

February 2, 2023

Dear Shearith Israel family,

**A Groundhog Day Covid-19 Update.** Spring is just six weeks away. Punxsutawney Phil told us so, just a few minutes ago. Who says nothing changes on Groundhog Day?

- Groundhog Week email from February 2021: “As I’m writing you this email, the Wall Street Journal needed to interrupt to tell me, literally, ‘Experts are increasingly convinced that Covid-19 is here forever’.”
- Groundhog Week email from February 2022: “Covid-19 numbers are improving in a locality near you! With these [new] data, we should be ready to return to where we were during the ebb in the virus post-Delta and pre-Omicron last year. As a Congregation we do seem ready. But now we will have to wait another week . . .”
- Groundhog Day 2023: Positivity rates are down in NYC, the first time below 10% in what, months? But positivity rates are horrible in other parts of the world, and people are still getting very sick and dying in record numbers there. In NYC we are up to variant XBB.1.5, which accounts for about three-quarters of the infections in the City.
- Position open: Who wants to write the Groundhog Day Covid-19 entry for 2024?

**Oh Nazarite: Make Up Thy Mind.** The worldwide Daf Yomi cycle is holding in the second week of learning Tractate Nazir, dealing with the law and lore of becoming a *nazir*. We saw last week that the three main areas of abstinence practiced by the *nazir* (foregoing wine, beautification of the hair, and coming in contact with human death) approximated a self-imposed self-improvement course in the three main theatres of Jewish life, respectively: that between human beings, between a human being and the Almighty, and the crucially important goal of building community.

The schizophrenia that our Sages have toward the institution of “*nezirut*”, or being a *nazir*, is well known and has been well told. On the one hand the Torah (really the Tanach) uses language commending the *nazir*. Yet on the other hand the Torah prescribes that, on completion of *nezirut*, the *nazir* brings sacrifices or offerings, and one of those brought is for sins or lapses in good conduct. Many explanations address the conundrum, including that of Rambam, or Maimonides, who explains that in general Jews have more than enough on their plates just doing their best in carrying out commands for a meaningful Jewish life; adding additional strictures (giving up wine, haircuts, and contact with human death) should be seen as worthy of praise but also and maybe more worthy of an apology.

A Talmudic story found in what we are now learning, Tractate Nazir 4b, provides insight into why we tolerate a temporary tilting too far in the direction of additional prohibitions. There we learn of the Talmudic sage R’ Shimon HaTzaddik, who explained that on only one occasion did he share

in and thus support the eating of the sin-offering of a *nazir* having ended his *nezirut*. The occasion was prompted by a handsome young man, who as a shepherd became concerned that he would stray from the right path because of his own beauty coupled with his own vanity. Resisting, he said to Satan, or his evil inclination,

*Wicked one! Why do you pride yourself in a world that is not yours? Why are you proud of someone who will eventually be food in the grave for worms and maggots?*

Thereupon the young man decided to shock his system. He embraced *nezirut*. R' Shimon HaTzaddik concluded that in this situation it was fitting for the young man to right his own ship, on a temporary basis, with some stronger medicine than the Torah prescribes. In such a case, the schizophrenia is tolerated.

There is much to learn from this little episode. Few of us can abide a holier-than-thou attitude in others. When it comes to ourselves, however, more of us are ok with it. A genuine, sincere effort at self-improvement sometimes requires a jolt! Too many jolts you get brain fry. But in smallish quantities, over a temporary period, we may be in the best position to know what we need to do or not do, embrace or forswear. To the popular question, is a *nazir* a saint or a sinner, the answer is, well, yes.

***Shabbat Shira, Magevet, and The Shearith Israel Winter Songbook.*** This Shabbat, Parashat *B'Shalach*, is known and celebrated at Shearith Israel (and elsewhere) as Shabbat *Shira*. It's a beautiful Shabbat of song (Rabbi Rohde will read much of the parasha with the elevated cantillations ("above the line"), which are truly beautiful). Our Shabbat will be even more enriched by the presence of Yale's *a cappella* singing group, *Magevet*, who are incredible. (I can't pass up the chance to tell you of the funny note from librarian, grammarian, speller-arian Professor Bella Hass Weinberg, who told me that, of the various ways to spell *a cappella*, none, anywhere, has ever matched my spelling last week. OOOOps!)

With so much song and joy afoot, it seems fitting to open the lines for our Winter Songbook. For our Summer and Fall installments, I preempted others from suggesting some of the greatest songs with my initial first. What a scrooge! This season I'm giving everyone the same starting chance. Help fill up another Spotify collection.

### ***Built Back Better.***

***Jewish Scottish Burns.*** Last week I thanked Rabbi Robinson for reminding us of Burns Day. Yes, I did know that Rabbi Robinson is Scottish. What I did not know is that David Cohen, while in the UK for grad school, also heard of the fun that even the Jews of Edinburgh had on – you won't believe this – their [Rabbi Burns Night](#). I'm thinking that, pretty soon, Rabbi Soloveichik will give us a learned disquisition on how the poet Robert Burns was actually Jewish – or at least seriously influenced by Jews.

**Bibliofile.** Some weeks ago we agreed on a bunch of great names for this section to share information on great or less great books. But we haven't had any good entries for a while. In the interim, I read Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*. Skip it for sure – the great writing does not compensate for the dated images, the poor story, and ultimately the empty meaningfulness of the lives portrayed.

On the other hand, Debby Sondheim (who seems to read more over a Shabbat than most of the rest of us read in a month) recommends *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern*, by Harvard Professor Stephen Greenblatt. Debby describes it as a *tour de force*. It is ostensibly an intellectual history of the Fifteenth Century rediscovery by book-hunter Poggio Bracciolini of the Roman poet Lucretius's *On the Nature of Things*. The book is certainly well written. And who am I to disagree with the Pulitzer Prize committee, which conferred its coveted award on the book in 2012.

Personally, however, I wonder. I didn't see any new historical insights or findings in the book. It's repackaged stuff, and frankly it exhibits a tiresome humanist-atheist-all-the-world's-purposeless bias in its many meanderings through time and space. It fails in trying to persuade the reader that Epicureanism isn't really about hedonism but rather about a loftier seeking of pleasures more akin to the higher pleasures of John Stuart Mill. The book seems clueless about the meaning and richness of Judaism. In the end, whether or not you agree with its underlying philosophy (want to guess where I come out?), the book is marvelously written. Great suggestion, Debby, thank you. (BTW, does anyone know how the Pulitzer is given? What are "their" biases?)

**Mathematicians of a Feather.** I still like Debby Sondheim's quotation from Dr. Wayne Dyer:

*"Change the way you look at things, the things you look at change."*

That, even though Aura Bijou knew Dyer as "Weenie" and even though our mathematician-in-residence Rebecca Frankel took exception. I asked for an aphorism to capture Rebecca's critique. To her rescue comes another mathematician, Dan Mosenkis, with the nice quip:

*The right viewpoint is worth 10 IQ points.*

I like it (even though, as Dan says, it doesn't really map to Rebecca's criticism), but then I like both math and mathematicians. (Speaking of which, *refuah shelaimah* to our mathematician *Kohen gadol* Bentsi Cohen.)

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

Louis Solomon, Parnas