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What Did You Do in The Covid Pandemic, Grandpa?

Many of you will remember the slapstick movie, *What Did You Do in The War, Daddy* in which American soldiers were ordered to capture a small town in Sicily during World War II. Remarkably, the townsfolk had no problem being occupied by the disorganized American troops—they just wanted to ensure that their annual festival would go on as planned. Wine flowed freely, leading to lots of confusion on the part of Allied and Axis forces. After a night of heavy drinking, the severely hungover Italian and American forces mustered together to clean themselves up and make things look like a real battle had ensued.

Certainly, nothing else can compare with the WWII era that consumed the lives of over 20m people and leveled significant parts of Europe and Asia.

Now we have been faced with the Covid challenge and the hoops so many of us have had to jump through since the outbreak of the pandemic could easily lead to another movie: *What Did You Do in The Covid Pandemic, Grandpa?* I am certain that each of us has one or more amusing or frightening adventures we could relate to one another. So many of us had to deal with hand sanitizers and wipes, bumping elbows in place of handshakes, stepping off the curb to avoid being breathed upon by passing strangers. So let me share how I handled the very real threat that we continue to experience.

When things began to unravel in March of 2020, I had just been released from a nine-day hospital stay—that’s another story that I will not bore you with. But what was interesting, is that by the time I was released, the UCSF ER was packed with Covid victims who were being placed in halls because there were no more beds.

My philosophy of “if you can’t fix it, feature it” kicked in. I organized my garden and workbench tools, something I had never gotten around to in 30 years. But I still had a lot of time on my hands. I am not a television watcher, but people began recommending several series. I binge watched *A Place to Call Home*, a 60 + episode series out of Australia, multiple seasons of *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisels*, *Schtissel*, *Unorthodox*, *Money Heist*,—a far-fetched Spanish series about robbing the Spanish Mint, and *Servant of the People*,—a 2014 rather contrived series starring President Volodymyr Zelensky as a high school teacher in Ukraine who becomes President. He is a standout but the plot and other characters are dopey. My guess is that everyone here has a favorite that he might not have ordinarily watched—let’s make up a list for those of us who are looking for movies and or series. [After the paper, members provided the following suggestions: *The Queen’s Gambit*, *The Untamed*, *French Village* and *Borgen*.]

As a humorous aside, after 3 vaccinations, I needed to get an antibody test to see if I had Covid protection. My internist put the blood lab order in and had blood drawn at UCSF—it came back negative. I called my go-to medical expert and he said that what I received was a general antibody test that does not detect Covid antibodies. I called my internist’s office and said that what I need is the Spike Covid Antibody Test. The order was faxed over to the blood lab and again—negative results. When I looked at the order after the fact, I had been given the same test as the first time. I restrained myself from being a bit huffy with the internist’s assistant and said, “I want the COVID SPIKE PROTEIN ANTIBODY TEST.

She said, “I’ve never heard of that, but eventually she found the right order and again faxed it over to the UCSF Blood Lab.

The phlebotomist looked at the order and said, “I don’t know what this is. I’ve never drawn blood for this test before.” He disappeared and reappeared with the correct color test tube, drew the blood, and then said, “we don’t process this test here, we have to send it out”. Finally, finally, three days later the results came back—positive.

On another occasion I might have been exposed to someone with Covid and spent the next 5 days in our guest room with trays of food left by the door. I did not have access to any of the projects I was working on, so . . . I painted our deck.

Early on I began to collect all the myths, fairytales, quips, metaphors, allegories, pithy quotes, jokes, puns, poems, and accounts of personal adventures that I used in sermons, lectures, and articles over the past 50 years. This anthology for speakers, clergy, MCs is now close to 700 pages and is in the copy-editing stage.

While I was collecting the material, I also wrote and had published an article on the internment of conscription-age Japanese young men who refused to enlist in the US Army because of the way they and their families were being treated, I also published a poem and a short story, and I gave a workshop at Temple Emanu-El for Yom Kippur Day. Tonight, I want to share some of my published creative efforts with you. For example, the premise for my Yom Kippur is that this is a solemn occasion, but by then people had had enough solemnity. I began by noting a brief six-minute interview with a September 4, 2021 National Public Radio, Weekend Edition. Journalist Debbie Elliot interviewed Jonathan Foret, employed by the local Wetlands Discovery Center in Houma Louisiana, a coastal town of about 30,000 where most people make their living on Gulf of Mexico in oil fields or fishing for shrimp. Hurricane Ida’s winds ripped Houma to shreds—power poles leaning precariously over roads, twisted power lines littered the sidewalks, the downtown destroyed, and glass storefronts blown out. Most people lost everything. Foret soberly remarked, “We work to educate our kids on how to bounce back from things like this and protect themselves and their families. But when you look around at this, and your community that is not even recognizable anymore, you don’t know where to start . . . I don’t know how often we’re going to be able to do this. I’m tired of being resilient. I just want to catch a break.”

That is where so many of us are after more than a year of drought, uncontrolled forest fires, political turmoil, Covid and its variants, masking, staying away from restaurants and public gatherings—things getting better and then getting worse, the specter of death hanging over every hospital with a too many youngsters dying and 200,000 US children having lost one parent to Covid, the disruption of the workplace and closing of favorite restaurants, people refusing to mask or be vaccinated. And then there’s the terror that 20th anniversary of 9/11 evokes, gun violence, the disorderly withdrawal, failure, and defeat in Afghanistan, the nuclear threat of Iran, Korea, and most recently Russia, the rise of anti-Semitism accompanied by Holocaust denial, political polarization—all leading to the conclusion that the safety net we once felt living in America is evaporating, leaving so many of us on constant alert. We’re tired, we feel our resiliency resources waning. We’ve already had enough solemnness to fill a dozen Yom Kippur commemorations.

It may seem sacrilegious to focus on well-placed humor on the holiest day of the Jewish calendar, but I wanted to offer something more than just comic relief because humor often reveals hidden truths, as Shakespeare wrote in King Lear: “Jesters do oft prove prophets.” Freud said that when we jest, we are humorously saying what we are frightened or forbidden to say seriously, as in the story of the son at the dinner table who turned to his father and said, “You

explicative deleted so and so, you ruined my life.” Followed by, “huhhhhh. I meant to say, ‘Pass the salt.’”

My article entitled “Jewish Values, A Judge and Japanese American Internment” was published on March 22, 2022 in the *Northern California Jewish Bulletin*:

Although hindsight is 20/20, looking backward at opportunities taken or missed does not provide a “do-over” for how people might have or should have behaved.

The Dec. 7, 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor provoked fear of Japanese Americans, especially on the West Coast, which resulted in President Franklin Roosevelt’s 1942 executive mandating their internment. This February marked the 80th anniversary of a wrong that cannot be made right. Most Japanese Americans were from families that came to the United States as long ago as three generations earlier. They were loyal, law-abiding citizens who gave no cause to believe that they were a fifth column in our midst. Yet they were forced to sell their property and possessions, often at fire-sale prices; they had to abandon their businesses and leave their jobs.

Despite overwhelming support among Americans for the Japanese internment, there were those in the Jewish community who were outraged. Partly because Jews were being rounded up in Europe and murdered in concentration camps, while there was no internment of German Americans. But also, because such treatment was antithetical to Jewish values as instructed by Leviticus 19:16, “Do not stand idly by while your neighbor bleeds.”

The actions of Louis E. Goodman U.S. District Judge for the Northern District of California embodied the highest values in his approach to this tragedy. Speaking from the pulpit of Congregation Emanu-El on Yom Kippur 1947, he said: “To advocate a just cause sometimes requires a rare sort of courage, the sort of courage that ignores personal security, be it real or fancied.”

Three years earlier, Judge Goodman came to the rescue of 26 Japanese Americans incarcerated at the Tule Lake Segregation after the U.S. government announced that it would begin drafting young Japanese men of conscription age into the Army, the same army that had been guarding them and their families in these detention camps.

Most of the young Japanese Americans choked back their resentment at the way the government had stripped them of all their rights and chose to accept the draft as just another unwanted test of their patriotism. But about 300 refused to comply with their draft orders. These resisters asked a simple but devastating moral question: “If we are loyal enough to join the army, what are we doing behind barbed wire?” The government punished them harshly for this.

Through the spring and summer of 1944, agents of the U.S. Marshals Service swept through the camps, arrested the resisters, and carted them off to county jails to await trials on charges of draft evasion. In every case but one, the federal judges convicted the Japanese American draft resisters.

Thirty-three draft resisters from the Minidoka Relocation Center in Idaho had the misfortune to appear before Federal District Judge Chase Clark. When he had been governor of Idaho, Clark demanded that all Japanese Americans be placed in “concentration camps” and forcibly removed from Idaho at war’s end. Now he set in motion production-line criminal justice, hearing 33 separate jury trials in 11 days. Every case ended with a sentence of three years and three months in the federal penitentiary.

Only one judge broke this pattern — Judge Goodman, who heard the cases from the Tule Lake camp in July 1944 in Eureka. The logging and fishing town about 230 miles north of San Francisco had a long history of ferocious anti-Asian sentiment. In 1895, an angry mob had forced all 310 Chinese residents in Eureka onto a boat and exiled them from Humboldt County

with a warning that they should never return. The local chamber of commerce guide boasted that Humboldt County was “the only county in California without a Chinaman.”

The day that Judge Goodman arrived, the local newspaper, the *Humboldt Standard*, ran a front-page story with the headline “Not Enough Food, Japs Complain in Jail Here” and a sentence that read: “Not enough ricee . . . they want three mealees, so solly, please.”

The lawyers appointed to represent the Tule Lake resisters suggested they plead guilty. But when Judge Goodman asked them about the circumstances that had led them to resist the draft — their forced uprooting from their homes in California, prolonged detention behind barbed wire, and so on—he refused to accept the guilty pleas. He purposely dragged the cases out all week on procedural matters, and then scheduled a special session of court for Saturday morning—the day he was scheduled to go home to San Francisco. And with his car idling in the parking lot outside the courthouse and his packed suitcases in the trunk, Judge Goodman took to the bench and delivered an opinion dismissing the charges against the Tule Lake resisters for lack of due process.

Judge Goodman told a stunned courtroom that “the defendants cannot be denied the protection of the guaranty of due process because of war . . . or danger to national security but only upon a valid declaration of martial law,” which had not taken place.

“It is shocking to the conscience,” he said, “that an American citizen be confined on the ground of disloyalty, and then be compelled to serve in the armed forces or be prosecuted for not yielding to such compulsion.” And with that, Judge Goodman banged his gavel, got up, hurried to his waiting car and beat it back to San Francisco.

In his closing remarks at the Yom Kippur service in 1947, he declared, “Gallantry and intrepidity in a just cause are the essence of strength. They command respect and admiration. They make for security, never for insecurity. If the American Jew looks into himself . . . and finds there that kind of courage, the God of Israel should look with favor upon him.” These words summed up the commitment to Jewish values that guided his decisions, and they echo down the 80 years since the injustices imposed upon American citizens of Japanese heritage: “Do not follow after the multitude to do evil”—Exodus 23:2, and “In a place in which there are no human beings, strive to one—the Talmud.

Finally, I share my recently published short story in the *Journal of Reform Judaism* entitled, *Temple Ahavath Achim, the Congregation of Brotherly Love*

Pinchas Schreiber was a short, stout, balding man whose hairy muscular arms were unremarkable except for the blue-black numbers tattooed on his forearm—a constant reminder of his transformation from a unique individual to a cipher. He and his family—mother, father, three siblings—had been herded into a concentration camp in November 1940. As the daily cattle car runs to Auschwitz emptied the ghetto, he tried in vain to protect his family, all of whom perished in the gas chambers. As a strapping youth, he was slated to be worked to death in various industries dedicated to the war effort. He did what little he could to thwart the Nazi war machine by occasionally sabotaging the massive IB Farben projectiles he worked on by failing to connect the detonator to the fuse, rendering the weapon a dud. Pinchas couldn’t remember when or why he was first attracted to the story of the Garden of Eden, but throughout his five-year ordeal in the camp it offered him an escape from the hell he inhabited. He thought of the lush flora—fruit trees of every kind, animals who always were gentle, just as Isaiah described in his vision of the lion and the lamb dwelling together in peace. The image of the lush vegetation that carpeted the earth in Genesis was a momentary respite from the desolate concentration camp where there was no greenery because the starving inmates ate every blade of grass.

Pinchas identified with Adam and Eve, whose punishment hardly fit the crime, considering how many people disobey God and get away with it. Like them, his life was disrupted by a “sin” unworthy of punishment—the sin of being Jewish. He had been a blameless child and an obedient young adult, and yet he was thrown out of the cocoon of a loving family home into the maw of the beast. Once expelled from The Garden, Adam had to work by the sweat of his brow just as Pinchas had labored in Nazi factories where there was no Sabbath respite or rest of any kind. Adam hid in the garden; Pinchas hid from the notice of the Nazis as best he could. He loved the comment about the Most Holy One walking about the Garden in the cool of the day. It seemed so refreshing in comparison to the harsh climate of Poland in winter and summer where he froze night and day in the winter and sweltered in summer.

After liberation in 1945, Pinchas lived in a DP camp where he met his bride, who had also lost her entire family, including her husband and four children. They married and had a son, not unusual for those who were trying to recover from lives shattered by the Holocaust. It was not surprising that the DP Camps had the highest birth rate for any population ever recorded. Children helped their wounded parents gain a sense of normalcy, even though their parents’ tortured lives indelibly marked their children.

His first and only job after coming to America in 1946 was as shamash—custodian at Temple Ahavath Achim, the Congregation of Brotherly Love, where he worked endless hours sweeping, cleaning, scrubbing, vacuuming, tending the grounds, and taking orders: “Pinky, do this; Pinky, do that; Pinky, set up the classrooms; Pinky, clean the toilets; Pinky, wash the windows; Pinky clean up the dog shit on the sidewalk.” He hated the diminutive “Pinky.” It made him feel like a circus performer or dopey teenager. After all, singing, dancing, and clowning around were the hallmark of early children’s television star Pinky Lee: “Hi ho, it’s me, my name is Pinky Lee. I skip and run with lots of fun for every he and she.”

Furthermore, on the rare occasion when someone addressed him by his surname, it was never “Mr. Schrieber” but always “Schrieber,” and with an edge of disdain that invariably had an order attached to it: “Schrieber, it’s too damn hot in the sanctuary. Do something about it.” To make matters worse, the adolescent boys in the religious school were alternately disrespectful and fearful of the man with the heavy foreign accent. Still, he responded politely to his nickname or surname as he did to the sometimes-unreasonable demands that the balebatim—lay leaders made of him day and night. But Pinchas was mindful that compared to the harsh orders the Nazis barked in Treblinka, balebatish commands seemed insignificant, almost comical.

The lay leaders of the temple were small business owners and middle-level managers. They had little say at work and even less authority at home. But at the Congregation of Brotherly Love, they felt like kings and queens, barking orders to Pinky, the rabbi, the cantor, and the rest of the staff, all of whom had learned over time that it was pointless to get into a pissing match with the temple president or other officers, because even if they were wrong, they were right. At Ahavath Achim they felt powerful—“I’ll tell that rabbi or cantor that he or she had better do or there’ll be hell to pay.” The words were sweet in their mouths and made them feel important. Their move to the suburbs from the inner city was further proof to them that they were on their way up.

Rabbi Morris Hahn (they called him Maurey and almost never “Rabbi”), a fifty-three-year-old balding wisp of a man, had learned from experience to submit to their every whim, but even he was embarrassed by the shabby way they treated Pinchas. Behind his back, they would refer to the shamash with humiliating Yiddish nicknames—shlemiel, nudnick, shmendrik—as they puffed on their big cigars.

Rabbi Hahn was a beaten-down man, but he loved helping the children to prepare for their bar and bat mitzvah ceremonies as well as teaching, preaching, conducting life-cycle events, and especially studying the sacred texts. The leaders frequently dismissed his sermons as comical, pathetic, and incomprehensible, but Pinchas faithfully listened to the rabbi's retelling of the Holy Writ, especially the stories in Genesis.

The rabbi went about the business of running the religious and educational program of the shul and ignored the outrageous things the leaders demanded and did. He was still twelve years away from retirement and he planned to wait them out by not rocking the boat. He had chosen the rabbinate because he thought he could make a difference and be a model for Jews and people who had lost their way. He led civil rights marches in town and believed in the equality of all people, but no one really understood the job of a clergyperson, and many thought he just showed up for worship and religious school and had the rest of the time to do whatever he wished. Occasionally he would be greeted by a member midweek, who would ask, "Rabbi, what are you doing here?" Members who were not involved in leadership and not regular worshipers adored Rabbi Hahn, especially for the way he conducted life-cycle events. Their praise and respect sustained him when others mistreated him.

What had interested Pinchas most was the nakedness of Adam and Eve, which they covered after tasting the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge and becoming aware of carnality. He believed that Genesis imagined sex in a new and striking way that was worthy of deeper thought. The words of the text reverberated in his mind: "Adam knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain." He was bothered by this terse description of the first conception and birth. Then it hit him—the sin of first man and first woman was not eating the fruit or sexual intimacy or disobeying and hiding from God—it was intercourse while Eve was pregnant. Pinchas and his wife had been intimate during her pregnancy, and the fact that he had given in to his desire bothered him because it felt unnatural and dangerous for their unborn child.

In his dreams he saw a blood-red serpent slithering over him. It had horns on its head and a come-hither look in its shining eyes. But even more fantastic, he saw that the snake was pregnant. He would awake with a shudder, but even though the dream troubled him at night for months and invaded his thoughts by day, he felt that he was being chosen to transmit an important message.

He had always felt that his surname, Schreiber—"writer"—meant that he had a book in him. He liked to think that if he'd had a normal education in Poland, he would have produced scholarly works, novels, and screenplays. So, he began to do research about intercourse during pregnancy. In his spare time, he would retreat to the local branch of the public library, which had a full run of the Readers' Guide to Periodic Literature, and he referenced dozens of articles that led him to magazines and books. He chatted with the doctors in the congregation, particularly with the OB-GYNs and urologists. Many were kind to him and answered his questions patiently, even though they thought his "theory" of intercourse during pregnancy was absurd.

Their skepticism did not deter his "investigation." The more research he did, the more he was convinced that the "real" sin of the Garden of Eden was intercourse during pregnancy, and Pinchas became the prophet speaking out against that sin.

At night, when the synagogue was closed, Pinchas would sit at an upright old typewriter in the office, organizing his thoughts and notes into a manuscript. Truth be told, it was disorganized, trite, and uninteresting. But that didn't stop his efforts. When he finally completed his magnum opus, he set about the job of mailing copies to dozens of publishers in the hope that one of them would enable his book to see the light of day. He never heard back from most of them and occasionally would receive a standard rejection letter that he stowed in a kitchen drawer.

Discouraged that there was no interest in his theory or book, he sought the counsel of Rabbi Hahn, who knew that Pinchas had been working on this project. How can I help Pinchas realize that the writing is poor at best and his facts are flawed, without hurting his feelings he wondered? He knew that Pinchas would be crushed by a negative assessment. Trying to figure out how not to disappoint Pinchas, he bought some time by telling him that he would read the manuscript and give him some advice in a few days. Rabbi Hahn struggled about how to break the news to him. Then he had a flash of insight. He thought to himself, if I can't fix it, there must be someone who can.

Rabbi Hahn told Pinchas that he thought it would be ideal to find an agent to sell his book to a publisher, before doing that he ought to consult a professional to copy edit the book and make the flow of ideas smoother and more easily understood. The rabbi realized that he was just postponing the inevitable, but at least he could hope that Pinchas would get frustrated and give up or maybe a flood or other disaster might destroy the manuscript—a flight of wishful thinking.

Pinchas pulled the name of a copy editor from the Yellow Pages and brought the manuscript to David Zipkin of Zipkin Service with a Zip, Inc. David told Pinchas he would not only help him edit the book, but would get it published—for a fee of \$3,000. Pinchas pulled together his hard-earned savings, borrowed some of his teenage son's savings and paid David. Sure enough, David reorganized the book, added more content and gave the book the title: *Sex and the Unborn Child*. One day a truck pulled up to the temple with twenty-five cartons of hardbound copies of the book. David's vanity press advertised in some off-the-beaten-path publications, mostly because advertising in obscure publications was cheap, and this is where it got interesting. Word spread about the book and all of a sudden there was enough demand to sell out the entire first edition of five thousand copies. A representative of Bantam Paperback Books got wind of the title and sellout and contacted David Zipkin. He offered a tidy sum to secure the paperback rights for six hundred thousand copies.

As word spread throughout Temple Ahavath Achim, people began to congratulate Mr. Schrieber. "Mazel tov on your book, "Pinchas," the president of the congregation said. "We must plan an author's evening for you." And he did. All of a sudden there was an air of respect for someone who had been so mistreated through the years. Members of the congregation came out in great numbers on a Sunday evening to salute their shamash and under-the-radar author. Pinchas beamed from ear to ear and for the first time since anyone knew him, it appeared that the weight of the world had been lifted from his shoulders. Rabbi Hahn spoke glowingly about him and his book. People lined up to buy autographed copies.

Then the next morning Pinchas went back to cleaning, vacuuming, and taking orders from the balebatim, clergy, and staff as if nothing had happened. But he knew he had made his mark on the world of Torah interpretation. And for the first time, he felt that he stood at the edge of Eden.

I hope you appreciated the fruits of being trapped at home by Covid, only proving that "every silver lining has a cloud"—or something like that. Thank you.