spouse in New York with a question whether it was ok to purchase a set of china for an exorbitant price. The return cable said, simply, “No Price Too High”. Was the purchase made? Without the punctuation, well, you get the joke. The *Urim V'Tumim* are proof positive that, even in the most magical of rituals, human agency is essential for there to be human understanding.

The skinny on the Yale logo is that the first recorded Jewish sermon preached in America was not at Shearith Israel – we didn’t tolerate, I mean embrace, sermons (certainly not in English) until well into the Nineteenth Century. Rather, it was at our sister synagogue in Newport, Rhode Island, later named and now known as the Touro Synagogue. The preacher was Rabbi Haim Isaac Carigal. The years, 1772-73. The recorder for posterity, the Reverend Ezra Stiles, who had a pulpit in Second Congregational Church in Newport and also became President of Yale University (~1778-1855). The friendship and mutual respect between Carigal and Stiles is the stuff, not just of myth, but of actual history. It was in part because of the personality of Rabbi Carigal that Reverend Stiles continued an intense interest both in Hebrew and in the Jewish congregation at Newport. Stiles’s written

recollections and reflections on American Jewish ritual from that time, which was essentially Sephardic, ranks as among our most authentic histories. (I'm going to fish out his description of the *Tisha B'Ab* service at the Newport Synagogue 250 years ago. It will knock your socks off that it is, step for step, what we still do at Shearith Israel today.) The congregants of the Newport Synagogue (remember this was nearly a century before Touro, after whom the Synagogue is now called) were our (collective) relatives and ancestors. Many came from Shearith Israel physically or biologically.

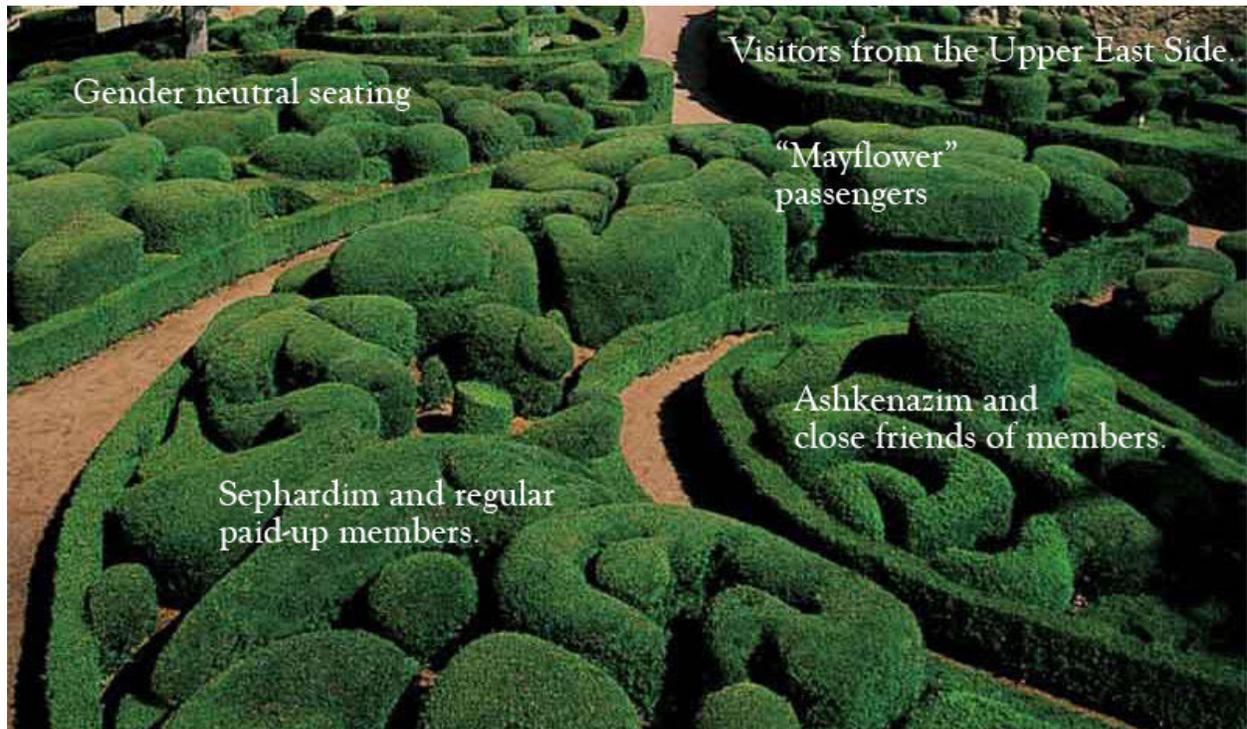
It does not appear that the Reverend Stiles created the reference to *Urim V'Tumim* in the Yale logo. The evidence rather suggests that the phrase was used at least 12 years *before* it appeared on the Reverend Stiles's own Yale diploma. See the excerpt of the [piece by Dan Oren here](#). As Yale President, however, and Yale's first professor of Semitics, the Reverend Stiles was surely instrumental in the study of Hebrew by *all* students and the strengthening and permanent perpetuation of the logo. So we give him credit, at least to fill out our story here.

*Half-Full Report.* Three special items this week:

*Jewish Royalty.* If you are like me, you probably thought that Queen's recent conferral of the Commander of the Order of the British Empire ("CBE") on "David Dangoor" was referring to our long-time member and Trustee of that name. David quickly emailed me to say that, no, the British honor went to his cousin, also named David Dangoor. But here's the *kuntz*. Our David Dangoor won the same award from the King of Sweden a few years ago. Each David Dangoor was seen by their respective countries as Jews of extraordinary probity, integrity, and philanthropy. We see them that way too. Truly, they are our Jewish royalty. Congratulations to the Dangoores and to us, for meriting the blessing of knowing at least one of them.

*The Crowned Knight of Movie Night.* Last night, Paved Paradise safely hosted a happy crowd to inaugurate our movie night series with the showing of *The Princess Bride*. What fun! Before the movie, Rabbi Soloveichik trounced his opponent in the trivia slam about the movie – though great thanks to Andrew Klaber for MCing and an interesting introduction, to our Judge Beth Goldman, and to the walk-on trivia king Michael Lustig. It was a great evening. Join us for the next one, which will be after *Tisha B'Ab*. Write in if you have a movie candidate.

*Picturing Paved Paradise.* We have another entrant into our Picturing Paved Paradise series, this one from our resident cartoonist Alan Zwiebel. It's fabulous, clearly crushing all rivals – thus far:



### The Shearith Israel Topiary Paved Paradise

The very long history of Shearith Israel lends itself to the very nature of the topiary garden. Ideally the various topiary growths would be nurtured over decades to eventually resemble previous rabbis and Parnassim—a living history of the great congregation. Various dedications would be encouraged.

Send in photos or drawings, real or imagined. You and the rest of us will enjoy it. Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom.