

April 28, 2022

Dear Shearith Israel family,

*Take Arms Against a Sea of Troubles.* Shakespeare's Hamlet uttered those words in his immortal "to be, or not to be" soliloquy. Since then, the phrase has been associated with the contemplation of death. Harold Bloom's marvelous book on poetry used this title as well, with the subtitle: *The Power of the Reader's Mind Over a Universe of Death.* The phrase by itself, *take arms against a sea of troubles*, however, need not refer to so ultimate an ending. I want to press it into service to describe what we need to be doing right now in the face of the current phase of Covid-19, as we continue to return to as much normalcy as prudence will permit.

All around us certain disease spread numbers are worsening. I refer principally to infection and positivity rates, not hospitalizations or deaths. As a nation we are passing the one million death mark, and we have all read as much to say that that grim milestone is an overstatement as it is an understatement. In terms of the rate of infections and serious resulting illnesses, the data for those vaccinated and boosted are starting to resemble what one sees during a bad but not horrendous flu season (I knowingly set aside the risks associated with Long Covid).

Until Covid-19, most of us didn't follow these kinds of statistics. Daily reference and consideration of disease spread data were the preserve of infectious disease doctors and epidemiologists. And since the rest of us don't have a lot of experience or context, we frankly don't know how to deal with them. It's for that reason that our Congregation is so fortunate to have our Covid-19 Working Group. For in that group are physicians and scientists together with others with the experience to weigh and weight the various conflicting pieces of information and make sound, if not perfect, judgments. The result of their regular meetings is that, as I've complimented them before, we do not have to lurch in one direction or another but can act with greater calm and deliberateness. We react swiftly when circumstances demand. We don't, and shouldn't, otherwise.

We are now flying on planes where few passengers are wearing masks (how effective the masks on planes were before, when they were removed for eating, don't ask). The recommendations we are daily receiving are at best confusing. Our comedian-in-residence, Alan Zwiebel announced:

Confused by all of the conflicting advice coming from Washington, I will wear my mask at least until sefirat ha'omer ends.

This seems as sensible an idiosyncratic rule as any on the personal level. For our Congregation, however, we will continue the status quo for services – vaccinated worshippers only, mask-only and mask-optional sections to suit most all preferences, spread-seating(ish), quiet air scrubbers galore. We will maintain a watching brief (two points for the origin of that phrase). With the warmer weather coming (right?), we will be having Kiddush and possibly some services outside on Paved Paradise. It's so nice out there. You really need to come and enjoy it.

In short, we have and will continue to take up arms against a sea of troubles. But in the recent past we have not had to discharge those arms often. Hopefully we won't.

*How the Mighty Are Fallen.* During the Daf Yomi cycle this week, we end the fourth and begin the fifth Chapter in Tractate Yevamot. It is here, on page 49b, that we encounter a story involving the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah is one of our prophets of hope. We read his haftarah verses during each of the seven weeks of comfort between Tisha B'Ab and Rosh Hashana. Can anyone tell me whether we take more weekly haftarot from any prophet other than Isaiah? Without serious debate, we can say that Isaiah is surely one of our great prophets.

The story on page 49b, however, is most peculiar. The text picks up the story with an explanation of the phrase that “King Manasseh killed Isaiah.” Manasseh got it into his head that Isaiah was prophesizing in ways inconsistent with the Torah.

Sensing that nothing he could do would dissuade Manasseh, Isaiah decided to pray and was swallowed by a cedar tree. Manasseh killed Isaiah by taking the tree and sawing into it up to the point where Isaiah's mouth was. It was at that point that Isaiah died. The Talmud then explains:

מְשׁוּם דְאָמַר: וּבְתוֹךְ עִם טְמֵא שְׂפָתַיִם אָנֹכִי יוֹשֵׁב

[Isaiah died specifically] due to that which he said: “In the midst of a people of unclean lips, I dwell” (Isaiah 6:5).

The explanation given is that Isaiah was punished, with death, for denigrating the Jewish people.

So now my two questions. First, don't we look to our prophets to inveigh against our collective faults? Isn't that their job? Is what Isaiah did so very different from what other of our prophets did? Indeed, the prophet Jeremiah railed against Jewish bad conduct so frequently that a word was coined to describe it – a “jeremiad”. No similar fate befell Jeremiah. Second, why such a harsh punishment for Isaiah?

Answering the first question, as important as it is to “tell it like it is”, there is another principle, often expressed in the Talmud, that collective attacks on the Jewish people is not appropriate, certainly not unless couched in delicate remonstrance. Isaiah was not gentle in this particular remonstrance. He did not rebuke with tenderness or by indirection. Are we being taught that the softer, gentler way is the preferred way?

Answering the second question, and in gratitude to our son Yosef for pointing this out, we need look no further than this week's Torah *Parashat Achrei Mot* to see that those high and mighty within Judaism are held to very strict standards of conduct. Two sons of Aaron, at least one interpretation goes, strayed from the right path and were punished with the severest punishment of death because of the exalted position they held among the Jewish people. I now understand why we have been reading the same portions of *Achrei Mot* for 3-4 weeks now, since during Shabbat we have been reading special readings for Pesah, therefore have not fully read *Achrei Mot*, and as a result have not moved on to the next parasha. The reason evidently is that the Torah wanted to wait for the Daf Yomi cycle to get to the story of Isaiah and his death in a tree so that we would read that in the same week as we read *Achrei Mot*. Both stories teach the same lesson.

Now, for all you prophets out there who fear that your inherent greatness will bring on super-strict punishment for *relatively* unserious behavior, our religion also contains a sometimes antidote to this draconian punishment schema: humility. This point was made evident in the talk Rabbi Rohde gave to bat

mitzvah Schuyler Levin, daughter of our members Yuliya and Igor Levin, this past Shabbat. Rabbi Rohde was encouraging Schuyler to start creating her own life's narrative rather than just being "in" the narratives of others. His own personal narrative, Rabbi Rohde said, was intertwined with that of our illustrious Congregation and indirectly with the Jewish People and, as such, he felt a part of something bigger than himself. His life attained deeper meaning that way, he beautifully said. The intertwining of the flawed and finite with the bigger, indeed with the infinite, seems to be the quality lacking in two of the sons of Aaron in the parasha and similarly lacking in the one sentence of less-sensitive admonition by Isaiah. We can all learn from Rabbi Rhode's abiding humility. (We can also learn from Schuyler's own talk about love, which has been entered in the international competition for shortest talks with deepest impact.)

*Yom HaShoah.* Kindly see [my email of 2.3.22](#). I cannot bear to write more, or ask you to read more, on this saddest of days.

*Half-Full Report.*

*Metaphor Moments and Aphorisms Aplenty.* I'm still waiting for more quotes from the Talmud of great metaphors, aphorisms, idioms, and other sayings. That corpus is a vast and deep, actually limitless, source of profound insights passing as funny or folksy sayings. Share the ones you know; enlighten everyone.

On our other new contest, to remind us of funny or poignant idioms responsive to three suggested topics, we seem to have stumped many. Many, but not the very best. Michael Schulder is a relative newbie, you might even say a rookie, to our contests. Yet he has risen meteorically in the point standing, surpassing even his brother Billy who knows R&R and the Beatles like no one else. Michael was unafraid of the three categories in the contest and offers the following idioms:

- The renewal of Spring:
  - "When young men's hearts turn to love (young persons'?)"  
[LMS note: I think the reason I didn't love this entry is because I used this same line of poetry in [my email of 3/25/21](#) – the line is from Tennyson's *Locksley Hall*: "In the Spring a young

man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love.” The Judge’s overruled me and have awarded Michael two points anyway. I think that’s a travesty of justice and urge Michael to return these ill-gotten gains.]

- Hearing the same joke one time too many:
  - “The first time I heard that, I laughed so hard I fell off my pet dinosaur” [Here Michael is tone perfect – two points]
- The reaction we have to the sanctimony of, say, a reformed smoker:
  - “He's more Catholic than the Pope.” [And here he is, well, plu-perfect, two inflation adjusted points]

Who else wants to step up and try? Where are not just the “Snowdens of yesteryear”, but our past winners, including the Beispels, the Bijous, the Deutsches, the Fogelmans, the Reiss’s, the Ravdocs, the Sables, the Savenors, the Tillys, the Zwiebels – to name only a few – of yesteryear? (Another two points, not for the poem with that phrase but for one of the funniest books ever written that used it brilliantly. Oh come on! Are you kidding? You don’t know it?)

*Fallen Icons?* Did you see that Paul Simon took the title of his marvelous 1972 song, [\*Mother and Child Reunion\*](#), from a menu naming a dish at a Chinese restaurant? Did you see that the “mournful” day that he sings about in the song was due to his mourning the death of a dog?

Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom. And without sounding rote, we pray that the violence we are witnessing will end soon.

Louis Solomon, Parnas