

June 16, 2022

Dear Shearith Israel family,

*Down in Covid-land.* Last Shabbat morning, we had close to 200 people at services. Thank you to Rabbi Soloveichik for making our Sanctuary one of the venues of a Tikvah Shabbaton held last weekend. We held services indoors, following our familiar Covid-19 protocols. We had mask-only and mask-optional sections. Everyone, literally, was respectful of the rules. No one seemed uncomfortable. There is no evidence of any disease spread. Services and the Rabbi's d'var torah were marvelous, as was Kiddush and a revived community spirit with our Sanctuary more full than in the recent past.

For this Shabbat, with Covid-19 metrics no worse than last week, we will be inside Friday night, outside for Shabbat morning, as we expect to be throughout the summer, weather permitting. For the Rabbi's afternoon class, we also plan to enjoy our beautiful outdoor space.

Since I'm now taking the short route to discussing the major pandemic of our time, I assume that you, like me, are reminded of Springsteen's great lyrics, from his triumphant [\[Down in\] Jungleland](#):

*And the poets down here  
Don't write nothing at all  
They just stand back and let it all be*

Indeed, for no rewards other than signal star-status, send in suggestions for other great songs with a watch-it-all-go-by theme. And no [Otis Redding](#), and not because he's dead a long time.

*The Only Way Is Through.* We can imagine how much Under Armour spent on its ad campaign promoted with the slogan,

*"The Only Way Is Through"*

Indeed, check out this photo of the HUGE signage on the Under Armour store at 58<sup>th</sup> Street and Fifth Avenue:



The ad campaign endorses hard work. The company says that the slogan defines what it means to push yourself. And, it seems to me, the slogan should prompt us to try to emulate other wholesome qualities such as honesty, probity, and other characteristics or *midot* held in high esteem by our religion.

One of those highly valued characteristics, we are taught, is giving credit to others where scrupulous adherence to honesty warrants it. It's for that reason that I wonder if anyone has seen Under Armour quoting from the Robert Frost poem, *A Servant to Servants*, published in 1915. There the great poet says:

*Len says one steady pull more ought to do it.  
He says the best way out is always through.  
And I agree to that, or in so far  
As that I can see no way out but through —  
Leastways for me — and then they'll be convinced.*

I was pondering Frost's 105-year jump on Under Armour when we recently learned page 92a of Tractate Yevamot as part of the Daf Yomi Cycle. The discussion there dates from more than 1,600 years before either Frost or UA. In that discussion we encounter something most fascinating.

Our Sages struggled to enable women to remarry even when the whereabouts of their husbands remained unknown. Based on Biblical requirements, the Talmud typically requires two witnesses to an event to be able to sustain a decision of a Jewish Court. In the case of a lost or missing husband, the Talmud (here and elsewhere), based on Biblical sources, permits testimony of only a single witness. In part the reason is that the wife herself will do some checking since the consequences of an error are huge. So far so good, right?

The catch is that, as with other areas of evidence in jurisprudence, by reducing the standard of proof we increase the possibility of error. So here the Talmud needs to address what happens when the husband reappears after the Beit Din relied on a single witness to presume him dead. *Awkward!* The actual question under discussion is whether the wife, in circumstances where she should have been more careful, has to bring an offering for an error (a *chatat*). And it is here that R. Eliezer says:

*יקוב הדין את ההר*

or, literally,

*“Let the law bore through the mountain”, or put it in the vernacular, the only way is through!*

By this R' Eliezer means that we need to go *through* the grave error that occurred and consider why it happened. Go behind the error of the Beit Din. The error arose not merely because of a lenient Beit Din but because the wife failed to do a better job checking to see if her husband was dead before calling to testify a single and evidently erroneous witness. Because she bears some responsibility, the wife does indeed bring a *chatat* offering.

As R' Eliezer said, the only way is *through*. You betcha! And shouldn't Under Armour and even the great Frost acknowledge their debt to the Talmud?

*Half-Full Report.*

*Happy Song Contest.* Perhaps because there were so many good choices, we do not have a clear winner. We need a run off, among:

- 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 Giacomo Puccini's *Turandot*, the song [Nessun Dorma](#)
- [Billy the Squid](#) by Tom Chapin
- [Happy](#) by Pharrell Williams

Please vote early and often (one point for the city that made that adage or its variant famous).

*Built Back Better.* *Pre-N-Post* has a new name! The clear winner – Built Back Better, or BBB, or 3Bs, or B-cubed – belongs to the genius of Rabbi Shaul Robinson, marvelous spiritual leader of our neighbor, Lincoln Square Synagogue. Note the “t” rather than a “d” in “built”. That way the title will not be confused with President Biden’s initiative. Using “built” conveys the meaning that we are *already* experiencing an improved state of affairs. It’s brilliant (in fact it’s so good that I solicit your views about whether BBB should replace, not just *Pre-N-Post*, but the title *Half-Full Report* altogether.) Rabbi, thank you.

With B-cubed, we have a name worthy of the good feeling we are trying to stimulate to help shape our attitudes. And with that, there were a couple more great suggestions for how we have found good things “post-pandemic”:

- Beth isn’t going to take this too seriously. She was able to bake her way through some of the great cookbooks of desserts. She is happy, and her family is happy, even though hubby got a little chubby.
- Susan Lobel’s BBB entry is the following photo:



Of this she describes a “book of Talmud and an Upper West Side Citibike that greeted me this morning on my way to work. *Enduring values will prevail.*” It’s a perfect B-cubed entry and a fantastic tribute.

- Alan Zwiebel also sent in a great photo. Call it stairway to Heaven:



- Estelle Freilich understands the importance of BBB. All of us, individually and together, need to begin re-pursuing a positive, forward-moving optimism. With vigor, we need to get back to the business of growth and development in all of

life's facets. Estelle, though, to her credit, asks that we not forget some of the pressing projects that Covid-19 interrupted and that remain of dire importance. The problem of *agunot* in our religion – women who remain unable to remarry because of the refusal of their husbands to grant them a Jewish divorce – is in crucial need of consistent and aggressive attention. Estelle, of course you are right.

*Bloomsday.* Dublin Jew Leopold Bloom took his modern odyssey reflected in James Joyce's *Ulysses* on June 16, 1904. The book was published in one volume 100 years ago this year. From the famous first sentence:

*Stately, plump Buck Mulligan came from the stairhead, bearing a bowl of lather on which a mirror and a razor lay crossed*

to the timeless last phrase expressing an optimism appropriate for *Built Back Better*,

*yes I said yes I will Yes*

there are few books more life-affirming and, well, just plain brilliant, imho. Happy Bloomsday all.

Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas