

September 9, 2021

Dear Shearith Israel family,

Extreme 5782. I personally applaud the late Freeman Dyson for being unwilling to posit global warming as the reason for the then-recent ostensibly “extreme” weather patterns without empirical evidence that an unbiased scientist would find persuasive. Still, in our geographic area, we have recently experienced weather not full standard deviations from the norm, but still pretty severe. Would anyone quarrel with calling it extreme?

Ok, never mind; I don’t want to create controversy in the New Year. Let’s all agree on something easier – but equally profound. As a Congregation, we did *extremely* well over Rosh Hashana. The hard work of our Covid-19 Working Group and our administrative staff, coupled with the tireless efforts of our Clergy and several others being thanked by name below, made for such a moving and uplifting series of services that we as a community collectively experienced the joyous aspects of these Days of Awe. I will not do a good job of explaining the tidal wave of good feeling abundant among the close to 300 people who attended one of the three services on both mornings of Rosh Hashana. Many who could not attend nonetheless attended one of the two additional public shofar blowing services we had on each day as well. It was a wonderful way to start the year.

There are many people who helped make the services run so well. Please do NOT skip this part of my email. Each and every name deserves a personal note of thanks: First, our Clergy, Rabbi Soloveichik, Rabbi Rohde, and Reverend Edinger (who as our Assistant Hazan beautifully led several services, some for the first time). Next our lay Clergy, at least that’s what I call them, Avery Neumark, Jack Daar, Mark Aaron, Rafe Sasson, and Maimon Schwarzschild. Next our Hatanim for this year, who made about 130 trips up and down the steps in the main sanctuary opening and closing the Hehal, Joel Marcus and Ariel Bengio (more on these wonderful Hatanim in a few weeks). Finally, the next generation, Jacob Aufzien, Isaac Haberman, Akiva Haberman, Benjamin Nathan, Jonathan Nathan, Hillel Neumark, and Jacob Neumark, each of whom is doing more and more indispensable work—including of the non-ritual kind-- for the synagogue, and even the half-generation after that, Eli Aaron, Elie Sasson, and Avi Friedman (if not for this holiday then just in general). To all of you, we are deeply indebted.

Judaism's Three-Step Program. In my email of last week, I likened Rosh Hashana to a reset or reboot. The letter “R” that begins each of those words was, yes, intentional – time, as it were, to put the “R” back into Rosh Hashana. Seriously, the reset/reboot metaphor underscores that the miracle of Rosh Hashana is its capacity to enable deeply flawed human beings to see their own capacity to stop going in one direction, to stop, pause, reflect, and reconsider. It is the predicate – the essential predicate – for positive change.

I should have said then that the Reset or Reboot is the first of the “R”s that animate these High Holidays. There are two others, one for Kippur – Return – and one for Sukkot/Shemini Hag Ha’atseret/Simhat Torah – Repair. Reset/Reboot; Return; and Repair. Our 3Rs. Together these form our annual three-step program of life-affirming behavior that characterizes a meaningful and successful holiday period.

In an email long ago and far away ([see my email of palindromic 1.21.21](#)), I discussed the folly of believing that anyone could really remember much less carry out complex multi-step processes. In the main, twelve-step courses are just too hard to keep in mind and even harder to internalize and see through to fruition. At least they are for me. If you think judges, juries, or other people whom we want to persuade can remember any more than three basic points, you are possibly deluding yourself and doing a disservice to your listeners. Judaism is, as we have seen, full of threes. That the world stands on three pillars (Pirkei Avot 1:2) is just one of many examples.

The three Rs of this time of year follow an orderly sequence.

- Rosh Hashana is our annual reset/reboot. We are tasked with finding the faith to see the Almighty and to witness the Almighty’s sovereignty over the cosmos and over humanity. Far from being simple, this if anything is the hardest of the three Rs. There are too many other competing belief systems to make resetting to a place of faith anything short of Herculean. For many, the workings of the natural world, of the cosmos itself, create the existential *inability* to see the Almighty in nature. Some of us see in nature the expression of the Almighty, dazzled by every new insight in biology or chemistry or physics, which firms up that belief. For others, sadly, we never get beyond, as Williams James said, the busy buzzing confusion of sense. We don’t know what to do with it all – and so it remains meaningless, entropic, devoid of sense. For these people, to borrow from [Steely Dan’s](#)

[1972 hit](#) (great music, eh lyrics except these), they are “reelin’ in the years/stowin’ away the time.” For other of us, it is not the natural world that poses the challenge to belief; rather it is the mess that human beings have made of the natural world that creates the dilemma. Here there are so many examples. I have neither the competence nor space in this email to try to suggest *how* we can best gain the faith we need for a serious reset/reboot on Rosh Hashana. Beginning with beautiful communal services is a clear start.

- But then let’s suppose we can accomplish the reset/reboot to a position of faith. The next “R”, return, is the theme of Kippur. It is so fascinating that Judaism, having given us the miracle of a reset, then proceeds to channel our energies not forward but towards Teshuba, whose Hebrew root is “return”. A return is not forward looking but backward. How retro (another “R”)! Imho, the point of our return on Kippur is that, if all we do is reset and reboot, there is no content to our energies and aspirations. We are neutral. We are *parve*. The proverbial clean slate. Blank canvas. But is that the ultimate goal of our reset? What imbues the direction of virtue, of value, of meaning in our lives? That, Kippur teaches us, can be supplied only with a return to principles, tenets, and modes of living that have been part of our people for hundreds of generations and thousands of years. Past is prologue because past is where virtue, value, and meaning were born. The shofar blasts on Rosh Hashana are contentless, primal. Kippur gives them shape and meaning. Read our service and see it. The good and the right are not beyond the sea, as last week’s *parasha Nitzabim* said (Deut. 30:11-14). They are there for us to behold and grab on to, now, if we can effectively return.

- Armed with a set of principles making life meaningful, we then come to the last of the holidays in Tishrei – Sukkot and Shemini Hag Ha’atseret/Simhat Torah. These holidays are full of doing, of action, of concrete steps. The third “R” of our three-step program is “Repair”. Yes I’m reminded of Rabbi Soloveichik’s hilarious joke (it’s not his, by the way, but nobody tells it better) of the person asking for the Hebrew translation of “*tikun olam*”, it being so overused in English that everyone thinks they know what it means (it translates as repairing the world). The point of “repair” is, simply, to take the principles of our return and press them into service to repair the world, to repair our relationships with community, family, friends, and the larger world. Repair is a full-throated transitive verb – it has action

written all over it. And Sukkot/Shemini Hag Ha'atseret/Simhat Torah take everyday objects, repair them, and make them holy and with them make the world holy. Jews are one in the ritual of the Four Species. The world is one in the sacrificial service of Sukkot, where the sacrifices add to the number 70, another metaphor for a repaired and united world. We reset on Rosh Hashana. We return to a meaningful existence on Kippur. And we repair the world, even if just our tiny microcosm of it, by opening our homes and our souls to others on Sukkot and the subsequent holidays. That we culminate all that in rejoicing in the Torah is an obvious amalgam of all three Rs. The metaphor, our holiday season, and our three-step program, will then be successfully complete and will have prepared us for a successful remainder of the year.

Half-Full Report.

Running Into Fate. Ben Suckewer and Gil Deutsch both get full marks for answering that the most famous recent retelling of the Talmud's story of the two attendees of King Solomon, running away from fate in Jerusalem only to run right into the arms of fate in far away Luz, was John O'Hara's, *Appointment in Samarra*. At first I thought that Ben edged out Gil, since Ben also knew that W. Somerset Maugham wrote the epigraph for the O'Hara novel:

"A merchant in Baghdad sends his servant to the marketplace for provisions. Soon afterwards, the servant comes home white and trembling and tells him that in the marketplace, he was jostled by a woman, whom he recognized as Death, who made a threatening gesture. Borrowing the merchant's horse, he flees at great speed to Samarra, a distance of about 75 miles, where he believes Death will not find him. The merchant then goes to the marketplace and finds Death, and asks why she made the threatening gesture to his servant. She replies, 'That was not a threatening gesture, it was only a start of surprise. I was astonished to see him in Baghdad, for I have an appointment with him tonight in Samarra.'"

But then Gil tied up the score, since in answer to my question whether he knew any telling of the tale earlier than the Talmud, he answered simply, and hilariously, "Gilgemesh-ish" (both the "Gil" and "ish" are so funny – get it?). On a reference earlier than the Talmud, our daughter Tess thought the whole point at least in general was presaged centuries earlier than the Talmud by Oedipus. Tess is right

on all particulars, but as I should recuse myself (at least so says Barbara Reiss), I ask you: Isn't Tess right on all particulars? Should she share in the prize? What's your vote?

Picturing Paved Paradise. The intensity of the back-and-forth competition between Ruth Lazar and Trustee and Segan Karen Daar to picture paved paradise has been exceeded, only slightly, by the last several rounds of play at the U.S. Open. Having gotten back on top last week with her seasonally appropriate Holy Ark ensemble, Ruth tried again this week with floral arrangements. The neutral panel of judges gives this week's win back to Karen, for her Ancient Stones motif below. In part the judges were moved by the fact that the floral arrangements now on Paved Paradise are spectacular already – thus taking a few points off for bringing coals to Newcastle. (Can anyone picture Paved Paradise with Newcastle coal?) In any case, Karen's condition for entering, and winning, again this week is that you the reader need to identify where the pics are from. Good luck.



Thank you all. Bless us all. Meaningful fast (the shorter one for Gedalia, that is). Shabbat shalom. And Tizku L'Shanim Rabot!

Louis Solomon, Parnas