

March 4, 2021

Dear Shearith Israel family,

*The third hand.* "Which way do we go George; which way do we go?" Thus the immortal words of cartoon character George the Fox to Willoughby (or nearly so). So which way do we go? On one hand we are seeing a reduction in restrictions in New York City with more indoor dining and the impending re-opening of movie theatres (tomorrow!) and then of larger entertainment venues. Many other states - even BIG states such as Texas (which, given what it has been through, should know better) - are eliminating even single mask restrictions and most other precautions. On the other hand, it was reported this week that in some regions not far from here the downtrend in disease spread has slowed, it is thought, because of the variant viruses. The CDC is recommending *multiple* masks. It's beginning to feel a lot like, well, the beginning. Then, like the proverbial mule between bales of hay, we (collectively) managed not to be able to decide what to do quickly enough. The disparate approaches led to needless disease spread. Is this déjà vu all over again, to quote one of Yogi Berra's timeless malapropisms?

What are *we* going to do? And who are *we* going to call? Ghostbusters aren't answering. But our Covid-19 Working Group is, and they are our third hand. Among our Working Group members are four physicians. They are seeing Covid-19 every day. They are clinicians and researchers. These are practical and intelligent people (actually I think they are saints, but, well, we don't go in for sainthood). We are going to follow their recommendations, especially when supported by the on-the-ground evidence, sense, and practical wisdom of our other Group members (also Saints they - oops NO SAINTS!). Hence, we are going to continue to observe the maximum degree of protocol while still maintaining our communal programming and worship as best we can. Given the constraints, we *are* doing about all we can communally. On Purim last week, we read megilla seven times (deep thanks to Rabbi Soloveichik, Rabbi Rohde, and the women who read as a *habura* on Friday morning keeping that tradition alive). We beamed out megilla reading to several hundred people. No one confused what we had with pre-Covid communal festivities. Yet as a community we observed the holiday,

some of us seemed actually to enjoy the laser-sharp, if not spare, focus on the essence of the holiday, and there have been no reports of disease spread. The third hand is the hand being dealt by our Working Group, on whom we will continue to place our reliance - hoping in the meantime that the mule, to-ing and fro-ing between one hand and the other - doesn't starve.

*40, of course.* Oh the drama of this week's *Parashat Ki Tissa!* Moses is at most six hours late coming down from Mount Sinai. Aaron, delaying all he can, finally relents. Many Israelites, starving for a physical instantiation of the Divine (breaching the second, not the first, Commandment, according to R. Yehudah Ha Levi), build the Golden Calf. Moses returns, shatters the Tablets containing the Ten Commandments, and cleans house. By the end of the *Parasha* (Ch. 34), Moses is hewing two new Tablets, re-ascends the mountain, stays there for another 40 days and 40 nights, and returns, his face forever thereafter aglow. Moses succeeded in retrieving the Written and Oral Law. The rest, as they say, is history - indeed it is the most significant interface with the Divine in history.

My question is, why was it necessary for Moses to stay on Mount Sinai another 40 days and 40 nights? We know the deep significance of the number 40 in Judaism. In *Sefer Bereshit* (*Parashat Noah*) it rained for 40 days and 40 nights when the flood destroyed the world. And in *Sefer Bamidbar* (Ch. 32:13), the Torah tells us that Israelites wandered "to and fro in the wilderness forty years, until all the generation, . . . was consumed". A kosher mikveh requires 40 *seah* (a liquid measurement) of water (Tractate *Eruvin* 4b). A fetus is considered "water" until 40 days of gestation (Tractate *Yevomot* 69b). In Jewish law, many wrongs beget 40 (minus one) lashes (Tractate *Makkot* 22a). The same number, 40 (minus one), is so important to our Sages that, in enumerating the major categories of forbidden creative activity on Shabbat, there are differing views concerning *which* acts constitute the 40 minus 1, but that number is the limit according to all opinions. The very fact that the Talmud speaks of these as 40 minus 1 is an indication that we are to focus in part on the significance of the 40.

In Jewish thought, it seems that the number 40 often marks a full period *and* a transition from one period to another. At this level, 40 makes sense when

thinking about Moses's second trip up the mountain; the Jewish people and then the world were about to undergo the greatest spiritual transition of all time. Yet, what I don't love about this explanation is that the number, while of signal significance, seems somewhat arbitrary in *this* context. That is, you can fit a human body in 40 *seah* of water in a mikveh, and a human being (not *this* human being) ostensibly can tolerate 40-1 lashes. But with Moses on the Mountain Part 2, the period is no more or less comprehensible than any other. Moses obviously was a very fast learner. He absorbed the entirety of the Written and Oral Law while on the mountain. But since 40 days isn't enough for any mortal to do that, why choose the number 40 to reflect it? Also, and respectfully, the comparisons between the Moses 40 and the other 40s seem a bit, shall we say, demeaning of the miracle of what Moses accomplished? Shouldn't there be a more majestic comparison?

For any who would like another explanation, I offer the following: A main objective of Torah precepts is to teach humanity how to sanctify both time and space. Space and time, or space-time, that endless continuum that is our cosmos. There are countless examples of the sanctification of each of time and space in the Torah and subsequent writings, including Shabbat for time and the Tabernacle, respecting the person and personal property of others for space. The sanctification of time and space is redolent throughout the sacrifices in the Temple. My thought, then, is that the 40 days in our *Parasha* for Trip 2 is a measurement, and sanctification, of time. It is, in fact the epitome of the sanctification of time for humanity. So in choosing the number to represent the epitome of the sanctification of time, the Torah used the number that represents the epitome of the sanctification of space. How does the number 40 do that, in terms of the sanctification of space? My answer is that it appears that, in space, there are (at least now) roughly 40 orders of magnitude between the tiniest sub-atomic particle and the furthest reaches of the universe. Estimates obviously vary a few orders of magnitude in either direction, but we will use 40, as many scientists do. (If you want to see a set of dazzling photos depicting the tiniest to the furthest away, [check this out](#).) In connection with the measurement of space, 40 is not arbitrary. It surely possesses a degree of grandeur and majesty. It is

therefore fitting that it serve as the analogy to what Moses did with time in Round 2. By using a 40-day period, the Torah is teaching us that the gift of the Torah enables the majestic sanctification of both time and space. Thought about like that, a number other than 40 seems unimaginable. 40, of course.

*Paradise by Another Name: Prayground.* The votes are in. They were fairly counted, survived a savage challenge, and were certified. Huge thanks to everyone who voted; even greater gratitude to those who voted and explained. We loved the emails. "Paved Paradise" remains the favorite name for our lot. It is *not* a slavish copying of the Joni Mitchell hit. In fact its genius is that, as our daughter Lia put it, far from doing what Joni Mitchell sings about -- "paving paradise to put up a parking lot" -- we are *actually* doing just the opposite: paving a parking to put up paradise (see [my email of Dec. 3, 2020](#)). The moniker shall forever rank among the great alliterations, at least for yours truly.

However, Congregant Paul Beispiel's fabulous inspiration, "Prayground", captures something so fun, so clever, so positive that it garnered nearly as many votes. It is a deserving co-winner. Last week's email recorded the poetic paean to Prayground by Steve Smith. We did not there record the objection raised by Alan Zwiebel. Alan, his choices having lost fair and square, submitted the following cartoon, with as many shades of hilarity and profundity as there are dimensions in an n-dimensional game of chess:



In the end, call it whatever you want. Well, don't call it late for dinner; and maybe don't [call it Ray](#). But you could even call it Ishmael if you want. And you can certainly call it AI (look at the photo of Central Park pre-Covid-19 when [Paul Simon sang that great song](#)). Whatever you call it, it is there for all of us. And we are going to be using it for a long time. So please visit.

Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas