

June 9, 2022

Dear Shearith Israel family,

*The Yawn Report.* Last week, I promised for this week a short and sweet Covid-19 report. Alas, I did not receive the fierce backlash of disagreement that I had hoped for. (On the contrary, one careful reader of these emails, whose opinion I value, doubled down and encouraged shorter EVERYTHING not just shorter Covid-19 reports!) Short and sweet seems to be called for because our congregants on the whole know what is going on. And the overwhelming majority of congregants are comfortable with the steps your Working Group has recommended to keep us safe.

The Covid-19 infection, hospitalization, and death rates in our community are about the same as last week. In light of that, we will be maintaining the status quo in our protections. Starting next week, Shabbat morning services will be outside for the summer but will remain inside the Main Sanctuary this Shabbat because of a sizeable group of expected guests. Kiddush will continue to be on Paved Paradise. Other services over Shabbat and during the week will continue to be indoors. The Rabbi's Shabbat afternoon shiur will be inside this week. Please come.

*Judaism's Three Important Traits.* We observed recently that the Torah portion of the "tochacha" or remonstrations, and the Torah portions read over Shabuot, describe the benefits of a life well lived Jewishly. What, you might ask, are some key aspects of such a life? One can't read the chapters of Pirkei Abot, which we read weekly between Pesah and Shabuot, without seeing at least several lists of those key character traits. The various lists, said in the name of different Sages, are not identical. The Talmud pages we recently learned as part of the Daf Yomi cycle week has its own list of three. How the Talmud gets at this question, and the particular list itself, deserve brief discussion.

Tractate Yevamot page 78b/79a discuss the attributes of leaders. We have reflected before that our Sages often remark that our greatest leaders each had flaws. Indeed, we are taught that having some skeletons in the closet is affirmatively *desirable* for a leader (*whew*). From there the Talmud discusses character traits that are generally undesirable, not just in leaders but in all of us. Chief among them are a lack of showing kindness to others and a lack of gratitude for the kindness shown by others. The Talmud for example mentions that it is a problem, in some cases an insuperable one, for the men (not the women) of Moab and Ammon to beget children who can convert to Judaism. Why? Because the character trait associated with those two nations is a lack of kindness to strangers/those less fortunate and a lack of gratitude (*hakarat hatov*). The Talmud mentions that the men of these nations showed no kindness to the Israelites in the desert after the Exodus. Other commentators mention the absence of gratitude that Lot (his descendants being Moab and Ammon) showed to Abraham for having been saved by him in Sodom. These are character traits that the Talmud has little sympathy for.

It is then that the Talmud quotes King David as saying:

שְׁלֹשָׁה סִימָנִים יֵשׁ בְּאוֹמָהּ זֹאת: הַרְחָמְנִים, וְהַבִּיטֵנִי, וְגוֹמְלֵי הַסְּדִים

*There are three distinguishing marks of this nation, the Jewish people. They are merciful, they are shamefaced, and they perform acts of kindness.*

What do you make of King David's list? Showing mercy and doing acts of kindness ok; they are close to what our prophets and Talmudic Sages enumerate, including in Pirkei Abot. But being shamefaced, or humble? And this from King David? His words may have taught these characteristics, but did his conduct exhibit them? Is he differentiating between what distinguishes individuals from what distinguishes an entire nation? If so, how does a nation show shamefacedness or humility?

One answer to these questions may be that the Talmud here is answering the age-old question, what does it mean to be "chosen" – a topic also addressed on Shabuot. I have discussed this concept before. It is rife with peril if misunderstood either by Jews or by non-Jews ([see my email of Dec. 10, 2020](#)). In its discussion of King David, the Talmud is clearly favoring the view that "chosenness" entails obligation, not privilege. One later commentator (at least) supports the argument that what is being talked about on this page of Talmud is how Jews should exhibit their chosenness by analyzing the Hebrew word for "chosen" itself. The Hebrew word for "chosen" is "*bachar*", containing the three-letter root ב (bet), ח (het), and ר (resh). That, it is argued, is related to what the Talmud here is saying. What it means to be chosen is that the nation *and* its individual adherents exhibit humility (the "bet" in *bayshanim*, the first letter of the Hebrew root for chosen); perform acts of kindness (the "het" in "*hasadim*", the second letter in the Hebrew root for chosen); and show mercy (the "resh" in *rachamim*, the third letter in the Hebrew root for chosen). Humility or shamefacedness – not usually in the list of attributes - needs to be central when describing Israel's relationships with other nations. That is precisely because an arrogant view of "chosenness" has led to calamities throughout history. Chosenness as obligation, and a humble approach to carrying out those obligations, is not some recently hatched notion, a modern apologia given the heat chosenness has received in modernity. This Talmudic discussion is over 1600 years old.

*Half-Full Report.*

*Happy songs.* This challenge didn't start life as a quest for happy songs. I eruditely sought candidates for "sad/happy/beautiful/life-affirming songs to get us through the entire pandemic." My conception was much more highbrow – and basically of no interest to anyone. We have received a bunch of great suggestions in the past few weeks, brought to you by Great Contestants Faith Fogelman, David Vorchheimer, Andrew Lipton, and Sarah Meira Rosenberg. Including my initial suggestion, here they are:

- [\(It's Just\) Another Day](#). Paul McCartney post-Beatles/pre-Wings
- 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
- From Giacomo Puccini's *Turandot*, the song [Nessun Dorma](#)
- Another great Sinatra song, [All My Tomorrows](#)
- [Billy the Squid](#)
- [The Ghost of Bleak House](#)
- [The Ragtime Dance](#)
- [R-E-C-Y-C-L-E](#)
- [The Big Rock Candy Mountain](#)
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More great suggestion streamed in this week, including:

- Billy Schulder's nomination of "[Happy](#)" by Pharell Williams (as to how I missed this one, Billy just says, "duh.")
- Jack Schenker nominates anything by Pavarotti, since, as Jack says, "there will never be another"

So there you have it. Listen to all of them, and you will smile non-stop for a week. Vote on your favorite three. Winners will be announced next week.

*Pre-N-Post*. In this, our newest section of this email, I was seeking 1) examples of positive turns of events in the past two years, and 2) a better name the *Pre-N-Post*. There is no winner for 2); Roy Simon – as positive a person as you will find – proposed *The Overflowing Report*, mostly because he doesn't love the locution *Half-Full Report*. So naming rights are still on offer.

On actual examples lifting both mouth corners and spirits, I have rarely seen such truly wonderful responses:

- Don't forget my initial suggestion – that we as a Congregation boast a Rabbi who routinely reaches hundreds or thousands of listeners/viewers using technology that was forced to improve because of the dictates of the pandemic.
- Amazingly, some of the best examples are *not* technology driven. Honorary Parnas Peter Neustadter gives a moving disquisition on how Israelis (he's one now) have not only become more self-sufficient given (among other things) closed or only partly open borders due to the pandemic and the Ukraine; he also describes a fusion within Israel of

haredi and “other” Israeli Jews such that THE happening place for Tel Avivers on Thursday nights is, incomprehensibly, B’nai Brak to buy fish and challot.

- Barbara Reiss tells of how waiting in lines at the beginning of Covid prompted her to use her time to listen to podcasts, something she now loves to do, and does, even though the lines are more back to *Pre*. She and Guy also report that “spending extended time in Europe, hiking, hanging out with cows, and then working the late shift has been an incredible life-altering opportunity.”
- Sarah Meira Rosenberg identifies libraries and how they've expanded digital access and resources. “No ID, proof of address, digging up old utility bills - just go to the [website](#), tell them where you live in NY and/or Queens, and get access to hundreds of ebooks and audiobooks. MAGIC.”
- Roy Simon describes how the stay-at-home Shabbatot at the beginning of the pandemic gave him time and opportunity to read the weekly Torah parshiot, something he has continued to do even since we are back at communal services on Shabbat.
- And the tear jerker of the lot, Karen Simon beautifully describes being in the small pod of people including their grandchildren, which gave – and still gives – more time together than would have happened otherwise.

See what I mean about how blessed we are, if we only take enough initiative? Write in your stories; give everyone else a boost.

*Shabuot*. The sole reason for this short entry is *hakarat hatov*, or showing our collective gratitude, for our marvelous Shabuot weekend. The Sisterhood outdid themselves with the gorgeous floral arrangements in the synagogue (see photo below). All our clergy taught, read, sang with brilliance. The tribute to Chormaster Emeritus Leon Hyman was as special on Shabuot Day 1 as our very young women’s reading of The Book of Ruth was on Shabuot Day 2. These are the events that define us. And they were wonderful.



Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas