

January 4, 2024

On the Theme of Unity and Community

Dear Shearith Israel family,

Magnificent Magevet Mañana. *Magevet* is Yale's Hebrew a Capella group. They will be singing at Shearith Israel after services tomorrow evening as well as at a community dinner at the Synagogue tomorrow night after Rabbi Soloveichik's *Friday Night Lights*.

Reservations for the dinner are already closed. But our spacious Sanctuary can accommodate anyone who wishes briefly to hear this marvelous troop. There are fewer pick-me-ups more instantaneous yet lasting than hearing ten+/- separate voices each braiding into a beautiful, coherent, communal whole. The effort these students go to, and the success they achieve as a unified body, is a microcosm of how we can build a sustainable community – indeed how nearly anything worth doing can be accomplished. Come for your own sake. You will be uplifted and transported.

And here, for your special enjoyment, is a [link to Magevet's new album](#), on Spotify.

Our Year of Hope. Our ***Year of Hope*** was conceived, named, and begun before the horror of October 7 and the annoying antics of antisemites in the US gave us reason to become anything but hopeful. The war in Israel continues, though with a brief respite for some of the reserves. We have kept our ***Year of Hope*** alive nonetheless. We are a 369-year-old American institution. As a congregation, we have much we can show and tell and teach about Jewish and American values. It is these values, respectfully, proudly, and properly displayed, that will act as antidotes to many of the hostilities we are witnessing here in America. We short-hand what we are trying to accomplish by remembering the three fundamental pedestals of our Congregation's seal and motto: Truth, Justice, Charity (by the way, two points for examples of older logos or seals still in use in America).

There is another aspect of our history and indeed our Congregation's seal and motto that supports my thesis. Let's look again at the seal:



As you can see, our seal not only displays the three pillars with the Hebrew words for Truth, Justice, and Charity; it also contains the following in a semicircle above the pillars:

וְאֶעֱיֶדֶה לִּי עֵדִים נְאֻמָּנִים - and I will take to Me faithful witnesses to record.

The phrase is from Isaiah 8:2. It bespeaks a testament of faith, a statement of testimony to the truth of the prophecy that follows. Reverend Edinger gave a marvelous lecture on the phrase, as part of our seal, [here](#). For our purposes, the phrase perfectly captures what we are trying to show and tell and teach those open-minded enough to listen. It is a fitting subtitle to our **Year of Hope**.

Our Banner Will Yet Wave. I predicted that my question about the first stanza of our national anthem would trigger a response. We got a great one, from Judge Alvin Hellerstein:

We forget how tenuous was our nation in 1812, physically and as a nascent democracy. England sought to regain its lost 13 colonies, and desisted only because of the demands on its resources by its continuing war with France. Domestically, our experiment in democracy hung by a thread. "That the star-spangled banner doth wave" was inspirational at the time, and remains so. Our democracy remains vulnerable to putative tyrants, domestically and internationally, and each generation, ours included, must guard its fate. The flag remains inspirational.

Our flags flying outside our synagogue are certainly inspirational, and when you come inside, you'll be even more inspired. Check your mailboxes or [go online here](#) for our Winter Bulletin, or pick up a copy at the Synagogue. Once again, you'll be inspired by the beautiful cover photo of our flags and inside, by all of our great cultural and educational programs coming up this winter.

Buck the Trend; Build Community. Our seal and subtitle as well as our national anthem are perfect introductions to a discussion of *The Upswing*, the 2020 book by Robert Putnam and Shaylyn Romney Garrett. Professor Putnam brought us *Bowling Alone* about 20 years ago. *Upswing* tries to trace 120+ years of American history in the areas of economics, politics, social/society, and culture; tries to prove that that period follows an I-we-I inverted curve in each of these areas; and argues that recapturing some of the communitarian ideals of the Progressive Era of the early Twentieth Century may be a way to recapture as well the positive aspects of the "upswing" charted in the early to mid-Twentieth Century in the four areas addressed.

Upswing is not the tour de force of *Bowling Alone*. Still, most of it is well-written and well-reasoned. The exceptions are two weak chapters on race and gender, which imho suffer from the inevitable incompleteness of analysis that arises from discussing race and gender without addressing the effect on social institutions stemming from decades of what we now are told was an unconstitutional imbalance favoring individualism over community in the guise of the Supreme Court decisions in *Bakke* and *Roe v. Wade*, which were reversed by the Supreme Court after the book's publication. Maybe this is a quibble brought to you by a lawyer/hammer seeing everything as a nail. What the book does do is remind us how much a strong community can mean to us all.

Unity in Poetry. Our theme of unity is captured beautifully this week in a stanza of Dr. Susan Vorhand's weekly poem on the Parasha, this one addressing Yaakov's blessings to his twelve sons in Parashat Vayechi:

*Each according to his abilities
His strengths and deficiencies
It is most imperative to remember
That despite differences, they/we must stay together.*

Baba Kama Pages 59-65: Out of the Pit and Into the Fire. Pages studied this week, as part of the worldwide, community-driven Daf Yomi learning cycle, are pages 59-65 of Tractate Baba Kama. In them we finish Chapter 6, which at its conclusion focuses on tort law concerning fire and its legal analogies, and start Chapter 7, which treats the Jewish law distinctions between robbery and theft before addressing yet another communitarian concept of "ribouy" or when majoritarian values outweigh other important principles.

The Talmud's discussion of the thief/robber distinction is interesting. We have learned elsewhere that the Talmud labels a "thief" someone who steals another's property through stealth, concealment, or surreptitiously. The Talmud labels a "robber" someone who steals openly, through force or intimidation. We can comfortably understand that distinction. But then the Talmud, actually the Mishna on 62b, teaches that a thief can be liable for twice the value of the object stolen, but that remedy does not apply to a robber. A robber only has to return the item or pay its value one time. If that's not curious enough, when a thief steals a sheep or a goat and slaughters or sells it, he is liable to pay four times its value, and if the thief steals an ox, the liability is five times rather than four. Again, however, this remedy does not apply to a robber.

I solicit your views on why the thief/robber distinction should carry with it the different liabilities and remedies. *Claude Nadaf*, where are you (two points for guessing the 1960s show I'm mimicking)?

The Irish: Authors and Aphorisms. I have a thought or two on the relationship between the Irish and the Jews – including the affinity between these two peoples in terms of how their respective cultures have been shaped by external events befalling them over the millennia. But that's not for now, since no one has asked me to share my view (hint hint!).

What we were talking about is great Irish authors. We covered Colm Toibin's *The Magician* over the past couple weeks and, as introduced to us last week by SM Rosenberg, Caimh McDonnell's [Welcome To Nowhere](#). I want to give others a chance to read and comment on the McDonnell book. I just read it at SMR's suggestion, thought it was great and borderline-hilarious if you are looking for *A Confederacy of Dunces* in a New York setting and sensibility, with a dollop of Samuel Butler's *Erewhon*. It's short, so give it a read, and weigh in.

Trustee and email mainstay David Sable wants to take us in a different "Irish" direction. David reminds us that some of the greatest aphorisms in English have been brought to you by the Irish

and that the genius of an aphorism is that it “sparks your imagination in a simple way.” David kicks off with Oscar Wilde’s,

Be yourself, everyone else is busy

Wilde as aphorist is nearly incomparable. *Nearly*. Send in other great Irish-writer aphorisms, and ok you can even use other Wilde-isms. Make us all a little happier or a little more thoughtful.

Or Paint a Picture. Alan Zwiebel has been trying to dispel the doom, gloom, and dreariness of the war by painting. Here is his most recent:



Alan feels the painting will give “you comfort if you look at it long enough. A glass of decent Bordeaux might help the process.”

Thank you, Alan. Any other budding or not-yet-discovered painters? Or any wine recommendations, maybe French, Spanish or Israeli?

Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom. *B’yachad* (united together). טוב יהיה טוב *Yihiyeh tov* (things will be good).

Louis Solomon, Parnas