

June 17, 2021

Dear Shearith Israel family,

Brief Pause? There is much encouraging Covid-19 news of late in our geographic region. Governor Cuomo for example announced this week that COVID-19 restrictions were being lifted, as 70 percent of New Yorkers aged 18 or older have received the first dose of the vaccine. Still, we also read this week that vaccination numbers are regrettably stalling. Given that disease spread numbers have also not continued to show substantial improvement, there remains a concern that one of more of the new variants is filtering through our population. As your Working Group has long said, the delays between exposure and disease onset, coupled with the delays in reporting, make for a situation where caution is nearly always the best strategy.

Fortunately, the protocols we have in place are meet for the task. We will continue to observe them for all minyanim this Shabbat. The Working Group will also continue to monitor, assess, consider, and report. There are good reasons to hope that, so long as we continue to be mindful of growing differences in treatment between the vaccinated and not-yet-vaccinated, we will be able to achieve the goals for Tisha B'Ab that we announced in my email last week: that, by Tisha B'Ab, we will be relaxing many of the protocols for indoor services as we have for outdoor services, barring an unwelcome surge in disease numbers and subject to the good judgment of our Working Group. We are also hopeful that we will have Tisha B'Ab services, in-person and by Zoom for our far-away friends, much more familiar to our Congregants and guests for both the evening and morning of this important day.

Heifers and Halfers. There is so much to talk about in this week's *Parashat Hukat*. I find the most arresting the initial verses describing the ritual of the Red Heifer. Modernity (at least this little speck of modernity) seems to have lost the sense of how important to the daily life of our remote ancestors was the *physical* attempts to avoid or correct *ritual* impurity. The Talmud spends many, not just pages, but whole Tractates on the subject of ritual purification. Some testament

to its importance, and to me a continuing wonder, is that, when visiting the very oldest places where Jews once lived, from Israel to Europe to Iberia and so many other places, what we see are the remnants of an abundance of *mikvaot*, or the ritual baths that were evidently so important to the Jews of that time and so prevalent.

During the centuries it was in use, the rituals performed with the ashes of the Red Heifer were integral to the ritual purification process. (Tradition teaches that there have been only nine Red Heifers in all of Jewish history. The tenth is being saved for the Messianic Era.) To us today, the Red Heifer rituals seem not only obscure but positively mystifying, since they not only included the "normal" set of incomprehensible purification rites but one additional one: As a result of the ritual, those who were impure became pure - but the very process rendered *impure* those involved in administering the ritual. The reasons underlying the Red Heifer ceremony have baffled our greatest thinkers. It is said that King Solomon, the wisest of people, could not unravel its mysteries. Even in the time of the Talmud a thousand years later there are vivid discussions of the fact that we do not know its full meaning.

In his magisterial commentary on the Torah, Rabbi Joseph Hertz, at the beginning of *Parashat Hukat*, beautifully summarizes a story told about the Red Heifer in days of the Talmud. The story involved a Roman officer asserting to Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai that the Red Heifer ceremony was nothing but incomprehensible black magic. The great sage disagreed, patiently explaining that, just as Roman rites sometimes involved the exorcism of evil spirits from the physical body, so too did the Red Heifer ceremony cleanse the Jewish body of evil spirits. Satisfied, the Roman officer went on his way. At that point, however, the students of Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai said to him, you have warded off the officer's attack with a twig; what is the real answer? The Rabbi said: By your life, know that the dead body does not defile and the waters of the Heifer do not purify. Rather it is a Decree from the Almighty that is to be followed, period.

It is fundamental to my understanding of our faith that there are things in the ritual world that we cannot, and will not, comprehend. I have mentioned this in passing before (see [my email of 7.9.20](#)). My point doesn't seem controversial. At the same time, I hope it is equally fundamental to our faith that matters of physical reality *are* capable of being understood. More, we should take it as our holy obligation to do all we can to understand the workings of the world, to master and control it, and to employ our mastery to achieve goals of improvement of the world itself. Sure, there are aspects of spiritual reality that we do not and will not comprehend. But for the rest of reality we need to do all we can to comprehend it. Confounding the two realms of existence, the ritual and the physical, doesn't clarify either - in fact it makes each less comprehensible. Instead of a heifer to you get a halfer.

I believe this is normative orthodox Jewish dogma, and I respectfully ask that anyone who disagrees come forward with citations and proof. If I'm right, however, then I think two interesting observations follow. First, in the recent *Return of the God Hypothesis*, by best-selling author of *Darwin's Doubt*, Dr. Stephen Meyer tries to show that advances in science essentially lead to the *proven* conclusion that the Almighty has designed the universe and is in active and continuous connection to our observed universe. This thesis feels the need to take faith out of the equation of life. My own view is that his proofs fail, but more to our point here they confound the two realms of reality. When, in the name of trying to cram the Almighty back into science, you remove from religion the sacred, the other, the truly ineffable, I fear that it leads both to poor religion and poor science. It's a halfer.

Second, by the same token, it also makes little sense to try to *preclude* G-d's existence because of those same advances in science. This seems like an elementary category mistake in the opposite direction from the one Meyers makes. It too is a halfer. I am not saying that we should leave G-d to rule in Heaven, while the laws of physics, chemistry, and biology rule on earth. I am saying that to have the spiritual subservient to the physical is as mistaken as

having the physical subservient to the spiritual. Leaving each to its own domain leaves room for growth, development, and understanding in both with less interference and confusion. (Actually, though a little off point, if you want to read a recent, unadulterated summary of scientific advances in biology, especially as they relate to aging, see Dr. Andrew Steele's *Ageless*. It's terrific.)

Let me take this one step further, depressing as it is. So far this year in 2021, as many people around the globe have died from Covid-19-attributed diseases as died in similarly attributed Covid-19 diseases in all of 2020. Of course, the pandemic wasn't officially declared until the Spring of 2020, and so 2020 wasn't a full year of disease spread at its worst. Still, one would have hoped that humanity learned so much in 2020 - it did - that we would be using that knowledge more effectively in 2021. This is not to criticize. We are witnessing truly Herculean, unprecedented efforts by the scientific community and by governments to face down the scourge of the Covid-19 pandemic. At the same time, and without trying to get into a debate over the limits of faith, doesn't it seem like our response in 2021 to Covid-19 should not be limited to throwing our hands up and praying to the Almighty? Covid-19 is a known unknown, something that human beings need to and can take responsibility for. It may be that the Almighty has designs for us. We hope so. But in the meantime, our job is adamantly *not* to say, as Phil Ochs sang, "there but for fortune may go you or I". (What [a deeply affecting folk song](#).) Covid-19 is not a heifer situation. It's not a halfer situation. It's one we can and must help wrestle under control, here, there, and everywhere.

Half-Full Report. Two items this week:

First, we are set to launch our Movie Night in Paved Paradise series next week, on June 23. We will be featuring *The Princess Bride* but before the feature film, in lieu of previews, Rabbi Soloveichik and yours truly will face off in a Princess Bride trivia contest. We've already raised \$500. Send in your shekels. Also, we are considering permitting walk ons for one or two who want to show up and compete. This will be fun. [Come](#). Thank you to Andrew Klaber for inspiring and MCing.

Second, I haven't gotten many photo entries in our Picturing Paradise contest. I do offer one entry, below, which is fitting. Zoom in. Can you spot the animal? Be the first to get the right answer for a small prize.



Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas