

July 29, 2021

Dear Shearith Israel family,

*Breaking Through.* Our daughter Tess has an extraordinary, nuanced ability to hear and use language (English mostly - I can't tell how good she is at German). When she heard about "breakthrough infections", she reasonably thought that our health professionals were referring to a tiny subset of patients for whom Covid-19 broke through their immune system despite prior vaccination. (I, naturally, heard the reference to be to The Doors' great [Break On Through](#).) It then turned out that "breakthrough infections" are happening in a high percentage of those being diagnosed with the Delta variant of Covid-19. An Israeli study puts the number at 50%; a study from Singapore, even higher. It is only the U.S.'s CDC that is at much lower estimates, but without peer-reviewed or published results yet. Isn't Tess right? Don't we need a term other than "breakthrough" - especially since in my lexicon the term has a positive connotation altogether?

Despite the challenging nomenclature, the numbers are concerning. Covid-19 disease spread, the lion's share from the Delta variant, is worsening - so much so that the CDC is now recommending that in many places we go back to masking indoors (that's where we are already for our indoor services). The news from other houses of worship is a bit confusing, especially about the upcoming, no longer too far off, High Holidays. In some synagogues, confusion is exhibited by those who had planned early for an open, "Covid-19's behind us" High Holiday season in terms of venues (indoors only), seating (close together), and attendance (full capacity). These places are now needing to walk back some of that. In other synagogues, confusion is exhibited by those who are adamant that they aren't going to change anything - there the confusion arises from the incredibility of the pronouncements given the worsening conditions. We respect all of these efforts. For us, however, guided by our Working Group, we'll make it simple, so that people can plan. Here at Shearith Israel, there are three simple things to remember:

- First, we do not know what the disease spread will look like by Rosh Hashana, 5-6 weeks from now. No one does.

- Second, because of that, we will retain in place the protections of masking and social distancing for indoor services. Additional precautions are going to be much easier to implement at the last minute if need be (like how we will handle aliyot and other honors, whether and where the choir will sing, from where we will blow shofar on Rosh Hashana, etc.). We can accommodate socially distant seating for over 100 congregants in our magnificent Sanctuary.

- Third, we are blessed with outdoor space, our Paved Paradise, that can hold at least 50-75 socially distant congregants. Given the known knowns, this space will be available for many of us to join together over the High Holidays.

Rosh Hashana begins the Monday night of Labor Day. We are confident that we will have sufficient seating for any member wanting to attend. As we promised last year, we will find space for everyone, even if we need to use another venue. Registration forms are going out imminently (if not already). Please, sign up on time, come, and enrich both yourselves and the rest of us.

*Everyday heroism.* Is "everyday heroism" an oxymoron? Can you have heroism that is commonplace? Sometimes, we are fortunate enough to be exposed to heroism. But is that common? Indeed, were it common, would it be heroic? At the same time, we read or observe endless descriptions of the commonplace in both literature and life, but can those ever really be heroic?

Can something be both? Can we choose from both Column A and Column B? Can we have our cake and eat it, too?

Have you seen the feel-good commercials running during this year's "2020" Olympics? No, not the Google, "how to start" commercials, which are totally feel-good, if personally mystifying (Google needs to advertise?) I'm referring instead to the commercials showing one athlete stopping or stooping or otherwise pulling himself or herself out of contention for gold in order to help another athlete who has fallen or strayed out of lane or something. Mostly this is the stuff of fiction, but occasionally there are real events underlying the episodes. In fairness, they are the stuff of heroism, but they are not *everyday* occurrences. The fact that the commercials themselves are rare and evoke such a teary response bespeaks the absence of commonplaceness.

We also have a different phenomenon -- a long tradition in modern fiction, reaching its pinnacle in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, in which the heroic *is* the commonplace. Wasn't that Joyce's point, turning what Homer did to the mighty Odysseus (a/k/a Ulysses) into an ordinary day of an ordinary person of the most banal and boring variety? Leopold Bloom's day was the quintessence of reality (can anybody quickly tell me what date is Bloomsday, which commemorates Bloom's romp through Dublin and beyond?). The stream-of-consciousness depiction of that day is so life-affirming (even the grungy or less savory parts of Dublin and life)

and comedic that the book is and I believe will continue to be an enduring masterpiece. But no one would call it or the genre it leads everyday true heroism, would we?

I do have a candidate for common even ubiquitous occurrences meeting a reasonable definition of heroic - heroic at least by today's standards. Take any page of the Talmud and study the back and forth between the titans of learning and probity depicted in those pages. At every turn we see great sages going out of their way to suggest ways to help the arguments posed by *other* sages, even those expressing contrary views. I venture that attempts to prop up and rehabilitate another's view in Talmudic debate are as common, certainly nearly as common, as trying to prove one's own position. Can you imagine, whether in politics, in academia, or in any other discourse today, where an opponent's argument would be helped along and improved by the adversary of the position being taken? To those of us exposed to post-modern scream-fests, the phenomenon we see on every page of the Talmud is nothing short of astonishing.

This week's daily Talmud study, Tractate *Sukkah* pages 18-24, contain literally dozens of examples of the heroic commonplace. The general discussion involves the structure of a Sukkah, materials that can be used in building one (an elephant?), dimensions, and so much more. What brought the topic to mind for me this week is a particularly powerful example appearing on page 19b. What is being discussed are not trivial matters; there is a lot at stake for those engaged in the debates. So what explains the heroic, super-human behavior?

Maybe you will argue that, when one generation tries to rehabilitate and render sensible the views expressed by a prior one, that's not a good example of everyday heroism but of intergenerational *kavod* or honor being accorded. Maybe. But that doesn't explain the regular practice of filling in lacunae in proof or logic of contemporaries, of which there are innumerable examples. Could it be that the search for truth led our great Rabbis to a greater concern for the right answer over the loudest or most popular answer? Might the reason for commonplace heroism lie, not in what was being discussed, but in the mind-set of those who are doing the discussing?

This week's Torah parasha, *Eikev*, sheds light on this. For it is there that the Torah teaches the trait of humility, among the most difficult virtues for smart, successful, driven, competitive people. The Torah's words are SO human yet so profound:

"You may say to yourself, 'My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me'. But remember the Lord your G-d, for it is the Lord who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms His covenant, which He swore to your forefathers, as it is today" (Debarim 8:15-17).

What extraordinary words. When both the answer and the means of finding it are guided by the Almighty, how can anyone dare to claim a monopoly on the truth? And without that monopoly, how can anyone dare to think that his or her opinion is more worthy than any other? And without that arrogance, how can we be anything but respectful of others' views and even try to shore them up when we can?

There are any number of ways for us to learn humility in addition to simply reading this week's *parasha* and seeing how our Talmudic sages acted. For those athletically minded, you will learn all the humility you need from watching any five minutes of the Olympics. (My own overdose of humility came this week from reading Harold Bloom's 2019 posthumously published masterwork, *Take Arms Against a Sea of Troubles: The Power of the Reader's Mind Over a Universe of Death*. Oh what insight, what brilliance in the man's, oh, 50<sup>th</sup> book!)

The Torah's teaching of humility created a mind-set that led to a modality of discourse in the Talmud, and since, that is keenly desirous of the right answer but just as concerned with getting to the right answer in a calm and respectful way. It is *everyday heroism*; both words fit like gloves. Together they light our way even now.

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

*Our Second Successful Fun Movie Night*. *Field of Dreams*, which many of us watched last night, was great. Greater still was the fact that many of us were together, outside, safely. Our Paved Paradise is *our* field of dreams. Our community is so fortunate to have access to this outdoor space.

*The Best of the Beatles*. Recognizing the efforts of those who thought hard about this and wrote in, I'm going through with this lunatic project of trying to name the best Beatles song. At the same time, see below for a salvage operation suggested by Bill Schulder.

Semi-finalist entries for the *best* Beatles song were submitted by Jane Shiff and Gil Deutsch. I'm going to throw in one for our daughter Lia, in absentia, and one from me:

- *Across the Universe*

- *Eleanor Rigby*

- *Hey Jude*

- *I've Just Seen a Face*

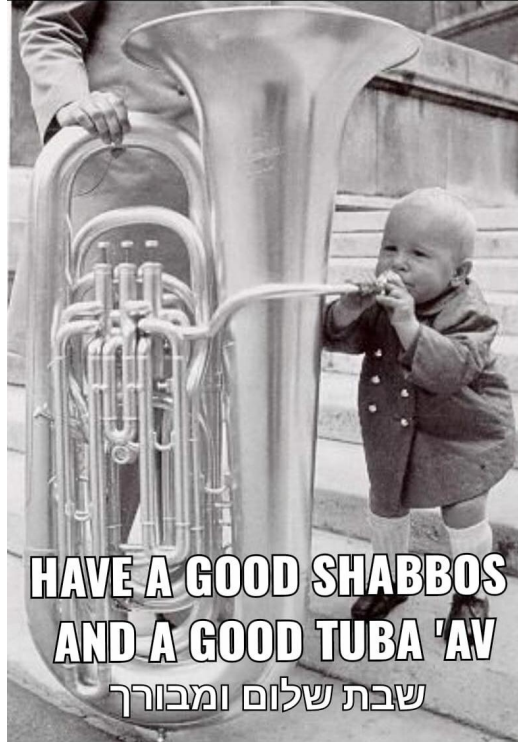
- *Two of Us*

What is interesting about the list is what's *not* on it: *While My Guitar Gently Weeps*; *Yesterday*, just to name two of a hundred and two. Send in your final votes, including new suggestions.

Now for the salvage part. Bill Schulder, feeling sorry for my fool's errand, mentioned that it might be easier to identify the *worst* Beatles song rather than the best. Bill and his brother appear to call bad songs "Charter" songs. So in their honor, we open the Charter Beatle Song contest. We already have two candidates: Octopus's Garden, which we've made fun of previously, and a disaster from the past suggested by Fran Altman, *Fixing a Hole*. I just listened to that again - it is really bad Beatles. Send in your votes, and may the worst song win!

*Picturing Paved Paradise*. For the second week in a row, Carla Schein grabbed the gold. She correctly identified the upside down building from last week's email as being from Calgary, Alberta. Rabbi Licht took silver with the right answer a few hours after Carla. Neither one of them answered the more difficult question: would Landmarks have approved that building on Paved Paradise? Maybe no one answered because the answer is a blitheringly obvious "no". Alas.

I still want you to send in photos or drawings of what could be built on Paved Paradise, or what the space might look like. The winner gets to negotiate with Barbara Reiss and Bonnie Barest over our next movie! And do check out the photo forwarded by Rabbi Licht depicting our Jewish Sadie Hawkins Day, which occurred on the fifteenth, or in Hebrew, Tu, B'Ab.



Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas