

December 2, 2021

Dear Shearith Israel family,

*Greek to Me.* The highbrows and internationalists have long listed The WHO as The World Health Organization. The song-loving *velt* knows better; The Who is one of the greatest R&R bands ever, formed under the brilliance of Pete Townshend (I know you're thinking [Pinball Wizard](#) from the Rock Opera *Tommy*; in fact you should be thinking of the less sung, or more unsung, but just as great, [The Kids Are Alright](#) (just listen to the song; the video's daft)).

The WHO, it seems, has an obsession for Greek letters to name mean, nasty, ugly Covid-19 variants (I assume you too ran home on Thanksgiving to listen to Arlo Guthrie sing *Alice's Restaurant*, the song that made "mean, nasty, ugly" nearly as timeless as the Hobbs *Leviathan* description of the life of human beings as "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short"). So we are up to "o", the 15<sup>th</sup> letter in the Greek alphabet (the WHO skipped "xi" – no need to offend China's Chairman). And "o" isn't just "o" or even "oh" in Greek. It's "Omicron." So this week's Covid-19 scare has been labeled the Omicron variant. Insufficient data exist to predict how ravaging Omicron will be; the early data suggest that it's more contagious than even highly-contagious Delta and able to morph so vanishingly fast that, if we are lucky, it will morph itself *out* of existence as fast as it seems to be invading South Africa and many other countries.

Omicron is not our only Covid-19 challenge just now. The uptick pre-Thanksgiving is expected to worsen given Thanksgiving get-togethers and travel. Still, I have to say I'm deeply gratified, and thankful, that with the help of our Covid-19 Working Group we have remained steady and vigilant in our precautions for in-person services, classes, and lectures -- so much so that, unlike communities that rushed forward and are now having to rush back, we do not have to make radical changes to protocol in the face of these new risks. We will continue to hold services in-doors, where we will be masked, a little chilly (the combination of the well-functioning filters and the large opened (gorgeous Tiffany) windows). (If you want to see a useful and understandable notice about the importance of indoor masking, [see here](#).) We will continue to practice social distancing. In the main, we will continue the precautions we have had in place. They have been sufficient but have not squelched our return to a semblance of normalcy. It is all we can hope for now.

*Kipling Kubed.* [My email of Aug. 26, 2021](#) paid homage to Kipling's *Just So Stories*. There are few if any places in the Talmud more stuffed with just so stories of our own

than the Third Chapter of Tractate *Taanit* (18b-26a), which is now being learned in the Daf Yomi cycle. The Chapter is known as the *Piskey Chasidut*, or Passages (or Parables) of the Righteous. The stories are not the least bit sappy or sodden. The Chapter is replete with great *aggadic* tales of morals, morales, and meanings.

The stories in *Taanit* Chapter Three can be sorted into three types:

*First*, there are stories of the great and righteous doing great and righteous things. In these pages, for example, we meet Honi the Miracleworker (actual translation, Honi the Circlemaker). We met Honi (or a relative of the same name) in an earlier Tractate for his Rip-Van-Winkle sleeping abilities (see [my email of July 15, 2021](#)) – a story that is retold on Taanit 23b. Here (19a, in the Mishna) we see Honi exhibiting chutzpah of Biblical proportions, telling the Almighty that he, Honi, would not leave a self-drawn circle until desperately needed rain began to fall – and then complaining that it was coming down too little, then too much, and then just right. Also here (19b) we learn about Nakdimon, who bargained with a wealthy well owner that he would repay 12 wells-full of water with silver if it didn't rain by a set date, and when the last moment arrived but it still had not rained, Nakdimon prayed, the rains came, and, for good measure, time not only stood still but reversed so that it was still daylight when the rain arrived, avoiding the Jewish community getting, er, soaked.

Second, there are also stories of the great and righteous doing ungreat and unrighteous things and teaching us lessons drawn from their return or repentance. So for example we learn here (20b) about great Sage R' Eliezer bar R' Shimon refusing to greet a man because he was so unsightly in appearance. When R' Eliezer asked if all the people of his city were as ugly as he was, the man replied, "I do not know, but go and tell the Craftsman Who made me how ugly is the vessel that you made". R' Eliezer immediately understood his sin and asked and finally was given pardon after retelling his sin to an entire city and begging the man for forgiveness. Somewhat related to this category of story are those retelling how our truly great Sages attained and maintained their greatness and longevity – all teach that it was because of highly concrete deeds of charity and loving-kindness towards other people (e.g., 20b, 21a).

*Third*, these pages feature another type of story – that of small and unsung Jews being slated for eternal afterlife. Their rewards were not conferred for the greatness of their fortunes or their learning or erudition but, exclusively, for acts

of lovingkindness that again are inspirations to the rest of us. So we learn (22a) about three people, one who at the expense of his own outward religious appearance made a jailhouse safe for those (particularly women) in it; and two others, who were jesters or comedians and who dedicated their lives to making people smile or to brokering peace to those feuding with each other.

Despite the diversity of settings, there are two motifs that carry through all the stories (ok, that's a challenge – prove me wrong). First, in not one of the stories is arrogance rewarded. Honi may have sounded chutzpadik, but in fact his prayer had nothing to do with himself and everything to do with saving other people. And, second, in not one does the protagonist try to justify selfish behavior. The power of repentance – which we lack in our cancel culture age (see [my email of Oct. 21, 2021](#)) – is set up as the only realistic path for virtually all of us. We are all sinners not saints – ok, most of us. And most of us strive to improve both ourselves and the world. We need these stories to show us the possibility of redemption arising from a self-aware, thoughtful, disciplined modification of our own hurtful behavior. We are a story-telling people; witness the Torah *parshiot* we are reading these weeks. We need to read and reread the stories in *Piskey Hasidut*, to ourselves and to others, and we need to learn how to live as these characters, great and small, teach us.

*Half-Full Report.* Clearly, we should rename this part of the email “overflowing with good stuff” report this week:

- Thanksgiving was a blessing. Many of us attended services with our additions of parts of Hallel, keeping alive a special Shearith Israel tradition begun in 1789 (the year of the first Thanksgiving Day). After the Rabbi's fun talk (on triskaidekaphobia and triskaidekaphilia – oh just go look them up) we had our annual Pack-a-Thon packing thousands of food packages for the underfed and hungry of New York. We raised over \$18,000, and this year we schlepped and packed on Paved Paradise, under the super-helpful direction of MASBIA and with our faithful partners from the Jewish Center, West End (Collegiate) Church, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.
- And it's Hanukkah. Many of us remember 2013, when Thanksgiving coincided with the first day of Hanukkah, a quite rare occurrence (maybe twice a century until the Twenty-Second Century, when, afterwards, it will not happen for, well, basically an eternity (two marks for anyone who can explain why)). Hanukkah as early as November 28 is also rare – and it's a blessing on top of a blessing to be able to celebrate the holiday by lighting our Synagogue's oil

Hanukkah each night. It is reputed to be the oldest in use in North America (anyone have an older citing anywhere in the world?).

· And we have more slogans for Paved Paradise. We now have entries from among prior slogan winners and from the best correspondents an email inveterate can have (yet where are the Zwiebels of yesteryear?), Aura Bijou, Faith Fogelman, and Steven Smith (and, well, I added a few, too):

- If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together. (It's an African proverb apparently.)
- Alone we can lead/Together succeed
- Paved Paradise: Where Heaven Meets the Ground.
- Live Slow
- Think fast/live slow
- Life's a Beach
- Be a part/Not apart.
- Take my hand, don't be a stranger in paradise (in a great wordplay of the title of the timeless song from [Kismet](#))

· And we have a slew, a literal bevy, of nine palindromic dates in a row: 12121, 12221, 12321, 12421, 12521, 12621, 12721, 12821, 12921! Two marks for when (if ever) we will have 10 in row.

· And we have a lovely photo of a no-harm-done-to-turkeys Thanksgiving feast (thank you Barbara Reiss) and a hilarious photo of Black Friday (thank you to Ruth Lazar, who also has a great collection of Albert Einstein sayings, all fitting for our Eastern Wall):



Thank you all. Bless us all. Hanukkah Alegre. Hodesh Tov. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas