

"LIVE LONG AND PROSPER"

PARASHAT NASO

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SLIGHTLY MODIFIED FROM REMARKS DELIVERED
DURING "ZOOM" SERVICES
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One aspect of being together and at home, with all members of our family, during this extended pandemic period, has been an argument over what we choose to see. We are in one place, but fight over a remote. I mean the device which controls the TV.

The basic argument pits those who want to watch something new, series or movies we have not yet seen, against those who find comfort in reruns, endlessly revisiting what we have watched many times before.

[As an unrelated side comment on behalf of new material, by the way, I highly recommend the Korean show *Crash Landing on You*. It is, perhaps, the best television series I have seen in, well, maybe, years.]

One of the "chosen" features on the other side of the equation, however, has been Star Trek, in almost all of its iterations (if that is the right word for the different series and movies.) And, recently, we rewatched the first movie in the recently rebooted alternate time line – and in it a scene I will return to in a moment.

Depending on where you live and who you are, there is a bit of a *machloket*, an argument over Jewish practice, regarding exactly what the Torah portion should be this week. The Jewish holiday of Shavuot began last night. And, as you know, for Conservative and Orthodox Jews in the Diaspora, Shavuot is observed for two days. Thus tonight, this Erev Shabbat, marks the beginning of the second day of the holiday, and the portion and liturgy reflect choices dedicated and devoted to the Festival.

But for Jews in Israel, and for Reform Jews around the world, we observe only one day of Shavuot. And, therefore, this is the beginning of a regular Shabbat. In Israel, all Jews simply go on to the next week's portion – and are one week ahead of the Diaspora in Scriptural readings for around a month. (We re-synchronize later on through a doubled portion in Israel read separately here, which I can describe in detail for anyone interested some other time.)

But what are Reform Jews to do? It is time for the next portion. But we do not want to be totally out of sync with our neighboring synagogues for too long. Imagine a community on the mainland, with multiple congregations. Take where Hank and Penny used to live, right in between my Reform synagogue and a Conservative congregation down the block.

So, what, you're going to hear one portion at one synagogue, leave in the middle, show up at another shul, and think you have gone back in time to the previous week? Madness! Chaos and confusion! The communal fabric of the universe would come undone!

So, generally, Reform congregations outside Israel will read the next Torah portion this Shabbat – *Naso*, the second portion in the book of Numbers... and then repeat the portion all over again, next week, thus being quickly back in Biblical harmony with neighboring synagogues.

It is, then, *Parashat Naso* which I wish to turn at the moment. It contains, most famously, the Priestly Blessing... words uttered by parents over their children every Friday night – you know, from *Fiddler on the Roof*, one alternative version: "May the Lord protect and defend you..."

These are also words recited, at Festival services such as we had this morning, by the descendants of those ancient priests. In a dramatic act known in Yiddish as *dukhanen* (because the word *dukhan* means "platform"), in traditional congregations during Festivals and the High Holy Days, the *kohanim* come forwards to the bimah, cover their heads with their tallitot, raise both hands in a two-split fashion which represents the Hebrew letter shin, for Shadai (one of the earliest names of God), and bless the congregation with these words.



And it was, in the mid-1960's, that when an actor playing a particular alien on a risky new science fiction show was asked to come up with some sort of blessing given by his species... he reached into his moderately Orthodox past growing up in North Boston, raised his right hand, and produced a secularized version of the ancient Hebrew prayer. It was, indeed, a spontaneous contribution by the actor playing Spock, to put into the world's lexicon of familiar phrases the words "live long and prosper."



My [favorite scene](#) from the relatively recent reboot, then, is when, through the quirks of time travel, an elderly Spock, played by Leonard Nimoy, meets his much younger self, played by Zachary Quinto. At first, seeing an elderly retreating Vulcan from the back, Quint

You know, until a few days ago, I planned on relating this phrase, based on portion this week, but without the three-fold invocation of God's name at the center, to the Coronavirus pandemic. To concern for our lives, and our livelihood. But, now, something else intrudes, urgent and stark.

I open my upcoming column in the June bulletin by asking a question. For those of us on island, do you remember, in the Fall of 2017, after Irma and Maria, after months without power, a cash only economy, no access to the internet, cell towers down, worries about water, shortages of generator fuel... do you remember the first time we had a conversation about something... *other than* the hurricanes and their impact? What a relief that was!

I have been yearning for that same thing now – to talk about, to see something on the news besides COVID-19.

Well, be careful what you wish for. Because with what we have now, I almost wish we were back to the virus.

"Live long and prosper." Not, perhaps, so easy, if you are African American. Especially if you are young, and male, and black. Minneapolis – but not for the first time. Central Park, again. Louisville. So many, so many. Not just the actions of the cops, but even the threat to call the cops... those Coopers in Central Park may have shared a last name, but they have little else in common in their lives or how they see the world.

And she may have apologized –but saying out loud that you would call the police to report that an African American male is threatening you, and actually doing so... that was no moment of "oh, I didn't realize" after-the-fact revelation. She knew exactly and precisely what she was doing when she weaponized her words. Amy Cooper was putting Christian Cooper's life in very real danger.

African Americans don't even have to be out and about to be threatening, apparently. Not even out for a jog! There was the student at Yale, asleep in the lounge of her own dorm – her own home! – who had the police called on her by a fellow student, a white student, suspicious and afraid because the one woman did not recognize the other. Or, two months ago, an EMT, unarmed and in her own home, fatally shot multiple times, murdered by police looking for a suspect who was apparently already in custody at the time of their raid.

Yitgadal Tamir Rice
V'yitkadash Travyon Martin
Sh'mei Rabbah Eric Garner
B'almah Di V'ra Chirutei V'yamlich Malchutai.
Michael Brown
B'chayeichon Freddie Gray
U'v'yomeichon Aiyana Jones
U'v'chayai Meagan Hockaday
D'chol Beit Yisrael.
B'agalah u'viz'man Kariv. Ahmaud Arbery.
Breonna Taylor. George Floyd.
And too, too many more!
V'im'ru: Amen.

The other day I completed the second of the three shifts delivering meals to those in need, on behalf of My Brother's Workshop. I am glad that we are doing this! The volunteer coordinator, by the way, told me that our synagogue's effort has *doubled* the number of people they have available to make deliveries during this four-week period. (And we still do need a few more folks for the final weeks – my thanks to Suzi Gribinich, who immediately said yes when I asked her to help organize folks on our end...and I will give her a chance to unmute and share a bit more about what is needed during announcements in a few moments.)

I was grateful for the chance to be helpful. And I was horrified at the same time. First, I felt terrible about three meals to one place I never delivered, to a family I simply could not find. Standardization of addresses on the island cannot come quickly enough! At one point I was in 143A Anna's Retreat, trying to find 143... and the folks in 143A could not or would not tell me how to get there.

But I was able to find all the other families I was sent to help. And almost everyone was gracious, grateful, appreciative.

And the conditions they live in – and look at me, posting pictures of the creative concoctions all of our kids are coming up with in our kitchen, so blessed and I don't even remember it – the conditions of those I was delivering fairly small meals to was appalling. I knew, intellectually, that this level of need existed here, but making these deliveries really brought that home.

And every single family I delivered meals to was black. No surprise, on an island which is 80% African-American, or African-Caribbean. But a powerful point, still. *Especially so now*, as we watch an old evil play out before our eyes again on the news. Poverty, vulnerability, marginalization, and other-ing. It is all, truly, tied together. Eyes and hands and heart and mind, it will take it all, to make a change.

We race for a cure. But we also need a cure for race. Or, to put the matter a bit more precisely, a cure for racism.

The virus, it seems to me, is a disease which attacks the heart, and the body, and it comes from outside. But we suffer from another dis-ease, one of heart and the soul, which comes from inside.

I opened tonight with the tension between reruns and that which is new. We are facing, now, an ancient illness, and a novel one, all at the same time. With regret we realize there is not, yet, a single shot, an instant cure, a magic wand for either one. And as we know from other and older settings, even an ancient foe we think we have subdued comes back in new forms. The inoculation we need is for every strain, and every season. Against microbes and racism alike.

"Live long and prosper." Health and Wealth. Quantity and quality of life. It will take God's grace, a vision of values, determination, the grace of God, hard work, and time.

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