

February 4, 2021

Dear Shearith Israel family,

That Was the Week That Was. Who remembers the catchy theme song from the early 1960s satirical news show by that name? It had a short run, maybe a couple of years, was hosted in the UK and I think the US by the super-conversationalist David Frost, and aired over a decade before Saturday Night Live was even a blip on our television screens.

What kind of a week have we had? The status quo has remained roughly stable, but as usual the average blurs the highs and lows. The snow storm canceled COVID-19 vaccine distribution affecting tens of thousands, **but**, the total stoppage in most places was only for a day. The virus and its variant strains are still packing sick wards in hospitals, **but**, deaths (with all the difficulty in pinpointing cause accurately) and serious sickness are declining in many places. Mask wearing is up, **but** mostly because the number of people who are wearing two is greater than the number of fatigued souls who are removing them altogether. The snow crushed part of our tent on Paved Paradise (sending at least one of us deep into a funk), **but**, through a miracle of engineering and hard work by Ari Sherizen, Barbara Reiss, and our maintenance staff, we will be using the space again by this Shabbat and will be replacing the tent soon (without more fundraising). For every yin, turn turn turn, there is a yang under Heaven. That was the week that was.

Bookending Ineradicable Evil. The week that was is given meaning by our Torah *parshiot* last week and this. We saw last week the triumph of *Parashat Beshallah*. The Israelites finally leave Egypt, experience the miraculous, and exult in song that could not have been sung more beautifully than when Rabbi Rohde (in mask) sang it this past Shabbat. This week we will read *Parashat Yitro*, the majestic retelling of the nation, as one, standing at Mount Sinai and receiving the Ten Commandments, those simple-sentenced, 297 words that forever changed humanity. Between these two *parshiot*, how could we as a people be flying any higher? Yet something isn't quite right. Smack dab in the middle of these epochal

parshiot - literally between them - the Torah seems to intrude the episode of an assault by Amalek (Shemot Ch. 17:8-16). This tribe of warriors attacked the Israelites from behind, preying on the weakest and most vulnerable (see the description in *Debarim*, Ch. 25:18). Were the Israelites being prideful or arrogant, needing to be cut down to size from their euphoria by this implacable enemy? On the contrary, the Israelites had been complaining a lot, which, to hear Rabbi Soloveichik tell it, seems to be our wont. No, I don't think you can so easily explain away the utter incomprehensibility of confronting us with the death and slaughter in the midst of our greatest episodes as a nation. What is this story doing here?

Let me offer a thought. Perhaps what we are being taught is that the middle muddle is here to stay. We will always have Amalek attacking us in some fashion. And most of that we can't do much about. The genius of the Torah, and its gift to humanity, is to show that human agency can partner with the Almighty to create the bookends of joy on each side of the undesired unavoidable middle. Were it not for one human agent, Nahshon, the Israelites would not have leapt into the sea, and it would not have parted. And were it not for the entire nation declaiming *Naaseh V'nishma*, in essence "we accept the Almighty's offer to create a heaven on earth", we would not have received the Torah or the Ten Commandments. It is the bookends that give meaning to the middle. The bookends give us the strength to deal with the middle, which will always be with us.

So too now. I was talking to our dear congregants, Gillian and Simon Salama-Caro, who are worried about the revival of antisemitism in Spain, where they still have many extended family members. I read with sadness the decision of the European Union's highest court, which approved Belgium's prohibition of the ritual slaughter of animals, with the result that Jews living there (again including many of our members' extended families) will only be able to eat kosher meat that they import (with all the extra costs and challenges that option presents to a small Jewish community). We read of educators in California creating an entire school curriculum of world history where the *only* mention of

1948 in Palestine is to the "atrocities" allegedly committed by Israel. We hear of an elected official from Georgia (the State of this Union, not the former Soviet satellite) accusing the Jews in the form of the Rothschild family of shooting lasers to start the California wild fires. These are all middles, and it seems that the hatred or ill-will (or a fundamental lack of understanding) they manifest will never cease to be with us. (If you want to read about even more lethal barbs and tirades, see the quotes about Jews by Erasmus, Luther, Calvin, and many others in Michael Massing's *Fatal Discord: Erasmus, Luther, and the Fight for the Western Mind*.)

Many an antidote has been offered to eradicate the ineradicable middle: unity, disunity, quiet, loudness, love, hate, peace, war. It seems like every imaginable gambit has been tried. Different ones work, better or worse, in different periods. What the Torah may be trying to teach us is that the best we can do is to bookend the bad between good and glorious acts of human greatness. Even if that itself doesn't end middles, we will still feel better knowing that we are partnering with the Divine in the service of humanity. That is the best antidote of all to avoid Graham Greene's "unforgivable sin, despair" (*The Power and the Glory*).

Four shorts:

First, having dispatched the notion that "through a glass darkly" required a citation to Corinthians, I asked about various "door" metaphors, which we were using long before John (see my email of 1.28.21). I had one as early as Proverbs, written by King Solomon. Congregational friend Larry Kobrin, who, with deep thanks, frequently improves my thinking and citations, reminds us of the even-earlier door metaphor in Song of Songs, or *Shir Hashirim*, also written by Solomon (e.g., Ch 5:2 et seq.). (Who has the authoritative cite to *Shir Hashirim* being earlier?) So both glass-darkly and doors are stamped "paid".

Second, in a related vein, a reputable weekly quotes Zeno as the first to say, "We have two ears and one mouth, so we should listen more than we say". Surely we have earlier sources for that metaphor. BIG prizes await the best answer.

Third, I commented on how lonely Broadway looked with so many closed stores and restaurants. Accommodatingly, Congregational friend and two-time BIG prize winner Alan Zwiebel sent in the following painting, by his truly. It's not of Broadway but of West End Avenue. It makes the same point and is certainly worth a thousand words.



Fourth, I got no serious answers to whether anyone knew any Jewish Mulligans. I did get some funny suggestions, including one from Steve Smith, winner of the Name That Decade contest with The Mulligan Years. Steve plays on the phrase "Jewish Mulligan" and offers: "Pesach Sheni is a Jewish Mulligan". Pesah Sheni is

the do-over date occurring a month after Pesah for those who were either impure or too distant from Jerusalem to celebrate Pesah in Nissan. It's a Biblically ordained "mulligan", which (not coincidentally) we are learning about in the daily Talmud study that Jews around the world are learning). So the suggestion is both apt and funny - but certainly no BIG prize and no election to the Two-fer Winners Hall of Fame - yet. Doesn't anyone know any Jewish Mulligans?

Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas