

August 5, 2021

Dear Shearith Israel family,

"The war has changed." The quotation, from the CDC, is about as good a way as any to describe why we cannot submit to self-pitying, sulking, and suffering in the face of recent, troubling Covid-19 disease spread numbers. I am not a cock-eyed optimist (show and song for two points, please). Still, I can't help thinking that we have such a better handle on the current spikes in variant spreads than last year. (It seems like just yesterday that we were at Delta; now we are worrying about Lambda – did I nap through e, f, g, h, and i?). Only 17 months ago virtually all of us were clueless and scared. Now at least we know what strategies are best calculated to keep us safe (in case you need it spelled out, the strategies do *not* include partying with abandon in Provincetown, Cape Cod). To continue the metaphor, we won the last war -- with deeply sad casualties not to be forgotten. If we have a new war, we will win this one, too. If it takes getting back behind our cloth and synthetic mask-bunkers, then we will do it. Our kids are taking the biggest hit in their lives. Yet talk to them; they are flowing with the go and making the best of it.

Our plans for the High Holidays remain firmly fluid. We are planning on worshipping together. We will bob and weave and avoid being tackled or crushed. But if we have to pray outside we will. And if we have to mask we will. We will do whatever it takes to offer safe communal prayer for every member who wishes. It is such a special time of year. Let's observe it together. Sign up now so that we have a sense of how many of us there will be.

Chosen, for This!? This week's *parasha*, *Re'eh*, begins with among the most powerful words in Scripture, at least for me:

"Behold, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse" (*Debarim* 11:26).

We twist our post-modern selves into never-ending, complicating knots. Yet this opening verse, part of Moses's second of three monumental Discourses in *Debarim*, shakes us into a different reality: It's not so complicated. We can choose, but how we choose matters to our own lives, to the lives of our families, friends, and communities, and to the continued vitality of the Jewish People. So make good choices. The rest, as they say, is commentary.

It is at the beginning of *Debarim* Chapter 14 in this *parasha* that my deepest attention is drawn. We are instructed not to mourn our dead by cutting ourselves or by other disfigurements. That seems understandable. We are then told that we shouldn't do that, "For thou art a holy people unto the Lord thy G-d" – that seems ok, too – "and the Lord hath chosen thee to be His own treasure out of all peoples that are upon the face of the earth". It is that last phrase, introducing the concept of chosenness, that seems to embarrass some of us. It shouldn't. I adverted to this topic earlier when the Torah mentioned the chosenness of the Jewish People (see [my email of Dec. 10, 2020](#)). Here, the Torah makes the point of chosenness pellucidly clear.

But so is the answer to the question, chosenness for what? All you have to do is read the exact topics that the Torah speaks about immediately after the “chosenness” verse. Each one of them is an obligation, a burden, a task. And the obligation, burden, and task is imposed *on* the Jewish People. First we are put on a restricted diet – we can’t eat what other peoples can eat (14:2-21, discussing the laws of *kashrut*). Then we are instructed to tithe all manner of things that come into our hands; to turn produce into money to spend it in what became Jerusalem to help the economy; to support the Levite “and the stranger, and the fatherless, and the widow” (14:22-29). The burdens do not stop there. Chapter 15 continues with obligations to release debts and says, simply, that in following this path “there will be no needy among you, for the Lord will surely bless you in the land the Lord, your God, is giving you for an inheritance to possess” (15:1-4).

Chosenness for what? For carrying a glorious moral burden of the world on our shoulders, for teaching the world charity, decency towards all people, tolerance. That’s what the Good Book says Jews were chosen for.

In the history of the world, this point has not been well explained. And in part because of that Jews have borne the brunt of oppression. This week’s daily Talmud study, which includes Tractate Sukkah page 29a, says it all:

It is taught in a *baraita* that **Rabbi Meir says: When the heavenly lights**, i.e., the sun and the moon, **are eclipsed, it is a bad omen for the enemies of the Jewish people** [this is a euphemism for the Jewish people], **because they are experienced in their beatings**. Based on past experience, they assume that any calamity that afflicts the world is directed at them. The Talmud suggests **a parable: This is similar to a teacher who comes to the school with a strap in his hand. Who worries? The child who is accustomed to be beaten each and every day is the one who worries**.

Even in the face of these omens and enemies and beatings, we, the Chosen Obligees, can and will continue to teach the world Godliness.

Half-Full Report. There is much fun stuff to report on this week (with one serious item):

True heroism. Gabe Goldstein rightly reminds us that, with the Jewish month of *Elul* approaching, and with the High Holidays following, our Congregation’s “Caring Connection” Committee has just arranged for blood and platelet donations for a congregant in need. This is true heroism; Gabe is right. As a community we need to do more and more and more of this.

The Beatles – The Final List. Jonathan Wagner, former trial adversary, great litigator, and friend, forwarded [a list](#) of every single Beatles song ranked from worst to best with a short commentary. Apparently the list was compiled by Bill Wyman and published in *Vulture*. We can agree with the rankings (I *told* you weeks ago that *Day in the Life* was at or near the top). We

can disagree, too. But what tenacity, talent, and courage to put the list together and actually offer reasons for the rankings. (Kudos to our own Faith Fogelman, who also had the courage to offer *Something* as among the best Beatles songs. Gabriella Styler offers *Came in Through the Bathroom Window*, which is curious to me since I would have put it near the top of the Worst List – but *à chacun son goût*). Agree or not, we now have The Definitive List. So I’m going to give you one last chance to weigh in – and in meantime enjoy the list forwarded by Jonathan, with our thanks.

I do need to “thank” Steve Smith (who famously coined *The Mulligan Years* – see [my email of palindromic 1.21.21](#)). Steve agreed with my own self-assessment of lunacy in thinking we could agree on the best Beatles song. Instead Steve suggested that we look for the “happiest” Beatles song, and he proposes *They Say It’s Your Birthday*. I don’t know that trying to identify “happiest” is any wiser a course than trying to find “best”. But since August is Beth’s birthday month, I’m game to ask for suggestions of happiest, which we can all sing to Beth at the end of the month!

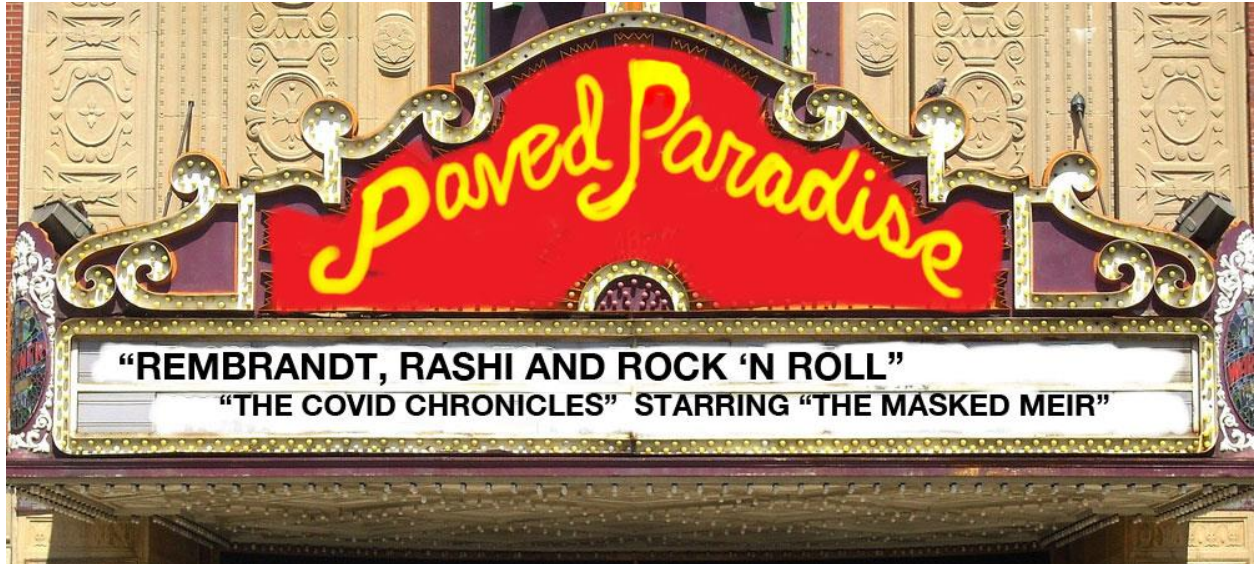
The Worst of the Beatles. There were a bunch of entrants, some hilarious. Thank you to Ben Dattner, who, borrowing from Jane Austen’s famous first line of *Pride and Prejudice*, wrote that he thought it was a “truth universally recognized that *Mr. Moonlight* is the worst Beatles song of all time”. Now that we have The Definitive List, we know that that someone else places the song at 153 of 213. Other keen proposals came from Bill Schulder (WARNING: Bill is scary smart on All Things Beatles), who offers *Wild Honey Pie*, *Flying* (which, Professor Bill says, is “their only instrumental”), and *Revolution 9* (“but is this really a ‘song’?”).

Bloomsday Then and Now. Of course Bloomsday is June 16. It was way too easy a question. Nonetheless, the Judges will still honor the conferring of gold medals on Jessica Amelar, Michael Gelman (one of our Covid-19 Working Group doctors), Jim Nuzzo (from Boston – welcome any time in our Synagogue), and Arthur Tenenholtz (whose own birthday is the day after – shhhh).

Picturing Paved Paradise. Ruth Lazar helpfully suggested a bridge on PP. One of her entries is terrific:



Then came Alan Zwiebel, who captures Paved Paradise in all its glory and has now surpassed Simone Biles in medals, his for best-in-class drawing, painting, cartooning, making us all smile in a time of dire need for smiles:



Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas