

January 14, 2021

Dear Shearith Israel family,

*When No News Is Good News.* The COVID-19 news this week is relatively unchanged from last week ("relatively" because, as predicted in my email of last week, the more viral B.1.1.7 strain indeed made its way to Queens and Manhattan). Maintaining essentially the status quo is not bad news. At worst it's no news. But imho no news *is* good news right now. As we move away from the year-end holidays and travel, the metrics could start improving. Slowly but slowly, the vaccines are rolling out (kudos to our congregants and those of other synagogues who are helping our elders make appointments, fill out the paperwork, stay on interminable calls, etc.) I start from a low bar: If this year is no worse than last, that will be a mighty good thing.

*You Want Ugly? I'll Give You Ugly!* In commenting on last week's COVID-19 metrics, I didn't want to describe them as "ugly". True, they weren't great, and since they haven't changed much they aren't great now. My reluctance to use "UGLY" was in part due to my hope that, by now, we have all developed a real allergy to overly harsh, extreme, or YELLING! words or phrases. I hope we can all agree it's time to recede to the reasonable sounding, even if we are talking about very unreasonable states of affair. As the Torah taught us in last week's parasha ([see my email of Jan. 7](#)), and long before Marshall McLuhan, the medium is the message.

Aversion to the YELLING of caustic or hysterical overstatements is not the only reason for my reluctance to avoid extreme descriptors of how we are doing in combating COVID-19. The spread, infection, and disease numbers for COVID-19 shouldn't be described as UGLY (but now that I think of it, UGHLY might be ok) because each of the vectors we routinely measure (number or percentage infected, spread frequency, seriousness of disease, serious complications of other diseases, deaths, e.g.) could be much worse. Want some examples?

- This week's parasha, *Vaera*, is all about plagues. Those plagues plagued an entire civilization save the population of Jews living apart. Those were big numbers.
- Then there were the three plagues that beset the Roman Empire, which I wrote about in my email of Oct. 29 when discussing Kyle Harper's *The Fate of Rome*. Each appears to have killed 5-25 million people, orders of magnitude more people as a percentage of the world's population than COVID-19.
- Then came the Black Death in the Fourteenth Century, killing an estimated 75-200 million, which, as a percentage of the world's population, ranks # 1.
- Cholera - literally countless numbers over the centuries, with the most recent serious outbreak, as recently as the end of the Nineteenth Century, killing nearly one million.
- Smallpox, killing millions of people, including 90+% of certain indigenous populations in many countries.
- The Spanish flu of 1918-20, barely 100 years ago, killed upwards of 50 million people and infected 10 times that many worldwide - and exhibited a vicious resurgence in year two of the misnamed plague.

I enumerate these neither to depress us, nor to inspire giddy overconfidence, nor to downplay the dangers of our plague. I do make the simple observation, which I would find it hard to gainsay, that we have to count ourselves as the most fortunate civilization to date facing mass disease. (More generally, if you want a pick-me-up concerning how we are doing compared to the ages, read roughly the first half of Steven Pinker's *Enlightenment Now*.) We don't see how fortunate we are, I know. Indeed, any society sees what is happening to itself as through a glass darkly. Now before you start shooting emails at me complaining that I should not be quoting Paul in Corinthians, or that I should not be quoting Paul in Corinthian's without proper quotation marks and attribution, riddle me this:

What early reference to "through a glass darkly" either pre-dates Paul or certainly gives Corinthians a run for its money? And even if you can't answer that without peeking, at least agree with me that living in this blessed time imposes on us a responsibility to do all we can to be part of the cure, not part of the problem. Mask up, keep your distance, stay smart to how much more time we need before we are back to "normal". Patient, pace thyself.

*Speaking of Cures.* It appears that last week's challenge, answering the question who first said, "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure", may have been *too easy*. Alice Lehrer, Steve Valenstein, Esther Ingber, and others after them answered Benjamin Franklin, with one of them chiding me, in essence, "don't waste my time" (who made *that* famous, by the way, and in what movie). I'm willing to award one prize to be shared by all three of them. The *velt* surely thinks they are right. But are they?

There are two reasons not to give full credit for that answer. First, the quote is *attributed* to Franklin. The actual words come from an "old citizen" in a 1735 edition of The Pennsylvania Gazette, in which the "old citizen" is giving a commentary on fire safety (not health). The words are attributed to Franklin only because he owned or published the periodical. So even if you are going to guess Franklin, whom Steve Valenstein deadpan says, "was one of the founding members of Shearith Israel", I'm just not prepared to hand over the gold so quickly.

There is a second reason. With due respect and apologies to my namesake, there is plenty new under the sun. But maybe not in Department of Aphorisms. About 200 years before Franklin, Erasmus, in Latin, said: "prevention is better than cure". Ok, it's not as lyrical, but, well? Also, looking 300 years before Erasmus, or 500 years before Franklin, brings another entry. Henry de Bracton was a Thirteenth Century jurist. He is known to lawyers who, unlike me, have a classical knowledge of Latin. He's also known by law students and by criminal lawyers (that is, lawyers who practice criminal law), since our common law notions of *mens rea* (the mental state needed for crimes) derive from Bracton's writings. In about 1240, in his work *De Legibus et Consuetudinibus Angliae* ("*On the Laws and*

*Customs of England*"), Bracton said: "It is easier to forestall a disaster than to deal with it". What do you say? Did Franklin ape the adage from Erasmus? Did he appropriate the aphorism from Bracton? Did all three get the thought from an even earlier, cognate source? Did Franklin change it, or improve it, enough to be entitled to top billing? I'm not so sure.

In truth, I did try to make last week's challenge a bit easier. Why? Because you all muffed the Proust quote on being slapped in the face with a wet fish ([Dec. 31](#)). And no one got the great Doctorow quote on why Jews sway when they pray ([Dec. 24](#)). So I tried to boost your confidence with an easier one. But, hey, what gives, people? They can't all be song lyrics. Crack the books!

*Name That Decade!* Congregational friend Gil Deutsch asks whether Shearith Israel has a name for the decade we are currently in. The Roaring Twenties and the Great Depression are taken. Neither seems apt anyway. (Gil's throw away, The Coughing Twenties, is one even he rejects, so we are going to let him submit again.) Write in your suggestions of what the 2020s should be called. BTW, does anyone know *when* the other decades were named - I can't believe they were named at the start of the respective decade? So this should be fun.

Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas