

August 19, 2021

Dear Shearith Israel family,

*The Perelis Principle.* I coined the “news is confused” last year, [see my email of 12.24.20](#), and I generously, selflessly gave it to the world to use. I haven’t seen a lot of use since then – actually I haven’t seen any at all, so I thought I might just as well get a little more mileage out of it here. The news *is* confused; the world is getting more confused, not less, over Covid-19.

As amazing as the vaccines have been, we are witnessing a cascade of worrisome facts: The Delta variant of the Covid-19 virus now accounts for about 90% of the Covid-19 disease around here that is being tested for; the hardy Lambda variant, which manifests little reaction to the Covid-19 vaccine, is spreading but has not reached us yet in detectable quantities; Israel announced that it would enter lock-down if and when Lambda reaches its shores; Israel is also requiring children age *three* and up to be vaccinated or to test negative before going into most commercial or communal places; all of us vaccinated months ago have to worry about getting the booster given waning potency of the vaccine; our elders are again at heightened risk; and “to mask or not to mask” is becoming a partisan and defining distraction, as heavily quoted – and for some presenting as profound an existential choice – as Hamlet’s famous line, “to be or not to be”.

We are resolved to react to the confusion with calm resolve. We are keeping our protective measures in place, maintaining services on Paved Paradise with safety precautions meet for the task we are facing. We will continue along these lines until circumstances force stricter or permit more lenient changes. We are making plans and back-up plans for the High Holidays. For them to become a reality, we need an accurate picture of whether you – and how many of you – will be joining us.

Last week, I quoted Professor Ronnie Perelis, who eloquently described our Congregation’s approach to Covid-19 precautions as trying to strike a “rationally cautious but life-embracing balance”. He is right. It’s what we are going to keep doing.

*Experiencing Memory.* Daniel Kahneman, Israeli born psychologist at Princeton, wrote an interesting book titled *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. One of his views is that an experience and the memory of that experience are two different things.

The approach, and the experimental research underpinning it, won him a Nobel Prize (in economics, no less).

I submit that the sages of the Talmud fully understood Kahneman's point some two thousand years earlier. Further, based on their understanding, our Rabbis altered some of the fundamental observances of our religion – and with those changes refashioned much of our religion. And I'm going to explain all that in a few short paragraphs.

We begin with page 41a of Tractate *Succah*, which we studied this week in the *Daf Yomi* cycle. There, we learn of an edict or enactment, called a *takanah*, instituted by R' Yohanan Ben Zakkai after the destruction of the Second Temple. In this *takanah*, Jews began to take, wave, and make a blessing on the Four Species (the lulab, Etrog, haddasim, and aravot) every day of the holiday of Sukkot wherever they were, whereas prior to the destruction the Four Species were taken for the entire holiday only in Jerusalem; elsewhere they were taken only on the first day of the holiday.

This was a big change. Think about how ingrained in us is the taking of the Four Species every day of the holiday. (Also think about whether we could get away with such a monumental change today?) The change was made so that Jews would act differently because of the destruction of Jerusalem and would forever remember how fundamentally a major observance was changed as a result. To me, this demonstrates that our sages fully understood that, as Kahneman says, an experience and a memory of that experience *are* two different things. It is for that reason that the *takanah* changed the experience -- in essence to live and relive the new memory created by the change.

This *takanah* is not the only radical departure enacted in order to make the world different because of the Temple's destruction. There were eight or nine others (meaning a total of nine or ten, depending on how you count). Another is recorded in the fourth Mishna of Tractate *Rosh Hashana*. (Who can supply a reliable citation in English for all 9-10 of them? Kudos if you can.)

The function of memory based on the *takanot* is quite different from what I wrote about in my [email of 3.25.21](#). There we discussed celebrating an ancient rite by re-enacting it, either to re-experience the original, unchanged moment (as in the Haggadah aka Seder on Pesah) or as a means of paying homage to what our ancestors did (I give several examples of what our Congregation does in the earlier

email). The function of remembrance based on the *takanot* is also quite different from one of the most fundamental “memory” commandments given to the Jewish people, which is repeated at the very end of this week’s parasha, *Ki Tetze*, that is, to remember that unfortunately there is evil incarnate in our world that must be destroyed and not mollified (the treatment of Amalek, Ch. 25:17-19).

The function of memory in the *takanot* is to change what we do in practice in order to change our experiences and hence literally experience a changed memory afresh every time we do the new enactment. The new conduct manifests a new experience and hence creates a new memory, thus reinforcing its influence in our lives. For Jews, this is one of the most powerful tools of collective conduct. Consider as an example the fact that, for millennia, we prayed for the rebuilding of Zion. We did so, and still do so, at every prayer service and every time we recite grace after meals. As a result, we experienced the very memory we were trying to preserve. I’m enthralled by a story of the Dalai Lama, which was told in my presence by someone who claimed to have been more directly involved, and the story is referred to [here](#) in muted form as well. Apparently, the Dalai Lama was so moved by the fact that Jews prayed for the rebuilding of Jerusalem every time they recite grace after meals that he had his own followers consider adding prayers in *their* services for the reuniting of Lhasa.

In making his nine-ten *takanot*, R’ Yohanan gave us neither the first nor even the most dramatic alteration of reality that Jews accomplished by changing their practices, reliving the change again and again, and playing it forward thousands of years. Too bad they don’t award Nobel prizes posthumously. We would have a shoe-in of a candidate in R’ Yohanan if they did. (Actually there are no shoe-ins for Nobel Prizes, it seems. Who knows the wild story of how Einstein got his Nobel Prize and why it was for photoelectric effects and not for either his truly novel theories of general or special relativity?)

*Half-Full Report.* Three on a match:

*True Greatness.* A new contest, and this one is for BIG prizes. I want your best examples of “greatness”. I mean true greatness. My candidates are the *great*-grandparents in our congregational family. Last week, we were blessed with news from Judy and Joel Schreiber, who celebrated the birth of their eighteenth *great*-grandchild. This week we celebrate Ruth Nathan, mother of our Honorary Parnas David Nathan, mother-in-law to Becky Chaplan, and grandmother of Aaron Nathan, who, with Meredith Case (who did all the work),

are the blessed parents of a newborn boy. Our great-grandparents are *great* people, models for all of us in so many ways. Send in other “greats” like this. Or send in other “greats” not like this. Let’s have a great list of our greats! Great!

*Learn from Our Kids.* I’ve said before that, when the Covid Blues come a’callin, think of the young people in our congregational family. Their lives have been infinitely more affected by the pandemic, yet they, on the whole, have been infinitely more resilient. They are our inspiration. Lloyd Zuckerberg was regaling me with the amazing Covid-defying strength of his kids. Ask him or Charlotte what their kids are doing. And send me information about what other of our next gen are doing. We can then all be inspired.

*Picturing Paved Paradise.* Again this week top prize goes to Ruth Lazar, who understands with great intuition just what our Paved Paradise can become. This week her focus has been on some small, unassuming amount of running water to enhance Paved Paradise:



Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas