

I was named in memory my grandfather Max Mordecai Mahler. Max was five years old when he arrived here in the United States on December 8, 1888. Max, his parents, Jakob and Rose, and his older sister Sarah, were emigres from Bohemia. Exactly thirty years later, December 8, 1918, Max died, one of 675,000 American victims of the Great Influenza pandemic. Five-hundred million people, one-third of the world's population, were afflicted. Fifty-million deaths worldwide is a reasonable estimate.

Max was survived by his twenty-eight year old widow, a five-year old daughter, and a four year old son, my father. For the rest of my father's life, he could not recall a single memory of his father. Following his father's death, his mother had to go to work. A hundred years ago, day care did not exist, so my father was placed in an orphanage for a year. Although my father could recall his experience in the orphanage, he would only say that it was awful. His awful year in the orphanage likely erased all memories of his father. I can only guess how much the specter of the 1918 Flu pandemic loomed over my father's life. I certainly know how much it has loomed over my life.

It was a significant factor in my becoming a rabbi. Plagues and pandemics are familiar territory for the Jewish people, starting with the Torah. So for reasons both personal and professional, I have long been a student of the 1918 Flu pandemic. In my studies, the most gripping, informative yet readable account is John M. Barry's book, *The Great Influenza*. It was a *New York Times*' bestseller when it was first published in 2004. Updated in 2018, it returned to the bestsellers' list, no surprise, last Spring.

The Great War, as World War I was then called, had its fingerprints all over the Great Influenza, but the Great Influenza had the Great War by the throat. John Barry points out that throughout history more soldiers have died from disease than from combat; so too in the Great War whose total number of casualties, dead and wounded, military and civilian, exceeded forty-million. Yet as California Senator Hiram Johnson then ruefully observed, "The first casualty of war is truth."

You may know this pandemic as the "Spanish Flu." That's not the truth. Simply because Spain was a neutral non-combatant in the Great War, the Spanish government did not censor the Spanish press's coverage of the pandemic. Among all the combatants, government censorship of the press prevailed. When the press in these countries picked up reports from Spain, they called it the Spanish Flu.

According to John Barry, the likely truth was the pandemic actually began here in the U.S., at Camp Funston, an Army training base at Fort Reilly, Kansas. Men living together in crowded barracks quickly passed the infection to one another. The trainees were then assigned to other camps in more crowded barracks. Eventually every soldier was deployed from East Coast cities to the war front in France via transport ships with even closer quarters. Meanwhile on the home front, workers streamed to factories manufacturing war materiel in cities with crowded tenements with living conditions that today's standards would call third world. This was how the Great Influenza took the Great War by the throat.

Once Congress declared war, President Wilson's single minded focus was galvanizing one-hundred percent support here for winning the Great War "over there." American Jews played a significant part.

Walter Lippmann, the influential journalist, sent a memo to President Wilson a week after we entered the Great War, suggesting the creation of a publicity bureau to keep morale high on the home front. The next day, Wilson issued Executive Order 2594, creating the Committee on Public Information. This Committee then established an organization of "Four Minute Men." One-hundred thousand Four Minute Men soon traveled the country, giving brief presentations before meetings, movies, vaudeville shows and the like to support the war cause and promote the sale of Liberty Bonds.

Meanwhile, Wilson himself never publicly addressed the pandemic that ravaged the country. Ironically or perhaps poetically to borrow from Shakespeare, Wilson hoisted himself on his own petard of silence when he contracted the flu, reported as a "cold," during the Paris Peace Conference at the end of the war. The flu led to a stroke, effectively ending Wilson's dream for a third term in the 1920 election. The lingering effects of the flu then ended Wilson's life in 1924.

Other Jews played prominent roles in contending with the pandemic. Three of the seven members appointed by Wilson to his Council of National Defense, were Jews: Samuel Gompers, head of the American Federation of Labor, Bernard Baruch, the financier, and Julius Rosenwald, head of Sears, Roebuck.

When the U.S. entered the war, one of America's most prominent physicians, Dr. Milton Rosenau took leave of his professorship at Harvard University to become Lieutenant Commander of Chelsea Naval Hospital in Boston. Rosenau's textbook on public health was considered "The Bible" by his

peers. Rosenau was among the first to answer the question, “why was this flu, different from all other flus,” identified ultimately as H1N1 influenza A virus.

We must give special recognition to the two-hundred fifty-thousand Jews who served in the American Expeditionary Force. More than thirty-five hundred were killed in action, twelve-thousand wounded, eleven-hundred decorated for bravery including three Medal of Honor recipients. General John J. Pershing, commander of the American Expeditionary Force praised his Jewish soldiers with the following encomium, “When the time came to serve their country under arms, no class of people served with more patriotism or with higher motives than the young Jews who volunteered or were drafted and went overseas with our other young Americans to fight the enemy.”

We should also remember that among the enemy General Pershing cited were one-hundred thousand Jewish soldiers fighting for Germany. Here we have a hidden Jewish tragedy that had occurred only one other time in Jewish history: Jews on opposite sides of nations at war. In the Great War, seventy-thousand of those Jewish soldiers were on the German front lines. They fought with bravery and distinction for a German victory they hoped would not only free the Jews of Eastern Europe from their Polish and Russian oppressors, but also prove German Jewry’s unequivocal loyalty to Germany. Twelve-thousand Jews were killed in action. Eighteen-thousand Jews were decorated with the German Iron Cross. Three-thousand Jews were promoted to officer rank, but only among reserves, not the regular army. Why not? Because of anti-Semitism.

As the Great War dragged on, Germany fabricated a census attempting to prove that Jews sought to avoid military service. This was a calumny that echoed a similar calumny against Jews in the North during the American Civil War. Upwards of ten-thousand Jews fought between the two belligerents in the Civil War, the majority in defense of the Union. This was the only other time in history when Jews fought on opposite sides in a war. And it leads us to an even more serious connection between Germany and the United States, a connection that we must face foursquare, and a plague we must face foursquare if we ever hope to cure it.

Pulitzer Prize winner Isabel Dickerson’s latest book, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* made the *New York Times*’ Best Sellers list as soon as it was released last month. *Caste, C-A-S-T-E*, maintains that what we call American racism is a de facto caste system upholding the superiority of some people and the inferiority of others because of the color of their skin. Wilkerson describes

how “throughout human history, three caste systems have stood out: the longest in India, the most vicious in Nazi Germany, and in the United States based on race. Because racism has become the great plague upon the American soul, *Caste* is a must-read for every American. *Caste* is a must-read for all humanity, because as we Jews have taught the world, God said, “Let us make man in our image, male and female God created them.” God did not say, “Let us make five human races according to the color of their skin.” This alone is reason for all of us to read *Caste*. But for these High Holy Days, chapter 8 of *Caste* demands our special attention, because it places us at the convergence of two of history’s great caste systems. Thus, throughout this chapter, Wilkerson freely quotes Yale legal historian James Q. Whitman’s recent book, *Hitler’s American Model: The United States and the Making of Nazi Race Law*.

On June 5, 1934, seventeen legal scholars and bureaucrats convened in Berlin under the auspices of Franz Gürtner, the Third Reich’s minister of justice. Their agenda was to transform Nazi anti-Semitism into German law. Regarding this Nazi think-tank, Whitman writes, “In debating ‘how to institutionalize racism in the Third Reich, they began by asking how the Americans did it.’”

These seventeen scholars and bureaucrats had done their due diligence. They knew that the “pseudoscience” of Eugenics, claiming genetic superiority of some groups and inferiority of others, had taken hold in the United States. Notable American advocates of Eugenics included Alexander Graham Bell, Henry Ford, and Charles W. Eliot, the president of Harvard University. Eugenicists Lothrop Stoddard and Madison Grant are names not known to us today, but they were very well known, and celebrated, in Nazi Germany.

Boston born and Harvard educated Lothrop Stoddard published a book in 1922 titled *The Revolt Against Civilization: The Menace of the Under-man*. When it was translated into German, Nazi ideologues seized upon Stoddard’s term “Under-man,” and rendered it *Unter-mensch* in German. *Unter-mensch*, or “Sub-human,” became the Nazi’s choice epithet for non-Aryans, most pointedly for Jews. Stoddard’s book became standard in Germany’s school curricula. Once World War II broke out, Stoddard spent four months in Germany as a journalist, covering compulsory sterilization trials of *unter-menschen*, so called “subhumans,” modeled after American compulsory sterilization trials. He also met with leading Nazis including Hitler himself.

New York born and Yale and Columbia educated, Madison Grant may have had even greater influence on Nazi ideology. After Hitler read the German

edition of Grant's 1916 book, *The Passing of the Great Race*, which advocated "A rigid system of selection through the elimination of those who are weak or unfit," he sent written thanks to Grant that "The book is my Bible." No doubt, Hitler's self-proclaimed "Bible" was seminal in his writing of *Mein Kampf*, published in 1925.

*Caste* describes how Hitler had "studied America from afar, both envying and admiring it." He attributed America's "achievements to its Aryan stock. He praised the country's near genocide of Native Americans." The Nazis in general "were impressed by the American custom of lynching its subordinate caste of African-Americans." Hitler in particular "marveled at the American knack for maintaining an air of robust innocence in the wake of mass death."

One member of the Nazi think tank, Heinrich Krieger was completing a book titled *Race Law in the United States*, influenced by his experiences as an exchange student at the University of Arkansas. The think tank lawyers were well versed in the legal precedent of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the 1896 Supreme Court ruling that deemed racial segregation constitutional, thereby legalizing racist Jim Crow laws. Here, Yale legal scholar Whitman notes, "the American Supreme Court entertained briefs from southern states whose arguments were indistinguishable from those of the Nazis." Whitman then adds the United States "was not just a country with racism, it was *the* leading racist jurisdiction - so much so that even Nazi Germany looked to America for inspiration."

One thing puzzled the Nazis: Why hasn't the United States treated Jews as it has treated Blacks?

*Caste* suggests a simple answer. There are no Blacks in Africa. They are identified only as members of tribes: Yoruba, Zulu, Hausa, Oromo, 3,000 African tribes altogether. They became Blacks when they came to America, more precisely when they were enslaved in America. As for us, before we Jews came to America, we were identified everywhere as Jews. However when we Jews came to America, we became white. Please ponder deeply the consequences of these respective transformations.

The deliberations of this Nazi think tank crystallized in the anti-Semitic Nuremberg Laws of 1935, which gave rise to Kristallnacht in 1938, which gave rise thereafter to the 1942 Wannsee Conference and the "Final Solution to the Jewish Question," which then gave rise to the murder of six-million Jews by May, 1945.

Chapter 8 of *Caste* concludes with more than a touch of irony. According to the Nuremberg Race Laws, anyone with one Jewish grandparent was considered Jewish. Whitman then contrasts this Nazi standard with the prevailing American standard. “While the Nazis praised ‘the American commitment to legislating racial purity,’ they could not abide ‘the unforgiving hardness’ under which ‘an American man or woman who has even a drop of Negro blood in their veins’ counted as black.’ ‘The one-drop rule was too harsh for the Nazis.’”

Since reading *Caste*, when I see someone in a public space without a mask on, in this country that leads the world in Covid-19 cases, where approximately a thousand people a day are dying in the pandemic, I cannot help but recall Hitler’s “marvel at the American knack for maintaining an air of robust innocence in the wake of mass death.”

*Caste* is not an easy read. Neither are many passages in Torah, which have never stopped the Jewish people from reading it again and again, and living by it, for three millennia and counting. I ask you to read *Caste* as a vaccine, an immunization against the plague of racism. Like any vaccination, it hurts. Like every vaccination, it is most effective when it is given to those not infected to prevent others from becoming infected, as well as themselves. Like every vaccination, it has the power to end suffering and save lives. So think of *Caste* as a gift, because not every plague has a vaccine to combat it.

The Spanish Flu, H1N1 influenza, is one example. Although vaccines were sought, none were ever developed. The Spanish Flu ended in 1920 when it mutated itself out of existence. But the H1N1 influenza reappeared in the 2009 Swine Flu pandemic.

Let us hope and pray, that a vaccine can be developed against Covid-19, *Bimeirah b’yameinu*, “Speedily and in our day.”

Such a vaccine that has all but eradicated another pandemic was developed especially close to all of us, both geographically and Jewishly.

Dr. Jonas Salk became one of the Twentieth Century’s great Jewish heroes here at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine when he gave the world an inestimable gift: the vaccine to prevent polio. The vaccine’s first clinical trials were conducted with children at nearby D.T. Watson Institute. I had just turned eight when the vaccine was approved for distribution through public schools.

Along with the Spanish Flu, the polio pandemic was a looming specter in my family’s life and mine. My mother was five years old when her younger

brother Morris contracted polio. He survived, but his left leg was severely compromised, first by the virus itself, followed by the many surgeries intended to help, but served only to harm. Testimony to his indomitable spirit, my uncle Morris lived to eighty-nine, his every day racked with pain. Morris had an answer to his pain and disfigurement which rendered him in the minds of many people that crude term that had not yet been censured: “cripple.” Morris sublimated his pain with his intellect. A PhD in Economics was his pathway to a long and distinguished career teaching at Syracuse and Binghamton Universities. At his retirement festivities, he described his teaching career as his one “opportunity to dance.” Yes, he was witty too.

My Uncle Morris completed his PhD the same year that I began my education in kindergarten. It was also the year that almost sixty-thousand American children were afflicted with polio. More than three-thousand died, while tens of thousands survived only to endure a lifetime of challenges similar to my uncle’s. Photographs in the daily newspapers and weekly magazines delivered to my childhood home showed children entombed up to their necks in mechanical respirators called “iron lungs.” The photographs petrified me. A nationwide survey indicated that Americans feared only one thing more than polio: nuclear annihilation.

But there is a post script to my childhood fears, a lesson learned from the combination of science and faith, a lesson well learned for all of us.

No doubt, you have had teachers in your life as I have had in mine: teachers who shape us and sometimes even shake us into becoming someone new and someone somehow better than the person we were before.

Such a teacher in my life was Dr. William Thomas Kirscher. Dr. Kirscher was the chairman of the Psychology Department at Fairleigh Dickinson University, and my professor for Abnormal Psychology. He was a fine teacher, but what I took most to heart were his lessons about life.

One day in class, Dr. Kirscher gave the students sample questions from a culturally based I.Q. test. When the students reviewed our scores, a pattern quickly emerged. The Black students scored the highest, the white students scored consistently lower. Dr. Kirscher was teaching the vital lesson that intelligence is as much a function of experience and social norms as it is an innate characteristic. I must add parenthetically that only one white student scored in the same range as the Black students: yours truly.

Knowing that I was a Biology major and Chemistry minor, Dr. Kirscher asked me if I would prepare a half hour presentation for the class on the biochemistry of the brain and nervous system. Fifteen minutes into my presentation, I discovered that what I had prepared was fifteen minutes too short. Standing in front of forty students, at that moment I was...disconcerted.

As I now recall my embarrassment, I am reminded of the old Yiddish story of the great magid and his wagon driver who traveled from community to community, Shabbat after Shabbat, where the great magid would preach and teach Torah and Talmud. After many years of traveling together, the wagon driver said to the great magid, "You know, rabbi, I have taken you to hundreds of synagogues. I have heard you give many great speeches and give many brilliant answers to many challenging questions. But with all due respect, you only have so many speeches and been asked only so many questions. Having heard them all, in the next town this Shabbat, how about you let me be the great magid and you be the wagon driver?" The great magid shrugged his shoulders and said, "If you think it's so easy, go right ahead." That Shabbat, as the wagon driver ascended the bima to deliver the sermon, the great magid took a seat in the back of the synagogue. The wagon driver then proceeded to deliver his personal favorite among the magid's many sermons, although he lacked the panache and passion the great rabbi always exuded in his preaching. The congregation then asked questions. As the wagon driver predicted, the questions were predictable. But then someone asked a question which had never before been asked, and exceedingly difficult at that. The wagon driver began to stammer and sweat, but then he pointed to the great magid seated in the back of the synagogue and said, "Why that question is so simple that even my wagon driver can answer it."

In other words, when I came to the end of my presentation, my too brief presentation, that day in Abnormal Psychology class, I turned to Dr. Kirscher and said, "I'm sure that Dr. Kirscher has a lot more to say about the subject of the biochemistry of the the brain and nervous system." Dr. Kirscher squinted at me and pursed his lips in what I can describe only as a frowning smile or a smiling frown. He then said, "What Mr. Mahler is doing is turning his presentation over to me, the authority. What Mr. Mahler is doing is being very clever." The class laughed, myself included. After class, Dr. Kirscher continued to chide me, with affection and respect. The lesson learned that day is one that separates rabbis from wagon drivers: if you aspire to achieve, be prepared to over-prepare. This is a lesson well learned for everyone. I should also note that the brevity of my

presentation had little impact on my grade in Abnormal Psychology. I received an A.

But far more noteworthy than my grade was my friendship with Dr. Kirscher. Dr. Kirscher was as close a friend as I had in college and in my early adulthood. He was middle-aged and divorced. He had no children from his marriage, but he had many surrogate children among his students. I was happy to be numbered among them. The college campus was the crucible for the fires of foment in those turbulent times, and I had a thousand questions about those times measured against eternity. Dr. Kirscher was a man of wisdom, substance and deep spirituality. He was a devout Christian, but he shared with me the fact that he was circumcised as an adult to symbolize his covenant with God. Looking back on our friendship, I can say that Dr. Kirscher was as influential as anyone in my life in my turning from Biology to Theology, from my dream of becoming a doctor to the reality of my being a rabbi. Indeed, the day before my interview for rabbinic school, Dr. Kirscher came with me to my family's cemetery when I felt the need to touch my roots and at the same time be touched by eternity.

After Dr. Kirscher died, I contacted the library in his hometown where he spent his final years and asked that they send me a copy of his obituary they had on microfilm. The obituary began, "William T. Kirscher, 69 ... died Monday at Sacred Heart Hospital."

The name Sacred Heart Hospital jogged my memory. Fifty years prior, when Dr. Kirscher was a student at the University of Wisconsin, he contracted polio. The virus attacked his intercostal muscles surrounding the lungs and essential to breathing. In effect, Dr. Kirscher was suffocating to death. He survived because of three factors.

First, he had been blessed with a booming baritone voice. His vocal training had taught him to breathe from his diaphragm. When his intercostal muscles failed, his diaphragm alone kept him breathing long enough to make it to the hospital and be placed in an iron lung. The iron lung whose photographs had filled me with fear as a child was the second factor that saved Dr. Kirscher's life. The iron lung was a gift of science, one of science's countless gifts to humanity, indeed countless blessings. Still, Dr. Kirscher would have died if not for factor number three. During his first night in the iron lung, his condition deteriorated. As he teetered on the brink of death, a light filled the room, a light unlike any light he'd seen before. Dr. Kirscher welcomed it as God's healing Presence. Dr. Kirscher lifted his right hand as best as he could in the iron lung, and recited the

verse from Psalm 16, “I am ever mindful of God’s presence, God is at my right hand, I shall never be shaken.” How often these words have been sung here at Temple Emanuel, especially during the High Holy Days, *Shiviti Adonai l’negdi tamid, ki mimini baal emot*. Dr. Kirscher survived that night in Sacred Heart Hospital, to live a full, vibrant and loving life. He then died there, fifty years later.

We are living in difficult times. We are challenged by a pandemic that threatens to suffocate all of us. We are also challenged by a plague of hate, four centuries too long, suffocating too many of us, symbolized by one man gasping “I can’t breathe.”

Have faith in science. Have faith in faith, the faith that Judaism brought to the world in the name of the one God who created all humanity in God’s divine image. Have faith that sings from the depth of your soul, “I am ever mindful of Adonai’s presence, God is at my right hand, I shall never be shaken.”

*L’Shana Tova. A Good Year.*