

May 19, 2022

Dear Shearith Israel family,

Oh Not Again. Earlier this week, New York State and City each made announcements recognizing the significant increase in Covid-19 disease spread virtually everywhere in the State and City. The positivity rate in New York City is above 9%. That would have shut everything down completely were it not for the miracle of vaccinations and the fact that the variants-du-jour, Omicron variant sequences BA.2 and BA.2.12.1, while more virulent, are apparently less lethal.

New York State's message includes the following:

"As we closely monitor the numbers and as case levels remain high across the state, now is the time for every New Yorker to get vaccinated and boosted, test following exposure or symptoms, and stay home if unwell, even if you initially test negative on an at-home test. If you test positive, consult with your provider about treatments," said State Health Commissioner Dr. Mary T. Bassett. "In accordance with guidance issued by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, we recommend that all New Yorkers in high-risk COVID-19 counties and all New Yorkers at-risk of severe disease wear a mask in public indoor places, regardless of vaccination status. These public health measures, as well as ensuring proper air ventilation when gathering, will help reduce COVID-19 transmission in communities and lower the risk of serious illness and hospitalization for individuals. We will continue to work with local partners and make every tool at our disposal widely available to New Yorkers, as we move forward through the pandemic."

Yet there is too strong a smell of realpolitik and city economics behind the recommendation. New York City, for example, continues:

The [indoor] mask advisory does not apply in cases where an individual is actively performing an activity that cannot be done while wearing a face mask such as actively eating or drinking; is practicing or playing a competitive sport in the New York City Public School Athletic League or on a professional level; or is performing, including but not limited to playing music, delivering a speech to an audience seated at least six feet away, and acting in a theater.

One can imagine many reasons for these exceptions. Consistency with science, health, and safety would not appear to be among those reasons. But then what do I know; maybe the new virus strains don't infect people while they are eating. Of course the proposition is preposterous.

With our government acting politically, its recommendations don't help us very much. They do not appear to be helping anyone else either. Based on our canvassing, no other Congregation that we contacted is changing their protocols in the slightest in light of the "recommendations".

Here at Shearith Israel, we have, as usual, turned to our Covid-19 Working Group for guidance. It is the consensus of that group that, for this week, and unless the government actually issues a

mandate, our congregation 1) will continue to ask that only fully vaccinated adults attend services, 2) should be mindful of the new recommendations, and 3) will have Shabbat evening and afternoon services indoors and Shabbat morning and Kiddush outdoors, on Paved Paradise. We are blessed with this space, and we should take advantage of it while the weather permits, giving us more time to see if the evident spike in Covid-19 transmissions is transient or will need other protocols and protections going forward. We hope to see you.

Our Semi-Annual Fundraiser. I won't burden you with more begging this week. My email last week was my best shot. I was disappointed that it didn't call forth, oh, thousands more click clicks to donate. (I do intend to bother you next week, but that may be my last for this fund-raiser). For now, Alan Zwiebel, our master jokester/cartoonist, is back! To my invocation last week of *Fiddler on the Roof*, Alan says:

New production of 'Fiddler' has Tevye singing: 'If I were a rich man I would substantially increase my support of Congregation Shearith Israel'. Does not scan as easily as the original, and the mask does not help. But that's show biz.

I don't know about you, but I really like the sound of that one. Here's a link. Please help all you can. We're approaching our goal, and your gifts, of whatever size, can help get us there (*and*, you'll receive and be recognized in the content-rich commemorative booklet that is being produced). [Click here to contribute.](#)

[*They're Only Made of Clay.*](#) I'm sure that you, like I, are waiting with restless anticipation (one point for the name of the philosopher and the book that made that phrase famous) for futurist Ray Kurzweil to make good on his promise to publish the definitive work on everything. He promised it as a sequel to his 2005 book *The Singularity Is Near* (see [my email of 3/18/2021](#)). It's late.

So instead I read his 2012 book, *How To Create A Mind*, which is worth reading if you can get over the severe I-Strain you will be subjected to. In *Mind*, Kurzweil extols the work of Scottish geologist Charles Lyell. Lyell was a contemporary of Darwin's and is thanked profusely in *On the Origin of Species* (which I also recently re-read; it deserves its reputation as a monumentally important if long read). Lyell, according to Darwin according to Kurzweil, brought important scientific brilliance to bear in hypothesizing that deep canyons, crevices, and valleys on earth were caused by the relentless wearing down of the earth's crust, over zillions of years, by water. The ability of soft and gentle water to wreak such change to the hard surface of the Earth is a powerful metaphor. And the person to figure out the fact of gradual wearing down by persistence deserves great praise.

That person, however, is not Kurzweil, or Darwin, or even Lyell. The Book of Job (14:18-19) says it:

וְאוֹלָם הָרֶ-נוֹפֵל יִגְוֹל וְצוֹר יַעֲתֵק מִמְקוֹמוֹ:

Mountains collapse and crumble;
Rocks are dislodged from their place.

אַבְנִים | שִׁחֲקוּ מֵיָם תִּשְׁטֹף-סְפִיחֶיהָ עַפְרָא-אָרֶץ וְתִקְוַת אָנוּשׁ הָאֲבֹדֶת:

Water wears away stone;
Torrents wash away earth;
So you destroy man's hope.

Ok, so the last line is a downer (though Rabbi Soloveichik made it beautiful this past Shabbat in his afternoon class. That weekly class is one of our Congregational gems. But don't show up this week; the Rabbi is traveling to Israel to celebrate an event with a congregant.) But as it relates to the metaphor under discussion, the Book of Job is ancient. The Talmud (Baba Batra 14b) records one opinion as attributing its authorship to Moses, and the runner-up opinion (on the next page) maintains that it was written in the equivalent of the Sixth Century B.C.E. The phrase, "water wears away stone", would have had no meaning were readers or listeners not fully appreciative of the fact that, well, water wears away stone. So can someone explain the hype over Lyell?

Maybe You Can Fix Stupid. The Touro Shabbaton this past weekend was marvelous in every respect. We were united with kindred spirits from Newport, we ourselves were united, our Clergy each gave magnificent talks, lectures, tours, everything. Barbara Reiss, Bonnie Barest, and our Clergy outdid even their typical exceptional work in pulling it all together. It would have been a highpoint of even the greatest of years. This year, with everything that is going on, it was truly transformative. With deep gratitude, we thank our Touro Synagogue Affiliate members who made the trip and were with us. We must do it again, and hopefully we will, soon.

One of our new(ish) friends from Touro Synagogue, Paul Tobak, likes to quote the bit of popular Americana, "you can't fix stupid". He was referring to nothing in particular. But it got me thinking, can't we fix stupid? And, well, wouldn't you know it, but I then saw, right in this week's Daf Yomi learning, a reference to the oft-used statement (originally from Psalms 116:5) that the Almighty watches over the stupid,

שִׁמְר פְּתָאִים יְהוָה דֹּלְתֵי וְלִי יְהוֹשִׁיעַ:

The LORD protects the simple [or stupid];
I was brought low and He saved me.

In Yevamot 72a, which we learned this week, the principle of "shomer psayim Hashem" (using the Ashkenazic transliteration) is used to explain how circumcisions usually come off ok even though most people at that time were not observing precautions about heat and dust and wind. In general the principle is used to explain that, if one of us does something unnecessarily dangerous or stupid, then Jewish law may well prohibit it, and we will suffer the consequences

of our stupidity. But if enough of us do a very stupid thing, Jewish law or halacha may be persuaded not to prohibit it, and we will be spared suffering the consequences of our stupidity.

So Paul, you are right, you and I can't fix stupid. But rest assured the Almighty can, and will.

Half-Full Report.

Post-Beatles/Pre-Wings McCartney. The stars came out to remind us all that McCartney had two albums full of great hits after the Beatles and before Wings, *McCartney* and *Ram*. The albums contain truly great McCartney songs, as winners Billy Schulder, David Vorchheimer, Esther Ingber (with a little help from her brother-in-law Elliot Ingber), and Professor Bella Hass Weinberg, with a little help from her sister Sarah, all got right. Gil Deutsch went all in, saying that *Ram* in its entirety deserves top mention.

For reminding us about [*\(It's Just\) Another Day*](#), and [*Maybe I'm Amazed*](#), these winners will receive THREE inflation-adjusted points – the highest award of points ever conferred by the judges. Indeed, *Another Day* vies for a spot in the top 10 sad/happy/beautiful/life-affirming **songs to get us through the entire pandemic** (ok, name others, for two points each). Many thanks to the winners. Now what about George? Did he have anything nearly so great post-Beatles as during? One point each for entries from memory.

Picturing Paradise. It is our hope that we will be making extensive use of Paved Paradise this Spring and Summer. Send in pics of events. It will be hard to beat the pic by Ari Sherizen below, capturing our youth's fun-filled "Leading into Lag La Omer event" on Paved Paradise last night. Priceless.



Thank you all. Bless us all. Happy Lag La Omer. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas