

November 19, 2020

Dear Shearith Israel family,

Good; Not Good. Rabbi Soloveichik tells the story from the 1990s of British Prime Minister John Major reportedly asking Russian President Boris Yeltsin to describe the Russian economy in one word. Yeltsin obliged, replying "Good." Seeking greater detail, Major then asked Yeltsin to describe it in two words. Yeltsin replied, "Not good". The one-word answer to "how are we doing" has to be "good" - most of us are well, the incidence of COVID-19 in our small square (our four *amot*, as the Talmud describes the personal space around each of us) is relatively low; and reports of a first and now a second possibly effective vaccine on the horizon have buoyed the financial markets and, to some extent, our spirits. What about the two-word answer, focusing more on the here and now? "Not good". The rest of the "velt" is bad and getting worse; NYC public schools just closed; NYC overall may be approaching the Orange level of alert; and our COVID-19 Reentry Working Group is concerned about the levels and direction of disease incidents and other metrics, especially as we head into travel season and holiday celebrations. It has left us all a bit wildered (the stop just before bewildered).

We are not cancelling minyan, but for Shabbat morning we are going to utilize Manhattan Day School's outdoor space. And some minyanim this week did not attract enough people who were comfortable signing up to enable those wanting to say kaddish to have a communal place to pray. It feels like we are waiting for the other shoe to drop - on our toes! It's not surprising that some of us are growing more anxious. People who are concerned about attending services should stay home and enjoy the breathtaking adventure of the Rabbi's Art and Torah series, his beautiful Friday Night Lights, on Thursdays, and the other sessions with Rabbi Rohde and Reverend Edinger that are offered weekly. At the right time we will all be back in our sacred Sanctuary, safely.

The Persistence of Persistence. This week's Parasha (Toledot Yitzhak) provides one of the first episodes in the Torah of a veritable Ground Hog Day. Earlier in the

Torah, Patriarch Abraham had a controversy with Abimelech over Abraham's wife Sarah, followed by another controversy with Abimelech's Philistine subjects over water rights in some wells. All of that was in Parashat Vayera, Genesis Chapters 20:1-18 and 21:25-27. In that story, Sarah is returned unharmed and possibly untouched; peace is achieved in part through the offices of one Phicol (Abimelech's lieutenant), and the wells are dug with ownership agreed. All's well (so to speak). This week, in Parashat Toledot (Ch. 26), Patriarch Isaac has the exact same controversy with the exact same Abimelech, this time over Isaac's wife Rebekah and, you guessed it, has the exact same controversy with Abimelech's Philistine subjects over the exact same water rights and wells. Rebekah is safe, clearly both unharmed *and* untouched. Even Phicol is back again, trying to make peace. To make sure the reader doesn't miss the Torah's point, the text actually says,

"And Isaac dug *again* the wells of water, which they had dug in the days of Abraham his father; for the Philistines had stopped them after the death of Abraham; and he called their names *after the names by which his father had called them* (Ch. 26:18).

What is the world's first Ground Water Day trying to teach us? Wise exegetes have explicated why the Torah narrates these nearly identical stories just a couple weeks apart. For now I want to make two points. First, it's comforting to know that the Ground Hog Day monotonous repetition of monotony that the COVID-19 pandemic has imposed on us has a clear antecedent in our Torah. Put it this way: If Isaac could withstand repetitive fighting that seemingly never ends (and it will be remembered what Isaac was capable of withstanding - the binding and near-sacrifice!), then so can we. Second, the repetition of the story with Isaac has a slightly different denouement. The narrative shows Isaac and his companions digging *three* sets of wells. After the first, the Philistines "strove" with Isaac over them; trouble remained. After the second, they "strove" over those again. It was only after the third set of digging that the neighbors found mutually coexistent peace. Isaac stuck with it - the phrase *The Courage of Persistence* (whence I take my variant title above) is what Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, for whom we are still in

communal mourning, called it in a beautiful essay in his collection titled *Covenant and Conversation*. For people like me, who lack courage, what we are in need of is just persistent persistence to see the pandemic through. Wave one? Done and gone. Wave two. Surely we can make it.

Paving Paradise? Both the one-word *and* the two-word answers to *this* question are "good". The project is moving along beautifully. Here is a pic taken earlier this week:



Yes, it looks like nothing is there. But it took a lot of work to get back to nothing. There was a lot there before, and it was not good. We've cleared away the "stuff" and completed the sitework as well as compaction and grading. This week will also bring laying out the footings and framing them for the pouring of the concrete thereafter. We are on track to have a festive welcoming of our new

space (albeit possibly before the sheltering tent is installed) by the first night of Hanukah, December 10, 2020.

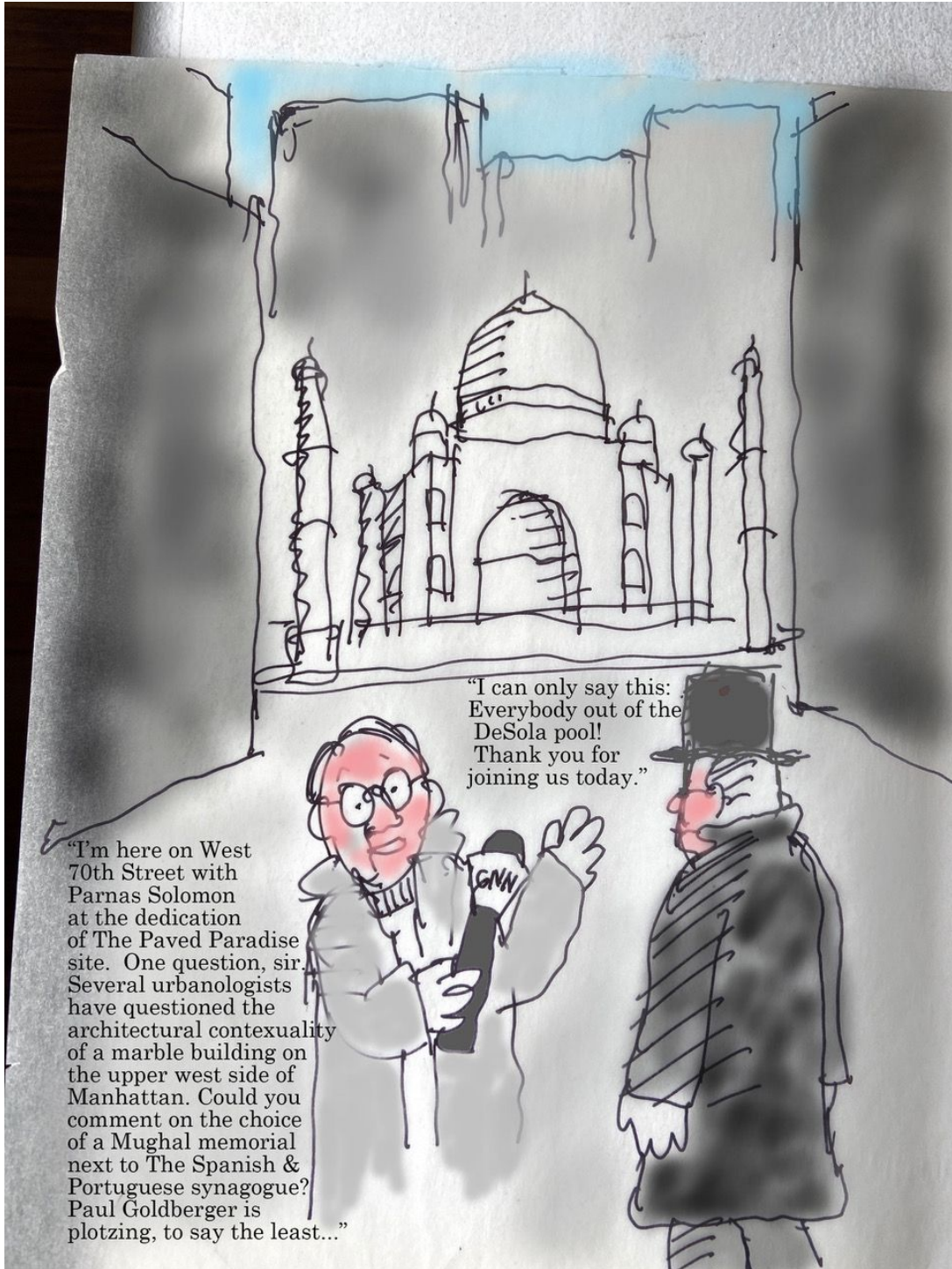
Fundraising is also going well. We have raised more than \$175,000 of the \$250,000 needed. We have had many discourses in our Synagogue about the laudable philanthropy of our Congregation and our congregants - helping during the Irish potato famine, the founding of Mount Sinai Hospital (see my email of June 4, 2020), and innumerable other charitable projects of which we can be justly proud. In his magisterial *The History of Western Philosophy*, the brilliant Bertrand Russell opines that it was the Jews who taught humanity the "virtue of almsgiving" and "practical philanthropy" (at 308). Russell was no intellectual slouch. Judaism needed to earn every ounce of respect he ultimately gave it (his extraordinary 1943 essay calling for the establishment of a Jewish state bears witness to both the difficulty and the importance of that task). For this intellectual giant to describe Judaism as the religion that taught humanity the "virtue of almsgiving" and "practical philanthropy" - what, are you trying to make Bertrand Russell out to be a liar? No? Well then click this [link](#), and give as much as your circumstances permit to Pave Paradise. Please. With just one more real push we can Pave Paradise and thumb our nose at COVID-19's effort to foil our ability communally to pray and learn in relative safety.

Thanksgiving for Thanksgiving. Here at Shearith Israel, it is so natural to read that Isaac called the wells his father dug by the same names his father gave them. We are a Congregation that embraces, indeed cherishes, continuity. We are not ashamed that we are doing things the same way even after many generations. "We're Old Fashioned", as Jerome Kern wrote (in *You Were Never Lovelier*). As a community, we have been publicly celebrating the miracle of America since before George Washington first federally declared Thanksgiving in 1789. We recite special hymns, and in recent years we have been treated to the special brilliance of lectures by our Tenth Minister Since the Revolution.

We intend to celebrate Thanksgiving again this year in as close to the same way as circumstances safely permit. With the help of the Almighty, unless things get worse before then, early on Thanksgiving morning some intrepid souls will be at

the synagogue for a brief, safe, socially distant, masked, tuneless minyan with Torah reading (it being Thursday). But a little later, from 10 to 11 AM, we can all safely enjoy a [Thanksgiving commemoration](#), livestreamed from our Sanctuary through [our Facebook page](#). The program will include the chanting of some psalms and portions of Hallel, Rabbi Soloveichik's annual address, and a short Pack-a-thon presentation featuring our dear Congregational friend, Rabbi Yosie Levine of The Jewish Center, representing our UWS coalition of faith-based institutions including The Jewish Center, West End Collegiate Church, the nearby Church of the Latter Day Saints, and Shearith Israel. For the past many years, these four institutions have together been raising money this time each year to combat hunger and food insecurity. Many of us will be alone this Thanksgiving. But none of us need be lonely. And fewer of us need be hungry. In addition to [supporting the Pack-a-thon](#), if you or anyone you know will need food, please email or call Barbara Reiss, Bonnie Barest, or me. No one whom we can help will go hungry.

Congregational friend and illustrator extraordinaire Alan Zwiebel sent me the following humorous reaction to my pictorial reference to the Taj Mahal in last week's email. Alan thank you - very funny! All funny and diverting comments most welcome.



Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas