

August 12, 2021

Dear Shearith Israel family,

Standing Our Ground II. The last time I thought of this phrase I quoted the great song of roughly that title by Tom Petty ([see my email of 3.11.21](#)). Since then our Congregation has been treated to a viewing of *The Princess Bride* on Paved Paradise. I had forgotten that Yellin, the Chief Enforcer of Florin, gave that same command to the 60 soldiers guarding the castle gate (“stand your ground men, stand your ground”), just as all of them were scattering, leaving Yellin alone with the keys (“Fezzik, tear his arms off” then follows). I revisit the metaphor since it captures where we are in terms of our Covid-19 precautions.

The NYC disease spread numbers have worsened again this past week. True, they are heavily weighted to the unvaccinated, and, blessedly, the vast majority of our Congregation is vaccinated. We will continue to count our blessings in being able to utilize our outdoor space for services and other activities. Even there, however, the CDC has said: “If you are in an outdoor crowded setting or participating in activities with close contact with others who are not fully vaccinated, wear a mask, particularly in areas with high numbers of cases.” Congregational friend Professor Ronnie Perelis has beautifully said that our approach to Covid-19 precautions tries to strike a “rationally cautious but life-embracing balance.” We will continue to stand our ground to try to achieve just that balance.

King? Tut! This week’s *parasha, Shoftim*, has a lot of great verses about systems of justice, offering wonderful insights to any lawyer. The *parasha* also speaks about appointing a king, which I have less connection to notwithstanding my last name. The Torah says:

“When you come to the land . . . and you say, ‘I will set a king over myself, like all the nations around me,’ you shall set a king over you” (*Debarim* 17:14-15).

There exists a vast commentary pointing out the ambivalent nature of this commandment. I at least can’t think of any other mitzvah like it. First, the command is conditional on the Jewish people wanting a sovereign. Can you think of many commands that turn on our wants? Second, the Torah says that the Jews will want a king “like all the nations around” – which is hardly a commendable, positive justification, certainly not for a Nation that is not supposed to act like those “other nations.”

So we start with ambivalence. The Torah then goes on to lay prohibitions on a king that the Jews do choose, *e.g.*, not too many wives, not too many horses. Here, too, we observe an anomaly. The Talmud points this out. Along with the proscriptions on too many wives and too many horses comes what appears to be an explanation in the Torah itself of the *reasons* for the prohibitory statements. We are forever looking for rationales of the commandments; who wouldn’t want them. The Talmud’s insight into why the Torah gives so few rationales is profound. On page 21b of Tractate *Sanhedrin*, the Talmud states:

“And Rabbi Yitzhak says: For what reason were the rationales of Torah commandments not revealed? It was because the rationales of two verses were revealed, and the greatest in the world, King Solomon, failed in those matters. It is written with regard to a king: “He shall not add many wives for himself, that his heart should not turn away” (Deuteronomy 17:17). Solomon said: I will add many, but I will not turn away, as he thought that it is permitted to have many wives if one is otherwise meticulous not to stray. And later, it is written: “For it came to pass, when Solomon was old, that his wives turned away his heart after other gods” (I Kings 11:4). “And it is also written: “Only he shall not accumulate many horses for himself nor return the people to Egypt for the sake of accumulating horses” (Deuteronomy 17:16), and Solomon said: I will accumulate many, but I will not return. And it is written: “And a chariot came up and went out of Egypt for six hundred shekels of silver” (I Kings 10:29), teaching that not only did Solomon violate the Torah, but he also failed in applying the rationale given for its commandments. This demonstrates the wisdom in the Torah’s usual silence as to the rationale for its mitzvot, as individuals will not mistakenly rely on their own wisdom to reason that the mitzvot are inapplicable in some circumstances.” (Sefaria website)

Our Congregation has exhibited its own ambivalence towards royalty. The story, well known in our history, is worth a brief diversion. Before Torah reading on Shabbat, we recite a prayer for the government. True, virtually every synagogue does that. But I challenge you to find many others that *sit* during that prayer. Why do we sit? We sit because our communal prayer for our leaders is older than the Republic. Indeed, we have the text of the prayer we said for King George, a prayer that referenced “King George the Second, His Royal Highness, George Prince of Wales, the Princess Dowager of Wales, the Duke, the Princess, and all the Royal Family”, among other personages. See J. Sarna, *Jewish Prayers for the United States Government: A Study in the Liturgy of Politics and Politics of Liturgy*, found in *Liturgy in the Life of the Synagogue* (Ruth Langer, Steven Fine eds. 2005), p. 208 (my thanks to Reverend Edinger for sending me this article). We have it on good authority that our Congregation stood for the prayer for the King. And then, well, we tired of paying fealty to a King, one thing led to another, we had a revolution, and after that we as a Congregation said we aren’t standing for any ruler of flesh and blood again, only for the Almighty (*id.* at 210). And to this day we proudly sit. We are thus in the long and great tradition of royalty ambivalents.

The Sounds of Summer’s End: Elulzman. As we approach the end of Summer, what sounds of summer engage us? Especially this week, some of us think about Fat Man and Little Boy, that is, the sounds of nuclear explosions and fall-out. I hope not many of us think too much about that. Some of us may think about the early 2000s compilation of way too much of *The Very Best of the Beach Boys*, which was titled *Sounds of Summer*. And some of us may think of the crack of a baseball bat, as we enjoy following our favorite baseball team. Indeed, if you follow the Mets, you can enjoy following them as they slide into third (place that is, not base).

Here at Shearith Israel, we have our own sounds of summer’s end. Earlier this week we observed *Rosh Hodesh Elul*. In its own way, the season of *Elul*, or *Elulzman*, can be as deeply

affecting as the High Holidays beginning four weeks hence. It's much the same as the Talmud's instruction that the preparation for a holiday should be treated as significantly as the holiday itself. It's meaningful in the same way as the detailed preparation for Shabbat enhances the experience of Shabbat itself.

Our Congregation's customs during this period are a blend of rituals that many other congregations observe and some (fairly) uniquely our own. Beginning this past Monday night, we began reciting *Selihot*. We recite *Selihot* every weekday evening until a couple nights before Rosh HaShana. The prayers are brief, and stirring. They begin (and middle and end) with the theme of repentance, using a haunting melody chanting the Hebrew of:

"Come, let us return to the Lord; for though it is the Lord who has wounded, it is the Lord who will heal us. Though it is the Lord who has smitten, it is the Lord who will bind our wounds."

We then chant responsively bite-sized versions of the much longer penitential prayers we say on Kippur and on the Days of Repentance leading up to it. The concentrated dose packs a wallop. We then, each weeknight, blow the shofar – a single set of *tekiah*, *shebarim terurah*, *tekiah*. Each night, this small dose puts us in the "mood and mode" of the season (as Reverend Edinger eloquently said in his terrific, 10-minute ["Call to Worship" video](#) on these customs). Rabbi Soloveichik has also begun a multi-part lecture series. Finally, in beginning to ready ourselves for the introspection necessary this time of year, each of us is encouraged as well to dig as deep as our respective financial circumstances will permit and give to charity. These are the Sounds of Summer's end at Shearith Israel. They are beautiful, poignant, and deeply moving if we allow them to be.

Half-Full Report.

First, I obviously asked too easy a question when wanting to know about "cock-eyed optimist." Just to name the first six winners, kudos to Susan Buckler, Faith Fogelman, Jay Harwitt, Jim Nuzzo, Carla Schein, and David Vorchheimer for guessing *South Pacific*. But as several of the winners pointed out, two points were too many for such an easy question. I am therefore requesting one point back from each of the winners. Thank you in advance. Also, I'm still waiting for answers to a bunch of other, harder questions, like who first described "strapless *tefillin* for evening wear."

Second, Ruth Lazar again takes the cake for the most original suggestion this week for what to do with Paved Paradise. What a climb!



Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas