

January 21, 2021

Dear Shearith Israel family,

Still Hanging. The data "out there" continue to confound. Some measures of COVID-19's disease spread are up; some down. We seem to be moving beyond year-end induced upticks. The wild card of the new strain, however, hasn't yet been played. The anecdotes of our Working Group medical experts describe a lot of people getting sick. Vaccines are here, then they aren't, then they're back. Congregant Richard Linhart sends [this helpful link](#) to track vaccine distribution. That's all "out there".

"In here", things feel upbeat. Could it be because, whatever your politics, a milestone national event was most notably marked by expressions of faith and calm, echoing my sentiment of last week to stop the yelling? Minyanim continue to meet indoors and outdoors (where it's, shall we say, airish enough so that, even were Senator Sanders to join our minyan, he might well be advised to keep on those toasty mittens). The abundant menu of classes and lectures from our Clergy continue to be offered via video-conference and dial-ins. For a close analogy to the latter, listen again to Orson Welles' radio broadcast of H.G. Wells' War-of-the-Worlds. The teaching moments continue to inspire hundreds of us several times weekly. In here, we remain vigilant, but blessedly stable. The song of the week, offered by Congregant Faith Fogelman, is Gloria Gaynor's, *I Will Survive*. It's a great choice, thank you.

More Mysteries in Three. Threes keep coming up in the multiverse, so they keep coming up in my emails. I don't just mean the typical "three" of the patriarchs or even the **Rule of Three** in my day job (if you need more than three reasons in trying to persuade a judge or jury on any point, don't bother). Rather, I'm referring to deep threes that are revealed in more profound contexts: **three** acts of kindness that are guaranteed to get all of us through the pandemic (May 4, click [here](#) for this and all of my past leadership updates); **three** words that capture our essence as a Congregation (September 3) and indeed animate our Congregation's motto (October 15); the triumvirate of our Clergy, like a

three-legged stool that will never teeter (December 10). The **three** perils of the Fire Swamp (September 10), akin to what we have overcome as a community, as well as the magical "**threes**" of *Stranger in a Strange Land* (November 12) were further examples of the explicit **Three** Mysteries that I challenged the Congregation to solve (July 9) (only one of which was solved, by the way). This three-stuff is real!

Two events this week require that we revisit The Glory of Three (no, not *that* three; don't be heretical) and rededicate ourselves to spotting and cherishing our fundamental Threedoms. First, in the daily page of Talmud studied tomorrow (*Pesachim* 62b), we learn of Rav Simlai, who came to the great sage R' Yohanan and wanted to learn the secrets of the Book of *Yohasin*. The *Book of Yohasin* is a notoriously challenging collection of Tannaic expositions on the Book of Chronicles. Rav Simlai was willing to devote **three** months to the effort. In refusing to teach him, R' Yohanan explained that the great Bruriah, wife of R' Meir and daughter of R'Hananyah b. Teradyon, "who would learn **three** hundred rulings a day from **three** hundred sages", was not able to master *Yohasin* in **three** years, much less **three** months!

Second, if that litany of Threes isn't enough to persuade you that there is a great deal going on requiring the **third** eye, consider the following. We have hosted many contests throughout our many months together: rhymes, riddles, brain-teasers, and let's not forget t-shirt contests. Many people have won big prizes (really BIG). But there have been **three** people who have won more than once: Trustee and Honorary Parnas Peter Neustadter, Joel Schreiber, and Alan Zwiebel. These **three** are the only ones (so far). Now watch this: Totally unbeknownst to me, these **three**, ostensibly having nothing to do with each other in life or work or even synagogue participation, not only know each other but, hold onto your seats, are connected in the most profound of ways. Alan Zwiebel reports: "Joel S. and I were counselors in [the **three**-word camp], Maple Lake Camp, in the late 50s! And Peter N. was my camper!" Or as Peter tells it, Zwiebel taught Peter to tie his shoes. I've interrogated each of these fine people to make sure they had not collaborated with each other to win (shades of the great game

show scandals right here at Shearith Israel?). I'm confident they have each won on their own bottoms. But if that's true, what can I say but: Holy Moly (a true Joel Schreiberism)! The Mystery of **Three** strikes again!

Some more challenges that no one got right. Two weeks ago, I gave you "ounce of prevention/ pound of cure" because it was easy (with a twist). You all had missed so many previous quizzes that, well, I wanted to boost your confidence. Yet no one got right my challenge to predate or at least contextualize Paul's comment in Corinthian's, "through a glass darkly". The answer is that the Talmud several times speaks of seeing things through darkened glass. See for example Sanhedrin 97b and Yevamot 49b, in each case contrasting seeing something through a clear and darkened glass. Now many parts of the Talmud predate prelate Paul, other parts are contemporary to his writing, and other parts post-date the assumed date of Corinthians. So who copied whom? One answer is that somebody who knows more about this than I do (not a high bar) should weigh in. Another is to speculate that they all come from an earlier-still, cognate source? Was the saying used colloquially in that part of the ancient world? Should that fact or speculation lead us to be extra careful about attributing aphorisms or other quotes to particular figures, especially when different civilizations and religions have different approaches to giving due credit?

My second easy challenge was for the source and movie making famous the line, "don't waste my time". Congregational friend Esther Ingber suggests the rap song by Usher and, I guess, the video in which it appears. That's not what I was thinking of; in fact I couldn't watch the video all the way through, and the song, well, isn't my taste. The right answer, which no one got, is the hilarious scene in *City Slickers*. Barry (one of the Ben & Jerry's characters) is asked the question, what is the perfect ice cream dessert for franks and beans? Sneering with condescension, he answers, "scoop of chocolate, scoop of vanilla; don't waste my time". Penance for this communal lapse is that you all need to watch *City Slickers* again. The unalloyed pick-me-up movie is one of the FDA-approved antidotes to The Gloom of COVID-19. It will give you the will to face your failure in not

remembering the timeless line. Go ahead. Suck it up, take your lumps, and rent it. You will thank me.

And one challenge, naming our decade, that many got even more than right. We will ignore the minor inconvenience that, as I suspected, no one could think of a case where a decade had been named prospectively. We will also ignore how awkward it is that we are celebrating over what to call a decade we are only one year into. I wonder if there is a Committee For The Naming of Decades. Anyway, awkward shmawkward. It's fun and surely a COVID-19 Blues Buster. So here we go, and thank you to everyone who made submissions.

In my opinion, there are four groups of finalists (can you imagine what would have happened had there been **three?**). All winners are from congregational friends:

- Fourth Place Tie: Trading COVID for Kavod (Executive Director Barbara Reiss). The variant, by Alice Lehrer, would read The Decade of COVID and Kavod.
- Third Place: The Fartrumped Era (Alan Zwiebel).
- Second Place Tie: The Zooming Twenties (Esther Ingber), and The Rising Twenties (Trustee and Segan Karen Daar).
- First Place and Grand Prize Winner: The Mulligan Years (Steve Smith)

Even for those of us who, like me, don't play golf, hitting or playing a Mulligan is a known concept. It refers to getting a do-over because your first attempt was so poor. The term is used in other sports as well. *The Mulligan Years* seems a great description of what COVID-19 (and other misadventures) have done to this decade so far *and* to the upward direction we are facing together.

If you think the order of winners should be rearranged, the polls will remain open for you to make your views known. Or, if you truly have a resoundingly better choice, write that in too. The field will be hard to beat; there are no Mulligans in any of the finalists.

Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas