

February 16, 2023

Dear Shearith Israel family,

A New Challenge. Our weekly emails were initially inspired by our wanting to communicate, to keep our Congregation informed during the initial phases of the Covid-19 pandemic. Much has changed since then, but in parts of the world, much remains the same or worse.

Almost every week I try to give a brief update concerning how Covid-19 is affecting our community, especially the communal use of our sacred Sanctuary during services. Of late, however, at least in our community, Covid-19 risks and perils haven't been changing that much from week to week. We have our protocols and protections. But reporting on them has started to feel a little like background noise, barely audible (except if you are sitting right near one of our air filters). Candidly, for me personally, part of me wants to continue some sort of weekly reminder so that we will never forget the sickness, the sadness, the personal and communal dislocations, and even the deaths that attended the early months of the pandemic in our community. And to those of you who prefer to put this behind you, I understand that too.

Many people would like me to continue conveying weekly information. Others, politely, have had enough. Do you feel a compromise coming on? That's where the new challenge comes in, one that I hope evokes more smiles than eye rolls: Come up with a phrase, an icon, a symbol of some sort that will convey a "business as usual" approach to our Covid-19 protocols without ignoring the fact that we are not completely out of the woods yet and that things could change. Send in your suggestions. We will pick one that most of us like.

A Light Talmudic Digression: Existential Intentionality. The global community's learning of Tractate Nazir takes a refreshing pause this week on pages 23a/b of the Tractate. We have been studying steadily the law and lore of becoming a nazir, or *nezirut*. Like so many similar "digressions" in the corpus of the Talmud, pages 23a/b include supposedly lighter fare in the guise of stories with messages. Let's look at the lighter side of the Talmudic discourse.

These pages start with a Mishna assessing a case where a wife believes she is breaking her *nezirut* (by, say, drinking wine) but, unbeknownst to her, her husband had previously canceled the *nezirut*. So while Wife thought she was willfully transgressing, in fact she wasn't doing anything wrong. Is Wife worthy of condemnation and punishment? The Talmud says yes, albeit through a different, Rabbinic form of punishment. The principle seems to be that intent to break faith with the community is sanctionable even if in reality there is nothing objectively transgressive about the conduct. The Talmud has some dubiety about the rule; it proceeds to state three separate cases where intent alone is sufficient for attracting different forms of punishment or at least opprobrium.

The Talmud doesn't leave it at that, however. The Talmud then addresses the case where mal-intent exists without any action; where impermissible conduct occurs with no mal-intent; and whether mal-intent is ever justified in doing good deeds. All theoretical bases are covered, as are examples from Scripture including stories of Lot and his daughters, Tamar and Yehudah, and Yael and Cisca. The conduct/intent matrix, elegantly 2x2, is fully explored.

These “light” pages include one other treat: The Talmud addresses the famous statement (which is in the form of questions here, but the principle is established):

וְהָאָמַר רַב יְהוּדָה אָמַר רַב: לְעוֹלָם יַעֲסוֹק אָדָם בְּתוֹרָה וּבְמִצְוֹת אֶפְיָלוּ שְׂלָא לְשָׂמְנָא, שְׂמִיתוּךְ שְׂלָא לְשָׂמְנָא בְּאֵל שְׂמִינָא

Rav Yehuda [said] that Rav said: A person should always occupy himself with Torah and mitzvot even not for their own sake, as it is through acts performed not for their own sake that good deeds for their own sake come about

This is one of the great maxims in Judaism, breezily on display right here in the middle of Tractate Nazir. The upshot of these light pages is deep and profound; in Judaism, conduct counts, but intent does too. One without the other is imperfect and incomplete. For those who feel that ours is a religion of rote doing, these pages appear to be clear refutations of that simple and erroneous assertion. And for those who feel that great thoughts are sufficient, leaving the hard work to others, well they too need to think again. What a digression!

Requiem to Burt Bacharach (1928-2023). Most of all I remember the horns he introduced along with the syncopations, harmonies, and key changes. But oh the horns. The melodies are unforgettable (lyrics were often by or with Hal David, another icon). We sing them to ourselves to this day over half-a-century later. The collaborations with Dionne Warwick seem everlasting.

We can't here recount his hundreds of defining songs and scores. At best we can pen a short goodbye:

Dear Burt:

We will not [walk on by](#); we will not evade you with [trains and boats and planes](#). We will speak of the [magic moments](#), of the [story of your life](#). We will not ask [what's it all about](#) (Alfie), and we will not ask [what's new pussycat](#). We have glimpsed what's new and what it's all about, largely because of you. Without making [promises promises](#), we will [never fall in love again](#) with any songwriter so talented; we know what the [look of love](#) looks like, again in large measure because of you. Without you, [raindrops would keep falling on our heads](#).

There will [always be something there to remind](#) us of your genius. The “F” grace note two octaves above high C in the measure near the end of that timeless classic was your homage to eternity – and it is our farewell to you. We will [say a little prayer for you](#).

Built Back Better.

Portuguese please. Salomon Vaz Diaz is one of our occasional chanters of prayers and haftarah. He did the haftarah this past Shabbat. His voice is amazing. Usually we hear him chanting the first chapter of Ezekiel concerning the four angels with four faces (anyone know

when we say that haftarah?). When he reads that haftarah, the shaking of the flooring beneath our feet in the synagogue is not the passing subway. It is Salomon's conjuring of the vision itself.

Salomon is also a complete adherent to our *minhag*. Recently he gave me respectful but full-throated remonstrance for making up words and using Ashkenaz written pronunciation. I plead guilty. But I also want to share his suggestions that we as a Synagogue should revert to the use of more Portuguese than we do nowadays. It seems that Salomon is right that, historically, we used more Portuguese than even Spanish in our service and communal greetings. And even if we can't accommodate his request for greater contemporary use, we can still enjoy the following Salomon instructions:

- We wish each other *Boas Entradas de Shabbath* and the reply is *Digo Mesmo*.
- On Yom Tob we say *Boas Festas* replied with *Melhoradas Festas*.
- Prior to a fast day, *Boas Entradas de Jejum*, replied with *digo mesmo*.
- On the eve of the 9th of Ab we say *Morir Havemos*.

I love these – but would love them more if someone translated them. Anyone?

Shearith Israel's Winter Song Collection. Last week we had the following initial entries:

- [California Dreamin'](#), of course, The Mamas and the Papas
- [Wintertime Love](#), by The Doors.
- [Here Comes the Sun](#), by the Beatles.
- [Baby It's Cold Outside](#), here sung by Dean Martin.

For this week, past masters of our seasonal songbooks (Summer and Fall), bestirred from hibernation by this new challenge, came, saw, and conquered. Faith Fogelman suggests:

- [It Happened In Sun Valley](#), Glenn Miller Orchestra, for the movie *Sun Valley Serenade*. Faith reports that one of the stars of the movie was Sonja Henie, the Norwegian ice skater.
- [I am a Rock](#), by Simon and Garfunkel, with its overall mood and specific alliteration of "deep and dark December." The Judges want it in; thank you, Faith.

David suggested [Sunshine Makes Me Happy](#), by John Denver. In response to my innocent question, where is winter in that song, David did two things: First, he admitted a winter title, words, theme were absent – yet, he rightly said, the song is great for keeping the blues away, which does happen in the Winter sometime. David, more than making up for having missed The Doors, overpowered me with the likes of:

- [Season Suite: Winter](#) (Official Audio), by John Denver
- [Hazy Shade of Winter](#), by Simon & Garfunkel, which nextgen editor SM Rosenberg also suggested.
- [I've Got My Love To Keep Me Warm](#), by Billie Holiday & Her Orchestra (Verve Records 1955), and
- [The Frozen House](#) from "Dr Zhivago"

These are great additions, and you see how “flexible” we are being in our definition of “winter song.” We need more, and there are more great ones. THINK!

Not the moon, but. In response to my entry last week on blessing the new moon, Francine Alfandary did not send in a photo of the moon but does agree that we don’t look up enough. She sent in this gorgeous dawn image of a New York City morning taken by a co-runner:



Shearith Israel at Touro Synagogue. Thank you to Rabbi Soloveichik, to Brown University and its leaders and students, and to Congregation Jeshuat Israel for a wonderful afternoon at Touro Synagogue:



Parashat Poetry. I know we are running long this week, but these are too good to pass up. For Parashat Mishpatim, Susan Vorhand limericks:

*Even at Sinai the elders partook of food
Elevating the physical, a holy thing to do
So pass the plate
Eat cheesecake
Your spirit will be satisfied too.*

And Jay Harwitt:

*Did G-d set the bar way too high
For the lex talionis to fly?
It would be quite obscene
If He really did mean
A literal "eye for an eye."*

Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom. Here! *Kaminando kon Buenos.*

Louis Solomon, Parnas