

December 10, 2020

Dear Shearith Israel family,

So where is this COVID-19 thing going? I fully appreciate that, were it not for COVID-19, I wouldn't have the profound privilege of writing you these emails. Still, you have to be getting as benumbed at reading about "how COVID-19 is affecting Congregation Shearith Israel" as I am in reporting on it. To be sure, there is great movement on all sides of us right now. This week has brought deteriorating numbers in nearby New Jersey, in other Boroughs, in "other" zip codes. It has brought yet more changes in the way federal, state, *and* New York City officials are approaching the issues. Now, for example, we are being told to focus on "Surge and Flex Operations".

We should express nothing but gratitude for any sincere attempt to contain the contagion. But even with so much turbulence and change all around us, we don't seem to be moving much, in any direction. Maybe that is as it should be. After all, this week has not only brought us "Surge and Flex"; it has also brought us the governmental directive to maintain "stability". At least we are epitomizing that. But can you blame me for being slightly reminded of the Scottish rock & rollers Stealers Wheel 1973 hit, the name of which is the same as the last line of the chorus:

Clowns to the left of me
Jokers to the right
Here I am
Stuck in the middle with you.

Now, we aren't stuck in any middle in terms of experiencing intellectual stimulation. Rabbi Soloveichik's two lectures a week are exhilarating. Rabbi Rohde and Reverend Edinger are the other two pillars making our spiritual tripod immune to wobble. (A three-legged stool can never wobble. Try it.) In terms of our in-person communal activities, however, we are a bit stuck in the middle, not daring to move too significantly to either increase and not seeing any critical need to decrease. We will continue offering both indoor and outdoor prayer options for this Shabbat. At the same time, we will be expanding the social distancing between congregants and strictly limiting the number of congregants in any one service. This past Shabbat we had two back-to-back outdoor services for Shaharit (on the portico, since the weather was not cooperative for other outdoor use). If

we need to add services, thankfully we have the Clergy to lead them. The long awaited “Hanukkat Ha’Paved Paradise” will be via Zoom; in-person services and candle lighting can only, and will be attended by only a small group. Hopefully, we can stay in the middle while we await the vaccines and their necessarily protracted aftermath before we will be back to a semblance of normal.

“*The most famous ‘therefore’ in history*”. Thus spoke Rabbi Dr. J. H. Hertz, in his virtually unequalled commentary on the weekly Parshiot and Haftarot. He was discussing the second verse of the third chapter in the Book of Amos, which is read (were it not Hanukkah) as the haftarah to this week’s Parashat Vayeshev. The second verse has the Almighty stating to Israel:

“You only have I known of all the families of the earth;
Therefore I will visit upon you all your iniquities”

Hertz says:

“The most famous ‘*therefore*’ in history. Israel is the chosen of G-d. Therefore, G-d demands higher, not lower, standards of goodness from Israel, and will punish lapses more severely. The higher the privilege, the graver the responsibility. The greater the opportunity, the more inexcusable the failure to use it.”

How different history would have been had people, Jews and non-Jews alike, understood the concept of chosenness as Hertz explains, which has represented mainline Jewish belief for thousands of years? The infamous *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, based on the idea of a global Jewish conspiracy to promote Jews as the “chosen people”, would have had to find something else to justify its vicious antisemitism. What would the Soviet ambassador Yakov Malik have used, when he told the United Nations after the Yom Kippur War that Judaism was racism because of the Jewish belief in chosenness. Referring to Jews as “Chosen People”, George Bernard Shaw is variously quoted as having said that, if the Nazis would only realize how Jewish their notion of Aryan superiority was, they would drop it immediately.

What a lightning rod the misinterpreted word “chosenness” has been! And what a perversion of the plain meaning of the text! It’s all about the “therefore”. In everything our Congregation has done for 365 years, in everything we can do now and will do in the future, I can think of no clearer test of value than to see how

what we do and what we say and what we feel measures up to Amos's true interpretation of our chosenness, as so plainly, and beautifully, explicated by Rabbi Dr. Hertz.

Hanukkah in Paradise. Our fundraiser to Pave Paradise has ended. Your Board of Trustees, Clergy, and Officers could not be more pleased, and humbled, by the outpouring of generosity from well over 100 congregants and friends. We raised nearly \$280k in a month so that we can have a large, safer space for outdoor prayer and activities. We intend to use the space for loads of purposes, among them our core activities. And, manifesting our "therefore", we intend to offer the space to other appropriate not-for-profit organizations who don't have our good fortune.

Tonight begins Hanukkah, the holiday to commemorate the commitment of our "chosen" people to choose a life yoked by the ceaseless obligations of the Torah rather than one celebrating the freedoms promised by Hellenism. What more fitting tribute to our resilience as a people than that we will be celebrating the first night of Hanukkah with in-person services on our paved paradise, with candle lighting, and in which all of our members and friends can join via zoom. Check synagogue listings for details.

Winning Puns and Other Fun Locutions. Imagine my astonishment, receiving the winning pun to last week's challenge within hours after I opened the contest on December 3. With apparent ease yet unmistakable cleverness, the short aphorism offered by Congregational friend Alan Zwiebel took Cassius's statement to Brutus in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, bundled it up with our efforts to pave the lot, and, commenting on the real reasons for any failures, said, simply:

"The asphalt lies not in the stars but in ourselves."

Category killed. Trophy won (*another* trophy—remember his cartoon spoof on Paved Paradise attached to [my email of November 19?](#)). End of contest three hours after it started (the Herlands didn't enter again—prior winners' prerogative).

There are two other winners, one in the category of lyrical rhyme and one in category of (hilarious) news reporting. Member Joel Schreiber, whose poetic talents have previously been commented on ([see my email of September 17](#) and

featured in our newly released [Winter Bulletin](#)), stole the show in the Lyrical Category with the following limerick:

There once was a Shul with a Lot...
That cooked up an ingenious Plot...
Since no one was wise.
They'd sell "Paradise" ...
And thus cut their Gordian Knot!!!

Screechingly insightful and funny, usually an impossible combination to achieve in a limerick. Yet Joel did it.

Finally, our far-flung correspondent, Honorary Parnas and devoted member to the core Peter Neustadter, filed the following dispatch upon returning home to Israel last week:

Everything here is back to Israeli normal.
Schools are open restaurants are closed but delivering,
government is collapsing
and you can buy a fake negative corona report in the shuk.
Museums and malls are opening so we should have a surge by Hanukkah.
The weather is perfect, the Kinneret is full,
and the Mossad is working overtime
so all is well.

Many thanks to other entrants. To our winners, we all thank you for showing us the upper bound of optimistic, life-affirming cleverness and humor.

Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas