

May 26, 2022

Dear Shearith Israel family,

*When Is An Update Not An Update?* Barely a week ago, the government threatened to restore mask mandates in indoor public gathering spaces. Bloomberg and other reputable news sources told us it was imminent. So what happened? Nothing, really. Transmission rates have not abated. Indeed, they are up, though hospitalizations and deaths of vaccinated people still down. On the negative side of the ledger, in the past week both specialized science and health periodicals as well as general readership publications have begun describing the new Omicron sub-subvariants as more akin to “SARS-3”, meaning quite different from Covid-19 and able to infect much more easily though dramatically less seriously for those vaccinated.

So if nothing has gotten better, why hasn't the CDC, the State, or the City lowered the boom? Our political leaders have essentially punted, unable or unwilling to act consistently. That leaves the matter in the hands of our trusted Working Group. When is an update not an update? When our own fellow congregants, looking out for the welfare of us all, keep things about the same since, on the whole, we feel we have struck the right balance. We intend, when reasonable and feasible, to take advantage of the rare gift of being able to hold outdoor services on Paved Paradise. For a community that can be fussy about the darndest things, we have shown incredible tolerance towards each other so that we can continue to pray and be together as a unified community outside. This week's update is that there is basically no update. We may pray Friday night and Shabbat afternoon indoors; Shabbat morning outdoors; and enjoy a sumptuous and congenial Kiddush on Paved Paradise as well.

On the updating front, see you next week, pre-Shabuot. Maybe we have a real update by then.

*The Undoubling Project.* Last year, we observed that, in 2021/5781, we doubled virtually every weekly Torah *parasha* that we normally double ([see my email of 4.29.21](#)). This year, 2022/5782, is very much the opposite; just look how short our recent Shabbat Torah portions have been, since we have *not* been doubling (*Achrei Mot/Kedoshim*, each separate; *Behar/Bechukotai*, each separate). I'm sure you will say, duh, this is a longer year because we added a leap month, so of course we need more single parshiot lest we get to Bereshit in August.

I admit that that's true, but that still does not explain why the parshiot in Israel are one off from the parshiot in the rest of the world, a difference that would be immediately solved were we to double up even once. Because Pesah began on Shabbat and therefore had its eighth day on Shabbat in the Diaspora, on that particular Shabbat we here read the readings for the holiday. In Israel, however, that second Shabbat was no longer the holiday, so they scooted ahead and read the parasha of Acharei Mot. So we were one off then. Why have we not caught up when we had the chance twice already? Indeed, this year we will not catch up until July 30, when those in Israel will read the parasha of *Masei*, while we will read two

parshiot, *Matot* and *Masei*. The question remains; why don't we double up the parshiot ASAP so that we and Israel are in sync?

I offer one possible reason, which relates to this week's Torah portion of Bechukotai. This parasha starts wonderfully – it tells of the manifold blessings the Jewish people and the world will reap if Jews stay true to our mission in life. Unfortunately, much of the rest of the parasha contains "*tochacha*", or remonstrations or chastisements – ills that will befall our communities if we fail to act in a way true to our religion. These are difficult verses to read, though following them are beautiful words of consolation (Vayikrah 26:44-45). A strong tradition grew up that these potent passages of *tochacha* needed to be read close to Shabuot – close but not too close. The custom is that Bechukotai is read the Shabbat before the Shabbat before Shabuot. We need to hear its grim remonstrations in order to appreciate the gift of the giving of the Torah, which contains the recipe to avoid the calamitous outcome. On the other hand, we can't hear the *tochacha* too close to the giving of the Torah since it could lead us to deep depression, and who enjoys a gift while down in the doldrums.

In order to maintain Bechukotai in its right spot, we do not double parshiot to catch up with Israel until we reach the doubling candidates that come *after* Shabuot. That still doesn't fully answer the question, since there is a doubling candidate, *Chukat/Balak*, that post-dates Shabuot but that precedes *Matot/Masei*. Anyone have an explanation? Do I really have to bribe you with points for Torah? Ok, two points for the first three people to answer why we don't catch up with Israel at *Chukat/Balak* rather than waiting for the second couplet in Bamidbar, *Matot/Masei*?

*Half-Full Report.* Fun stuff and a moment of deep sadness and sobriety this week:

*The Power of Small but Relentless Effort.* I demonstrated last week that the Book of Job is the right place to look for metaphors describing water wearing away rocks, not Lyell or Darwin or Kurzweil thousands of years later. Commenting on that proof, Guy Reiss shares with us the German saying:

*"Steter Tropfen höhlt den Stein"*

This, Guy says, is widely used and in English means "constant dripping wears the stone". Guy instructs: "Ovid reportedly used the Latin version (*gutta cavat lapidem*)". Even more persuasive, Guy notes that that the German version of Wiktionary references a Greek text from the second half of the fifth century BCE. In sum, says Guy, "the recognition that persistence, small steps, and constant nudging achieve something has been with us since ancient times". Just so! And thank you as well to Aura Bijou, back with us in full vigor, for her insights on "who wrote the book of Job", which is not a version of the Don McLean classic (you had better know that reference – one point for the first three right answers) but, as I explained last week, is fascinatingly discussed in the Talmud itself.

*The Interregnum of George.* It is only Shearith Israelites, congregants and friends, who, when we hear the “interregnum of George,” think about how we stood during the Shabbat prayer for the government for one George (as in King George) and then, after the Revolution, stopped standing during that Shabbat prayer for another George (as in Washington) ([see my email of Aug. 12, 2021](#)). For the rest of the *velt*, reference to the “interregnum of George” obviously refers to the time after the Beatles broke up, when George (as in Harrison) put out some solo albums. This “interregnum”, or a time in between, was before the late 1980s, when George H. helped form the Traveling Wilbury’s – what I described without successful contradiction as that staggeringly talented “super-group” of George Harrison, Bob Dylan, Jeff Lynne, Roy Orbison, and Tom Petty (imagine, the Nobel laureate Dylan was the least talented among them).

Last week, I offered big-buck points for the best of George in the interregnum. What I got instead was ridicule, including castigation for why I was giving away valuable points on a question that was so bloody obvious. Ok, so my detractors may be right, this time only. Accordingly, we are retroactively adjusting the point rewards downward. That *appears* unfair because it *is* unfair. The judges are awarding one point each to Andrew Lipton for [Bangladesh](#), and to Guy Reiss and to the Brothers Schulder (Michael and Billy independently) for the timeless [My Sweet Lord](#). Guy’s comment, that George was definitely one of his top three Beatles, is a quip undeserving of this space. Finally, an extra single point to Billy Schulder for unaided [All Things Must Pass](#) (weird version), and [Living in a Material World](#) (eh).

*Pandemic’s Song.* One of my candidates for sad/happy/beautiful/life-affirming songs to get us through the entire pandemic was and remains

- [\(It’s Just\) Another Day](#), Paul McCartney post-Beatles/pre-Wings.

The ever-resilient, ever-present (at services, that is), insightful, and newly conferred Ph.D. Faith Fogelman offered nine all by herself. My personal faves from her list include the following four:

- From the Chairman of the Board himself, the incomparable velvet voice of Frank Sinatra, singing [That’s Life](#) (“*you’re riding high in April, shot down in May, but I know I’m going to change that tune, when I am back on top in June*”)
- From [Damn Yankees, You Got To Have Heart](#) (“*when the odds are saying you’ll never win, that’s when the grin should start*”)
- From *Annie*, the song [Tomorrow](#) (is only a day away)
- [I Will Survive](#), by Gloria Gaynor

These are fabulous candidates. Polls remain open through Shabuot; the contest is too important, the stakes too high, to rush it.

*Quitting the Human Race.* Father Patrick Dubois's books, *The Holocaust by Bullets* and *In Broad Daylight*, document the unspeakable crimes leading to the murder in Eastern Europe of approximately 1.5-2 million of the six million Jews killed during the Holocaust. Father Dubois and his team have an unparalleled depth of knowledge on the murder by shooting of small and large groups of human beings. Yet in his must-read books, there is only one time I found where the author felt like quitting the human race: when he interviewed those who were complicit in and witnessed the execution of children. We deeply mourn the loss of lives young and old at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas.

*Memorial Day Commemoration.* As part of the Touro Synagogue weekend here in NYC two weeks ago, I had the privilege of visiting our Chatham Street cemetery with our Touro friends. The tour was led by Reverend Zachary Edinger. Z does an extraordinary job discussing our historic cemeteries, many of the people buried there, and the role of our great institution to preserve Jewish cemeteries over the centuries. As a community, we will be visiting the Chatham Square cemetery again this coming Monday, on Memorial Day. It is a fitting way to observe the day. Please consider attending, and bring your kids and grandkids for a meaningful, educational, and enjoyable experience with color guard and all.

Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom. Happy and meaningful Memorial Day Weekend.

Louis Solomon, Parnas