

September 22, 2022

Dear Shearith Israel family & Touro Synagogue Affiliates,

Pandemic No, Covid Yes. Were it not for the stabilizing effect of Shearith Israel, President Biden's announcement this week – that the pandemic is over but that Covid remains a potent and for some people a dangerous disease – would be a bit hard to know what to do with. Given the stabilizing effect of Shearith Israel, however, our Covid-19 Working Group knows exactly what to do.

This Shabbat we will be following our now-familiar protocols. We will do the same on Rosh Hashana, when they will take the following form. At night we will all be indoors, enjoying our comfortable mask-only and mask-optional sections. We will do the same thing in the mornings on Monday and Tuesday, when we will also have a full service outdoors on Paved Paradise. I should be used to this already, but the genuine understanding shown by our congregants for one another, many of whom will not be in their traditional, cherished seats, continues to confirm how magnificently we have come together as a congregation during the pandemic that, we are told, is now behind us.

A Rosh Hashana Message. The Daf Yomi learning this week includes Tractate Ketubot 77b. There we meet an extraordinary Sage with an even more extraordinary story. The lessons to be learned for the blessing of the Cosmic Do-Over that is Rosh Hashana are manifest.

The Talmud is discussing a serious malady afflicting men called *ra'attan*. The disease was a highly contagious skin ailment that was worse than all other 24 varieties of boils discussed as being justification for divorce because of the harm that marital relations would do to the husband who had the disease. (I know you're thinking, is *this* his idea of a Rosh Hashana message? Bear with me.) The Talmud then describes how several of our greatest Sages reacted to people with the disease:

Rabbi Yoḥanan would announce: Be careful of the flies found on those afflicted with ra'atan, as they are carriers of the disease. Rabbi Zeira would not sit in a spot where the wind blew from the direction of someone afflicted with ra'atan. Rabbi Elazar would not enter the tent of one afflicted with ra'atan.

Now I know you are thinking, ok, the pre-modern medical acumen of these Sages is impressive, but what about the Rosh Hashana message? It's coming.

The Talmud then describes one final Sage (I skipped one):

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi would attach himself to those with the disease and study Torah with them, saying as justification the verse: 'The Torah is a loving hind and a graceful doe' (Proverbs 5:19). If it bestows grace on those who learn it, does it not protect them from illness?

It is around this amazing Sage that this humble Rosh Hashana message revolves. Who among us even aspires to run *into* a burning building? How can we be anything but profoundly moved by the way Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi lived?

And not just how he lived. Consider as well his end of days. After the story above, the Talmud immediately tells the following story (if I don't quote part of it, you'll think I'm making it up):

When Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi was on the verge of dying, Heaven said to the Angel of Death: Go and perform his bidding, as he is a righteous man and deserves to die in the manner he sees fit. The Angel of Death went and appeared to him. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said to him: Show me my place in Paradise. The Angel of Death responded: Very well. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said to the Angel of Death: Give me the knife that you use to kill mortals, lest you frighten me on the way. He gave it to him. When he arrived there, in Paradise, he lifted Rabbi Yehoshua [above a wall] so he could see his place in Paradise, and he showed it to him. Rabbi Yehoshua jumped and fell into that other side, thereby escaping into Paradise.

(Sefaria translation, with my edits.)

The story goes on to tell that not only would Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi not come back out of Paradise; he also refused to return the knife to the Angel of Death, which would have been a great end to this part of the story. Unfortunately, the Almighty then intervened and told Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi that he had to give back the knife, declaiming essentially that living things must die. And so he did. (No doubt this is where Philip Pullman got his fabulous story and title of *The Subtle Knife*.)

Even with Rosh Hashana approaching, the story of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi does not really call to mind Wordsworth's dark and depressing [Ode: Intimations of Immortality](#). As Coleridge quipped, Wordsworth might have titled his poem, *Dejection: An Ode*. Rather, the story of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi is more like "for whom the bell tolls." Not the [Metallica noise](#), and not even the great [Hemingway novel](#) (which I re-read during Covid, and so should you). I refer instead to the poem by John Donne, [No Man Is An Island](#), with its ending:

*Each man's death diminishes me,
For I am involved in mankind.
Therefore, send not to know
For whom the bell tolls,
It tolls for thee*

The plain meaning of these immortal lines is that the listener in the poem is hearing a funeral bell for another but comes to understand that each of us is so much a part of everyone else that each person's death kills a tiny part of the rest of us but leaves the whole otherwise alive. The communitarian, unifying, J-continuum quality of life within death is what both Donne and Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi contemplate.

I have always thought the “thee” in Donne’s poem was, well, me. I have also thought that the poem channeled the last line of Hillel’s aphorism in Pirke Avot to *get moving now*:

*If I am not for myself, who will be for me?
If I am only for myself, what am I?
And if not now, when?*

We have a vanishingly short time here. I find myself someplace in the Back Nine. The end seems to be approaching far faster than the past is receding. (Physicists, what is the name of that red-shifting phenomena?) The bell will toll too-soon enough.

[Signs, Signs, Everywhere a Sign](#). Within the span of just a couple of hours, the wonderful trip that Beth and I took to the Shenandoah Valley before the Labor Day weekend ushered in Elul’s preamble to Rosh Hashana with many of these same thoughts. I can explain in photos.

First, outside our cabin hung a large and thoroughly *uninviting* hammock:



I have long said that a hammock, for me alone, is basically “living Hell.” The movement was nauseating even before I developed middle-ear vertigo annoyances. We were about to start a hike in Shenandoah National Park. So it was easy to avoid the hammock. But just the sight of it made me queasy.

We then drove to the Park, which is magnificent. When we arrived, I was immediately hit, square in the face, with a second image. This one was a sign, reading:



The bell, tolling for me, was telling me to “Leave No Trace.” That may be sound advice if you are about to hike or camp in a national park. But if you are in Elul, thinking about the year’s end and a new year’s beginning, thinking about brooding disease and warnings to sit and learn with someone highly contagious, thinking (always) about the final tolling bell, *Leave No Trace* about the last thing I wanted to see. Doesn’t *Leave No Trace* rank among the *last things any* human being wants to “accomplish” in life?

If a hammock is for me a living Hell during life, then *Leave No Trace* is a grim promise of a living Hell after death, again at least for me. Each of us should do all we can to leave a trace. One kind act will leave a trace. One caring deed will leave a trace. Teaching the sick and learning with the diseased leaves a trace, even if you have to return the knife and can’t stop the death of others.

So avoid the hammocks, avoid the signs, but do enjoy Shenandoah. It’s a must see before the bell tolls for thee. The songs alone are worth the trip, as [here](#), by John Denver, and [here](#), a marvelous Springsteen homage to Pete Seeger, and finally [here](#), a gorgeous a capella rendition by Peter Hollens (courtesy of my stalwart next-gen editor, Sarah Meira Rosenberg).

Building Back Better.

A Final Note on Related Notes. Henry Watkin pushed back on my unsupported “oh come on”, when I said that, obviously, *Hatikvah*, *Smetana's Moldau*, and *Tefilat Tal* came from a cognate source. All Henry asks for, reasonably, is a little evidence. “Shut up the father explained” does not pass for evidence. Sarah Gross then chimed in with [this](#), where a comedian shows that the chord progression of Pachelbel’s Cannon in D is ubiquitous in music of all genres. The skit would be funny if it didn’t capture the basic “music disease” I suffer from, hearing the same chords for endless numbers of songs all over space and time.

5783's Great Word Challenge. I think people have been busy heading into Rosh Hashana, and so many people haven't yet voted. Still, we have our four finalists:

- Give
- Here
- RejuveNation
- Return (as in hashivenu)

It was a hard, arguably unfair contest. But, we are where we are. Final ballots please.

5783's Great Phrase Challenge. Here we have a clearer winner, Laury Frieber's borrowing from the Ladino:

- *Kaminando kon Buenos [let's walk with good]*

It's a perfect phrase for us in 5783.

Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom. Happy first day of Autumn. Shana Tova.
Kaminando kon Buenos.

Louis Solomon, Parnas