

## 2022 The Year of Helping Out!

December 31st, 1932, 89 years ago tonight there was a special dance at Cafe Vienna in Haifa, the beautiful port city in Northern Israel, then part of British Mandate, Palestine. This New Years Eve special dance, as the advertisement promoted, “promised dancing from 9pm till 3 in the morning, as well as “Attractions, decorations, serpentines (belly dancers) and confetti (sweets).” (see this link for much of the Sylvester history

<https://www.israel21c.org/celebrating-silvester-aka-the-secular-new-year-in-israel/>)

60 miles down the coast, in the new city of Tel Aviv, named after the famous Theodore Herzl book that dreamt of a Jewish state - The Mugrabi Theater, brand new and anchoring the new Tel Aviv cultural scene also hosted a festive New Year’s celebration filled with - entertainment, surprises and a “splendid dance orchestra.”

While early European Jewish immigrants to Israel were often inspired by labor, return to the land, Zionism. New Jewish immigrants, especially during the time of the British Mandate, brought a more cosmopolitan lifestyle than earlier Jewish pioneers. They brought European manners and customs to the emerging homeland, including styles of dress, eating and rejoicing. They also brought dances, parties and galas including an annual celebration on December 31st called the Silvestertag or Silvester. Silvester was a big deal for many post-enlightment, pre-holocaust Jewish communities in Europe.

Here is Haaretz’s reporter Moshe Ongerfeld, from Vienna in 1926: “The most merry holiday here is the 31 of December, ‘Silvester Night,’ the Christian New Year’s. Here in Vienna it is called the ‘Jewish holiday.’ Most of the Jews of Vienna don’t completely celebrate our New Year’s (Rosh Hashanah). Everyone sits in his store and tends to his business, and doesn’t have time to visit a synagogue. But it’s

different on the night of December 31. The pockets of the Jews of Vienna are then filled with income, their hearts are full of happiness. And most importantly, the holiday isn't spent by the people of the city in prayer, crying and screaming, but with a merry cup of wine in the cafes and bars, and the happy sounds of singers, musicians and gay dancing."

Silverster, as some of you know, is the day of the feast of Pope Sylvester, who died on December 31st and served as Pope from 314-335. There is little known about Pope Sylvester - though there are some who accuse him of being deeply anti-semitic. According to the Hungarian-born socialist activist and journalist Ferenc-Iosef Jámbor: "Sylvester ...is the one who turned the heart of [Constantine](#) towards Christianity and anti-Semitism. He presented the emperor with an antisemitic diatribe – abbreviated sections of which are held now at the British Museum. Jewish historians have found that the condition of the Jews in the Byzantine Empire had worsened due to Sylvester's action," Not the greatest of dudes.

But to many Jews in Europe and eventually in Israel, the origins of the day of Sylvester didn't matter too much. And New Years Eve parties in Europe and among the secular Jewish immigrants of 1920s and 1930s Israel flourished. Sylvester was an excuse to have a good time and enjoy - the boulevards of Tel Aviv could feel like Vienna. The cafes of Haifa like Munich.

The newspaper Doar Hayom reported from Jerusalem on New Year's Day 1936: "The signs of the 'holiday' were visible at the hairdressers in the morning. The public began to get haircuts and have their hair washed. On no other day of the year have the hairdressers of Jerusalem seen this much traffic on weekday mornings. In the afternoon it became busier. The manicurists, beauticians and all those

in the business of cosmetics improved their balance sheets handsomely on the last day of 1935. After that the traffic on the street began. The movie theaters of course were half empty. On the other hand, the crowds made their way to the King David Hotel, to the cafes that celebrated Sylvester, and even to the German restaurant which was full. Of course the English and Germans prefer to greet the new year with their families or in a private ball or intimate groups, but our brothers and sisters of the children of Israel expressed their happiness over the ending of the year in public and with excitement.”

As you can imagine, the presence of Sylvester parties in the Holy Land irked many people - who thought that the celebration was inappropriate. In 1934 The Tel Aviv City Council passed a resolution to ban New Year’s Eve celebrations in Tel Aviv stating: “the Tel Aviv municipal council views this foreign custom of Silvester parties as absolutely undesirable, contrary to the spirit and traditions of the people of Israel, and requesting that all coffee houses and large event hall owners in the city not organize Silvester parties.”

The Chief Rabbinate and the municipal committees of Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and Haifa - Israel’s three largest cities accused the New Year’s eve revelers of blasphemy: “As the end of the civilian year draws to a close, to our regret, many of our brothers engage in celebrating a holiday of the Diaspora that is, both in content and in form, foreign to the spirit of Israel. The wild custom of ‘Silvester’ celebrations organized by Jews in the Land of Israel has invaded us, particularly in the last year, and from year to year more engage in idolatry.”

Sylvester isn’t a big deal in Israel these days - though it’s often still called Sylvester. Pre-Covid there would be parties in the hopping sections of Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, but on the whole it’s not a widely celebrated or marked festival. When it doesn’t fall on Shabbat - like it

does this year - work and school go on as planned on January 1st. If anything, over the past three decades with the continued rise of Russians in Israel - in some neighborhoods one is more apt to see the observance of the highly Russian New Year celebration, called Novy God.

“Conceived by the Communist regime as a non-religious New Year’s holiday, Novy God nonetheless borrows from traditional Christmas symbols: a bearded elderly gentleman named Ded Moroz and his companion snow maiden Snegurochka, fir trees decorated with tinsel and lights, gifts under the tree, and family dinners.” In 2018, Benjamin Netanyahu decided to make a play for the Russian vote with a commercial that included a toast to Novy God.

But what about us - how do we mark the end of the secular year? Ball drops? Champagne Toasts? Tuxedos? Certainly COVID and Omicron have diminished the joy of the flip of the calendar. Nevertheless, I’m thrilled you’re with us for Shabbat and highly discourage New Years Eve parties or dinners (I discourage them often) this year. I hope you have a festive and safe New Year’s Eve - whether it’s a ball drop or college football a day in PJs or a nice glass of wine - there is no reason not to find some joy and delight in the secular calendar. I love receiving the year end cards from old friends and I enjoy the reflections on 2021’s best music, or movies or books.

I’m thrilled we have our holidays and New Year’s Eve is no substitute for Rosh HaShana.

However, “I believe the secular new year can serve as an opportunity for any of us, Jew and non-Jew alike, to reflect on the past year and make some ‘New Year’s resolutions’ for the coming one.”

I also know that traditionally New Years Eve for many is one of the most lonely nights of the year. To many, the ball drop is not celebratory, but rather filled with promises unkept and resolutions unmet. Even the countdown feels rotten - an affirmation that we are missing something. If you love New Years Even - I promise I'm not knocking you. Enjoy with gusto.

But I'm sure everyone will agree that one "resolution" we at Beth Am can continue to tackle is our continued commitment to combating loneliness. Many of us know about the loneliness epidemic in this country - I've preached about it many times before. Even before the COVID three in five Americans reported feelings of loneliness and isolation. The last 20 months of shut downs and isolation have certainly exacerbated the loneliness pandemic.

Loneliness impacts people of all ages, genders and socio-economic backgrounds. Even in "normal" times we certainly know that proximity to people is not a cure for loneliness. Dr. Carla Perissinotto and colleagues at the UCSF [reported in 2012](#) that most lonely individuals are married, live with others and are not clinically depressed. Remember F. Scott Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby*: "At the enchanted metropolitan twilight I felt a haunting loneliness sometimes, and felt it in others."

Loneliness occurs in the very beginning of the bible - it's actually the first human emotion of the Torah. Adam, living in Eden, was lonely. God saw Adam's loneliness and in the second chapter of the Torah, declared "LO TOV HEYOT HA'ADAM LEVADO." It is not good for man to be alone. Abraham, Aaron, David, Ruth and Miriam all faced profound loss in their life. Joseph struggled alone in both a pit in the wilderness and a prison in Egypt. Leah and Hagar and Batsheva lived the struggles of loveless marriages. Isaac felt the isolation of old age.

Moses was the final one of his generation. Throughout our sacred texts loneliness and isolation is a common thread in the narrative.

Back to our New Year's resolution. An article in last week's New York Time offered a simple and profound step that can help combat loneliness. One that it turns out that Beth Am is pretty good at. The article, titled: "An Overlooked Cure for Loneliness: Science tells us the solution may lie in what we do for others, not ourselves:" highlights the therapeutic element of volunteering as a pathway to purpose and meaning in our life (lives)."

In a [study of 10,000 volunteers](#) in Britain, about two-thirds agreed that their volunteering had helped them feel less isolated, particularly those ages 18 to 34. It's not just for Millennials -

"Among older adults, social isolation and loneliness [are associated](#) with higher rates of mortality, depression and cognitive decline and Experts say that volunteering not only helps people feel less lonely, it can also improve physical well-being.

A [five-year study](#) of more than 800 people in Detroit found that helping others who don't live with you can act as a buffer against the negative effects of stress. Although the study participants encountered stressful life events like illness, job loss or financial difficulties, those who spent time doing tasks for others — like errands, child care and housework — were less likely to die than those who had not helped others.

How about this one - [Research](#) suggests that volunteering consistently is what appears to reap the most benefits. In [one study](#), widowers ages 51 and above who volunteered two or more hours a week felt less lonely — and were no lonelier than the married volunteers.

Volunteering as an antidote to loneliness.

We have lots of amazing groups committed to deep tzedek work - our Community Organizing team working to build relationships locally, Our Refugee Awareness team, working with local organizations to help new refugees to America, our Dayenu Circle, raising awareness about Climate Justice. Here's one you can do right away - Our Pursue Justice team - committed to fighting to preserve our democracy - including leading a nation wide fast next Tuesday to protect the right to vote. Certainly those places are wonderful places to start if you're looking to strengthen your tzedek muscle in 2022.

We also have direct service volunteer opportunities including helping at the Community Services Agency food pantry in Mountain View. Or serving at our monthly breakfast at a family shelter with LifeMoves. We work with the Jewish Coalition for Literacy and Learning Home Volunteers - one of our Equal Start Partners to help instill a love of reading. These are all COVID cautious and very safe opportunities - some of them are virtual.

It doesn't have to be non-profit volunteering. We need greeters and letter writers at Beth Am. Did you know that, led by our board member Emily Nagonkar, a group of bakers have been delivering challahs once a month throughout the pandemic? Like to bake - we'll connect you. And if you find rewarding volunteer opportunities through your office or neighborhood or school -- terrific. Maybe you can invite a friend?

Like all resolutions, start slow - see what feels right to you. If you skip a day or a week - no worries. As, Val Walker, author of the book [400 Friends but Who Can I Call?](#) writes "As long as we care about others in the communities we live in, we can free ourselves from the grip of isolation and loneliness. Volunteering helps us grow a sense of

community, a sense of place—of belonging. It gives us the opportunity to create little sanctuaries of belonging with each other. Let's not [shy](#) away.

I certainly don't believe that volunteering is the panacea to loneliness woes. I know it takes more than that. But I am inspired. Beth Am is a bold and wonderful place. We can do this. So 2022 - The Year of Fighting Loneliness! The Year of Helping Out! It's gotta to be easier than losing weight!

Shabbat Shalom and Happy New Year!

על פי בקשת הקהל הנכבד  
במזע"ש 31.12.32

**נשף סילנסטר**

רקודים משעה 9 בערב עד 3 בבוקר  
קונפטי, סרפנטין ודקורציות

הס"ט 99 מיל. תשלום  
הס"ט 99 מיל. תשלום

The New-Year at the "VIENNA" CAFE  
Tel. 541. Haifa, Hadar-Hacarmel.

New-Year's Eve Saturday the 31st December 1932

**SPECIAL DANCE**  
from 9 P.M. - 3 A.M.

Attractions, Decorations, Balloons, Serpentine, Confetti.  
Admission 99 Mils. Reserve your Table.  
The Management.



<https://www.israel21c.org/celebrating-silvester-aka-the-secular-new-year-in-israel/>

<https://reformjudaism.org/silvester-celebrate-or-not-celebrate>

<https://www.haaretz.com/jewish/.premium.HIGHLIGHT-the-4th-century-pope-and-the-great-jewish-war-over-new-year-s-day-1.9411119>

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/21/well/mind/loneliness-volunteering.html>