

December 16, 2021

Dear Shearith Israel family,

Hi Ho, Hi Ho/Let's Stay, No, Let's Go! A rhyme with a musical jingle – what a perfect way to give you the skinny on Covid-19 this week. On most metrics, the numbers are worsening in our area. Your Working Group docs have anecdotes of triple-vaxxed colleagues succumbing to terrible Covid-19 outcomes from breakthrough infections. The deteriorating condition does not even reflect the Omicron variant (see [my last two emails](#)) – what we are seeing is the remnants (we can only hope) of the Delta variant working its way through the population.

At the same time, our state and local governments have weighed in with largely consistent (meaning sometimes inconsistent) regimes. New York's Governor now insists that when indoors we all stay masked, unless we are all– every single one of us– maxi-vaxxed (makes sense) but except for when we are “actively” eating (makes no sense). With such obviously politically driven approaches, we are so fortunate to have our Working Group, who cares not a whit about politics or actually anything else other than the best interests of our congregation and our community. And the Working Group believes that the protections we have in place 1) should continue, and 2) are sufficient to keep us safe. We will continue to mask indoors, and we will continue to enjoy Shabbat Kiddush outdoors. This Shabbat will be particularly special. On Shabbat morning we will be hearing from Lincoln Square Synagogue Rabbi Shaul Robinson, while Rabbi Soloveichik will be speaking at LSS. Rabbi Robinson is one of the dearest and most thoughtful people and Rabbis on the planet. Please come and hear him speak – and enjoy a wonderful Kiddush afterwards.

If we are only for ourselves, who are we (cf. Pirkei Avot 1:14)? Rabbi Haim Sabato compiled a lovely book, *Seeking His Presence* (2016), containing conversations with Rav Aaron Lichtenstein. I'm not sure what possessed me to tackle one of the books Rav Lichtenstein cites in one of his dialogues, *The Essence of Christianity*, by Ludwig Feuerbach (first published in 1841). Maybe it's because the book is reputed to have so heavily influenced later important thinkers, including Marx and Engels, especially their very powerful and damaging views of religion. Maybe it was the fact that the work in print currently was translated from the German by one of our greatest English writers, George Eliot, whose sympathetic portrait of the Jew Daniel Deronda led me to ask, well, how difficult a read could it be. At least the English translation should be great, right?

I will leave to you answering the question, how difficult a read could it be. I will also leave to you answering how great the English actually is when translating from a German that must be tortuously didactic in the original. I instead would like to focus on three places in the book where Feuerbach directly addresses Judaism (indirectly, much of the

work, including the many discussions of miracles, would seem to apply to Judaism as well). I do this so that we have a sense of what is said of us by non-Jews, including heady, influential German-philosophers-who-are-translated-by-George-Eliot. And I worry that in one respect he may have half a point.

In his first discussion, and in part why Rav Lichtenstein cited the book, Feuerbach maintains that the “doctrine of Creation sprang out of Judaism; indeed it is the characteristic, the fundamental doctrine of the Jewish religion”. Feuerbach says the principle on which Creation lies is “not so much the principle of subjectivity as of egoism” (at p. 97). Citing nothing at all, he explains that Jews created the Almighty in their image and indeed that there is no separate existence between the Deity and humankind. To me, this is just wrong as a description of our religion; it’s not even an interesting caricature of Judaism. It’s in fact completely backwards. The Torah has the Almighty creating human beings, not the reverse. And the creator and created are certainly independent.

Feuerbach’s second and related discussion of Judaism is just as weak. Says Feuerbach, “in the origin of religion there is no qualitative or essential distinction whatever between G-d and man” (at p. 159). The author goes on to say that,

“in ancient Judaism, [the Almighty] was a being differing from the human individual in nothing but in duration of existence; in his qualities, his inherent nature, he was entirely similar to man, - had the same passions, the same human, nay, even corporeal qualities”

Here, again, nothing is cited for the proposition. And it seems incomprehensibly wrong as a description of Judaism.

I think the snappy song, [Manchester England](#), from the Rock Opera *Hair*, figured out 54 years ago the error Feuerbach is making. There, our hero, Claude, gets it right when he sings:

Manchester England England
Across the Atlantic Sea
And I'm a genius genius
I believe in God
And I believe that God
Believes in Claude
That's me that's me

Now that's not so complicated, is it? There's me. There's the Almighty. We are not the same, can't really be confused with each other. Let me put it starkly, and unqualifiedly, so that we bury these nonsensical assertions for good: I'm no more Eric Clapton than he is me. (Surely the seven-note riff beginning [Layla](#) is as famous as [The Most Famous opening notes ever](#) – you got a more well-known example? Three marks, since I bet you will fail.)



Feuerbach's third reference, however, deserves more attention. Feuerbach describes Judaism as well as the Jewish conception of the Almighty as primarily if not exclusively interested in Jews:

All of these contradictions of Nature [that's how Feuerbach describes miracles] happen for the welfare of Israel, purely at the command of [the Almighty], who troubles himself about nothing but Israel, who is nothing but the personified selfishness of the Israelitish people, to the exclusion of all other nations, - absolute intolerance, the secret essence of monotheism (at 98-99).

This animadversion is harder to reject, at least without some thought and help. Even Feuerbach recognizes that the Book of Jonah in the Jewish Canon is about the salvation of a *non*-Jewish population. His examples, however, are limited to one, and stop with Nineveh, the city that Jonah preaches against and that the Almighty spares. Now surely we can come up with A BUNCH of other examples where Judaism, and the Almighty, are interested in people beyond ourselves (send 'em in, folks, send 'em in). Now maybe you want to plead guilty and say that, well, Judaism *should be* interested in Jews, first and foremost. But should the Almighty? More importantly, *is* the Almighty interested in

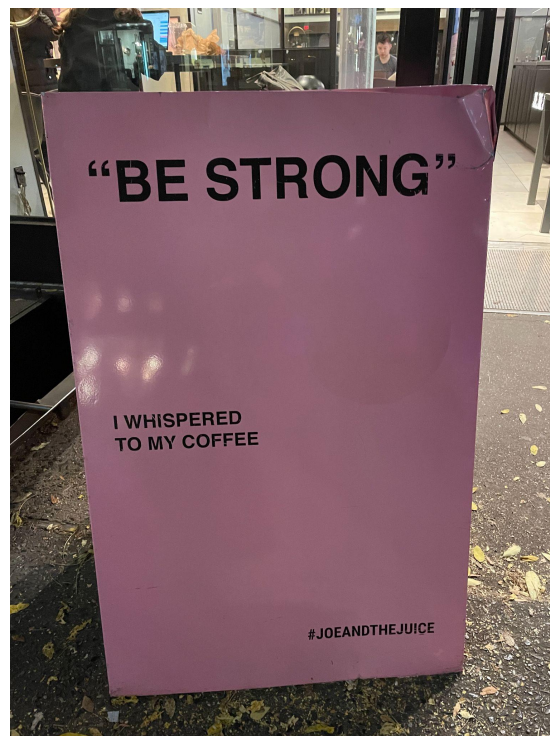
Jews first and foremost? When our greatest Sages and commentators are alone, having let their Hair down, I do not believe the picture Feuerbach paints is admitted. But does history have a point that sometimes, in some circumstances, the Jew-first-and-only boosterism leaks through the image?

Help me think about the best way to articulate Judaism's approach to the universal. What are the best examples from our liturgy, history, halacha, and lore? Even better, what are the best R&R songs for this issue?

Half-Full Report.

A New Paradigm. The voting isn't finally in yet on whether we as a community would benefit from permitting a little variation in safety protocols when we are dealing with "elective" or "consensual" activities. As of now, there does seem to be a strong preference for permitting the fully vaxxed to enjoy a class or seminar without either freezing outside or masking inside. New York City has not yet undone its strong recommendation to mask when inside. And, as noted, the State has thrown its own two cents in. So we have a little time. Please send in your thoughtful comments.

New Challenge. Who can beat the pic below, using a biblical phrase from a sign or photo or picture, from the 'hood or not, and be this funny:



Greek to me, postscript. Thank you to the master commentator, Rabbi Mark Licht, better known to me by the email handle “RavDoc”, for passing on the hilarious juxtaposition of my discussion of Greek letters, used and not used to name Covid-19 variants, and the holiday of Hanukkah:



Liron Kopinsky

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****Israel shuts down its borders to prevent any Greek letters from invading during Chanukkah****

Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas