

April 8, 2021

Dear Shearith Israel family,

*Betwixt and Between.* The Greek philosopher Solon is said to have given the world, "nothing in excess". That apothegm is too obviously anticipated by King Solomon in *Kohelet* (the Book of Ecclesiastes, which Ashkenazim read on Succot), even to be a challenge worthy of our Congregants. But if the *velt* believes the Greeks gave us "nothing in excess", I hope it was Bertrand Russell who gave the world the retort, yes, it was the Greeks who *said* nothing in excess, yet they *did* everything in excess. In terms of our Congregational Covid-19 compliance, we are trying to say and do the same thing. We are trying hard *not* to do *nothing* in excess but also *not* to do *everything* in excess. We remain in the middle, promoting safety above haste, individual and communal health above risk-laden even if desperately needed comradery.

Does that make us like the mule between the two bales of hay, equally poised between each and hence starving for want of being able to choose one direction or the other? (The metaphor is attributed to the Fourteenth Century French philosopher Jean Buridan and is affectionately known as Buridan's Donkey, but it's actually much older - who has a quote from *before* Aristotle? [Now that's a challenge!]). We don't think we are frozen by indecision. We are acting with deliberation. Our numbers for indoor and outdoor service attendance are increasing. And within the next few weeks, we expect to be able to announce some additional modest but meaningful re-entry approaches. Don't consider it starving between bales of hay. Think of it as staying healthfully *svelte*.

*The Gift of Giving.* While we are waiting to see which way the Covid-19 mule falls, we can all be doing three (there's that number again!) things. Each is guaranteed to invigorate and inspire:

- First, Rabbi Soloveichik just began a seven-part lecture series titled "Providence and Politics: Zionism from Herzl to Begin". The first lecture two nights ago, attended virtually by several hundred, was thoroughly original and

extraordinary. If you haven't already registered, I urge you to do so to enjoy the remaining six sessions.

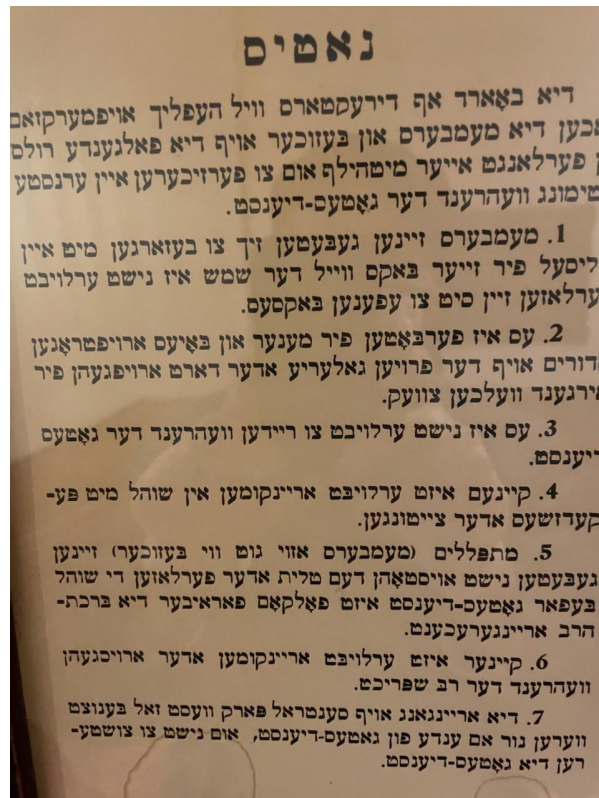
- Second, we have indoor and outdoor minyanim during the week and on Shabbat. Just to witness our Clergy dancing between locations to be in the right place at the right time to accommodate our Shabbat minyanim is a pick-me-up. There are also numerous on-line options each week. Tune in.

- Third, the Rabbi's lecture series is part of our Spring fundraising effort. Some may hesitate at soliciting funds, but as I mentioned Tuesday night at the kick-off to the series, we should rejoice in our ability to sustain this great institution. Those before us carried out their duties so that we could benefit from our synagogue today. By the time I visit you with my next missive we will have finished Tractate *Shekalim*. Like so many other places in the Talmud, the last few pages of the Tractate are full of marvelous stories about the blessings of being able to give charity. I mentioned two related stories Tuesday night. These are from page 15a of the Tractate (may the Almighty, who is not seen but sees, be gracious unto those who are generous in charity). The last full page of the Tractate (22a) also reminds us that, unfortunately, our loss of the Temple has deprived us of many ways to do charity. At the same time, several ways remain, chiefly our obligation to tithe, to give 10% of our revenue to charity. What a blessing that this mitzvah remains with us. It quite literally sustains not just the people and institutions receiving the donations but, just as literally, those blessed to be able to give them. Please, give irresponsibly.

*A Full Half-Full Report.* BIG winners for most of the open pre- and mid-Pesah challenges. On the pre-Pesah questions:

- *Yiddish at Shearith Israel.* What's the *velt, svelte* Yiddish going on above!? I mentioned before Pesah that our venerable Congregation has more to say about Yiddish than might be gleaned from some of our members or even from some recitations of our communal history. The point has particular resonance for Beth and me; one of our children has learned Yiddish and is studying in that language in yeshiva. Another has found a keen interest, and is developing admirable proficiency, in related German. Our third is

considering taking Yiddish in college next year, where the language will be offered apparently for the first time in the 320-year history of the college. Congregant Alan Lubarr won the prize for the FIRST AND BEST example of Yiddish in our Synagogue: A notice just inside our entrance at 2 West 70<sup>th</sup> Street is in Yiddish, English, and Ladino. Take a look at the Yiddish part here:



Now, you might say that that notice might date from the mid-Twentieth Century. It might, though the language structure suggests an earlier born-on date. But Alan also reports that his grandfather, who spoke Yiddish and lived in Hell's Kitchen at the *turn* of the Twentieth Century, was active in helping the Congregation make minyan (some challenges don't die). Let's go back even further: Our oldest set of by-laws, which are attached to our Constitution (and which predates the oldest corporation statutes in the United States in the early 1800s), could have been enacted shortly after our Constitution. The document speaks of those having "Yahr Zeit" (Art. V. Sec. 2), what we at Shearith Israel today refer to as a *nahala*. In one of the definitive histories of this illustrious place, Rabbi Dr. David de Sola Pool

amiably writes that, although we were an early adopter of Sephardic pronunciation of Hebrew,

"the community as a whole early yielded to Ashkenazi tradition in speaking of *ko' sher* instead of *kasher'*, and in calling the anniversary of a death by the German name *Jahrzeit*. They also referred to the *esnoga* by the German term *shool*, the name popularly given to a synagogue because of its use as a *Schule* - school" (An Old Faith in the New World, at 82).

Yahrzeit?! Shule, a/k/a shul?! OMG! I'm thinking that, with Pesah over, some of us deserve a large helping of humble pie.

- *Fermat*. I asked parenthetically before Pesah for the source of the quip that a margin was too small to contain a proof. Michael Gelman came instantly to the rescue. The comment was made by number theoretician Pierre de Fermat, in about 1637, challenging the future to solve a simply stated statement that no three positive integers  $a$ ,  $b$ , and  $c$  satisfy the equation  $a^n + b^n = c^n$  for any integer value of  $n$  greater than 2. The equation looks simple, benign if not downright friendly. This became known as Fermat's Last Theorem, and Fermat said:

"I have discovered a truly marvelous proof of this, which this margin is too narrow to contain."

The proof of this simple, friendly challenge was not made until 1993 (with a final correction in 1994) by mathematician Andrew Wiles. The proof runs to over 120 pages. So Michael Gelman gets that prize.

- *Passing this way or that*. I still don't have an answer to the algorithm that will tell us when we will next finish Tractate *Pesahim* so close to Pesah. I'm disappointed, since it's not that hard. I did get three correct answers to my question of Tanakh references to not passing this way again. Rabbi Mark Licht, Henry Rascoff, and Yosef Solomon each correctly identified Parashat *Shoftim*, in Deuteronomy (17:16), where the Almighty says of a king (but really more generally about retrograde motion in life and between the

generations): "You shall not return that way anymore". Oh, yes, though: one more (Columbo) thing: There is also a later reference to the same point, still in Tanakh, in the homiletic context. Anyone?

As for the Pesah questions, lots of us had fun with our favorite/least favorite songs (though nobody got the *triple* entendre of my use of "son[g]": the "ng" is the way we at Shearith Israel pronounce an ayin [ʎ], or a ngayin). There were too many clever responses to list them all. But to give you a flavor of how imaginative our congregants are, we start with Guy Reiss's Yiddish-like introduction, *Nisht during omer geret* (a takeoff on the Yiddish excuse for talking about whatever you want to on Shabbat, though Guy applies it to talking music during the omer). For the categories:

I. The Wise Son[g]: Brilliant title, tune, lyrics. My entries were *The Room Where It Happened*, from the play Hamilton, or, in the instrumental category, Mason Williams's *Classical Gas*. My favorites from others are Gil Deutsch's *Vincent*, by Don Maclean, and Alan Zwiebel, punster extraordinaire, who offers "Let the sons shine in" from the enduring 1970s musical Hair.

II. The Wicked Son[g]: Bad title, bad tune, bad lyrics, just overrated in every dimension. I took heat for lumping Leonard Cohen with Madonna. It is surprising how many truly bad songs there are, though I think that in some cases our view from hindsight derives from changing attitudes. My top choices of others' responses are Faith Fogelman's 1966 *Little Girl*, by Syndicate of Sound (which she rightly calls "hauntingly bad"); and Guy Reiss's 4'33 by John Cage.

III. The Simple Son[g]: Good title, good or better music, nothing lyrics. Here I didn't see any clear winners. Again there seem to be surfeit of songs with bad lyrics or a bad title or a bad melody. Let's leave this one as undecided; *Tayku*. It will be answered when The Prophet Elijah comes to answer our questions.

IV. The Son[g] that doesn't know enough to ask: Only one of title, tune, or lyrics worthy of being redeemed. Again I took legitimate heat about my comment about *Girl From Ipanema*. Gil Deutsch has another winner in my view for this category when he says, ipse dixit: "any song with the word Hello in title". 'Nuf said.

Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas