

November 18, 2021

Dear Shearith Israel family,

No, not again. As we head into the weeks of Thanksgiving 2021 and Hanukkah 5782, New York City data show increases in cases of Covid-19 infections. From a low base, the 14-day average rate is up 40%. Your Covid-19 Working Group experts see in the published data evidence that we have hit an inflection point. It may (*may*) presage a Fifth Wave (oh he's not really going to link to that [terrible song](#) and even worse movie, *The Fifth Wave*, is he, which got about the lowest score available on Rotten Tomatoes, 16%). The Covid-19 transmission data and their reasonable interpretation are worrying, especially when you consider the recent reports that vaccine effectiveness decreases over time more significantly than previously hypothesized.

So are we at it again? No, not again. We have been cautious, and we have in place safety measures that continue to work. The overwhelming percentage of our Congregation is multi-vaxxed (and please do send in your updated vax proof with your boosters or on behalf of your newly vaxxed kids to info@shearithisrael.org). We have a lot of space indoors. Our windows function very well, as do our air filters. In part because transmission rates remain in a range where the CDC advises continued mask wearing indoors even for the double-vaxxed, we remain masked during services and optionally masked for the Rabbi's talk and classes. Services last Shabbat were wonderful. Kiddush on *Paved Paradise* was especially nice. More of us were there. It was happy.

So no, we are not announcing any significant changes. The biggest change we would like to see, frankly, is in the attendance department. Many of us are still missing. If you are concerned for your health, then of course stay away and continue to be inspired by our on-line offerings. But if you are concerned that we won't recognize you, or that we won't be thrilled to see you, then you are wrong, dead wrong. Come and join us. Lift your spirits, and ours.

Tripping Through Taanit. At the end of last week, the Daf Yomi cycle began Tractate Taanit (literally "fasts"). Ostensibly, the tractate is about fast days, about when and how Jewish communities declare and carry out fasts for rain. The Tractate is actually about so much more. It is chock full of stories, parables, and tales redolent of deeper meanings. Indeed, the Tractate very early on teaches that "rain" is not merely the water that falls from the sky but is more generally a symbol of the Almighty's beneficence.

Given how often I cite songs from The Doors, you might think that my subtitle here, referring to “tripping”, has a drug-related, psychedelic connotation. Wrong! I’m using the term as Milton did, in his 1645 poem *L’Allegro*:

“Come, and trip it as ye go,
On the light fantastick toe”

The master poet was referring to dancing, nimble and light. I wonder if Milton’s usage is why the phrase in common use in the Twentieth Century, “tripping the light fantastic”, similarly referred to dancing. We all know what made *that* phrase famous – the great 1894 song, *Sidewalks of New York*, with the lyrics

“Boys and girls together, me and Mamie O'Rourke
Tripped the light fantastic
On the sidewalks of New York.”

(Listen to this great if scratchy [1928 recording](#).) And, for the sake of completeness, I should mention Procol Harum’s 1967 *Whiter Shade of Pale*, which begins,

“We skipped the light fandango
Turned cartwheels ‘cross the floor.”

Boy is [that](#) an overplayed song.

Anyway, tripping through Taanit is not just a telling three-lliteration; it accurately describes the many different topics taken up in this week’s Daf Yomi pages. When we begin praying for rain, how we ask for rain in our central Amida prayer, how should we differentiate among different types of rain – these expected topics are all there. But so are discussions of whether one should talk while eating (5b); why it is preferred that one learn with a partner or chavrutah (7a); and that Caesar’s daughter wondered how R’ Yehoshua ben Chananyah could learn Torah since he was *so* ugly. When she said additionally that, well, there were other scholars who were handsome, the Rabbi said (I’m not kidding), yes, but if they were ugly they would have been much *more* learned.

A topic that takes a variety of forms on these pages concerns what sins cause rain to be withheld and what communities can do about it. This is worth a quick detour, since the point is profound. According to the Sages, who prove their positions with citations and logic, the top three causes of drought – actually and metaphorically – are failure to give communal charity; gossip and other verbal acts of “lashon hara”; and arrogant or brazen

behavior. The Sages understood nature and understood the physical world and its effects on weather (indeed, on 9a they discuss the effect of underground water and clouds on rainfall and how salt is removed from sea water). Yet they didn't mention any of physical or natural causes. They mention among the most corrosive of selfish acts *by individuals*. And their point is that behavior, that is, the behavior of individuals, that diminishes other individuals has the effect of diminishing the *community* as a whole, by depriving the community as a whole of rain. To make sure we don't miss the point, the Talmud then turns to the question of the cures to drought. The number one cure, according to the Sages, is *communal* prayer (7b). What they are telling us is that behavior where individual sacrifices are made for the community have the effect of elevating the entire community, not just the individuals acting righteously. The Sages of the Talmud were people of extraordinary insight. If we could only learn but a little of what they were teaching, just a little.

Half-Full Report.

Maintaining Our Eternal Light. Several congregants have noticed that the Ner Tamid adorning our main Sanctuary has been replaced with a smaller light. The change is temporary. Our Sexton and Assistant Hazan Zachary Edinger advises that a chain on our permanent lamp fell two weeks ago. It damaged the bulb counter weight and so needs repair. It is maintenance like this that is needed throughout our entire Synagogue, nearly all the time. It is for projects like this that we need generous communal support – see above – unless you like fasting!

Reimagining Paved Paradise. I didn't really get a lot of great slogans to paper Paved Paradise. Jim Nuzzo likes "Think Fast/Live Slow", but it reminds me too much of the Daniel Kahneman book, *Thinking Fast and Slow*, which as you recall, I didn't love (see my email of Aug. 19, 2021, demonstrating that a thesis of the book was anticipated in the Talmud millennia ago). So we still need some super-slick slogans for Paved Paradise. The contest remains open.

There are, however, two super-interesting things to note:

First, in response to my bad idea that we use Paved Paradise to house at least the statue of Thomas Jefferson that the City Council no longer wants – remember I mentioned that our congregant [Uriah Phillips Levy](#) spent time, energy, and a fortune renovating Jefferson's Monticello home – our own historian-in-residence, Mark Aaron, reported that the "Thomas Jefferson statue in question was actually commissioned by" Commodore

Levy. Maybe this isn't such a bad idea after all. Anyone know anyone on the City Council (does anyone *not* know someone on the City Council?).

Second, after a brief time away, Ruth Lazar has returned with incredible, fresh new ideas for Paved Paradise:





Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas