

Dear Shearith Israel Family,

*The Timeless Tale of R' Yose.* The parable told by R' Yose 1,800 years ago (Tractate Megilla 24b) speaks with pellucid clarity to us today. R' Yose tells of encountering a blind man walking on the street curiously carrying a lighted torch. In the ensuing discussion between the inquiring Rabbi and the blind man (I'm omitting a few details), the Talmud rejects the suggestion that the help that others gave the blind man in outfitting him with a lighted torch was purely altruistic toward him. How could it be? He was blind and didn't need the light of the torch. But it wasn't purely selfish either on the part of the blind man's neighbors. They didn't need his torch to see either, since they could carry their own. The blind man wisely explains to R' Yose that others provide the torch so that *they*, his neighbors, could better see where *he* was walking and thereby help *him* avoid pitfalls and other obstacles. He is better off, since he participates in his own safe movement as best he can (and maybe avoids falls). His neighbors are also better off, their ability to help him made the easier by his holding his own torch. The entire community benefitted from the interconnected behavior. Symbiosis in human interactions was thus modeled and passed down to us as a precious legacy.

*A Lesson of COVID-19.* If there is any solace or consolation to COVID-19, I confess that, despite my efforts, I'm not the one who will find or tell of it. Even with the faint rays of light now visible as we tentatively climb out of lock-down, except for the tireless, prodigious efforts of Rabbi Soloveichik and our other Clergy, the energies of many of us are badly depleted. Many have lost loved ones, burying them in silence without community or communal prayer. Many others are still experiencing deep anxiety caused by months-long isolation. Many of us have lost jobs or are facing other serious financial hardships. Everyone's lives have been dislocated or disrupted, painfully evident not just in our elderly but in our young people. We are about to observe our fourteenth Shabbat out of our Synagogue. In silence we weep; in silence our Sanctuary weeps. So do not stop here for a silver lining, to borrow Milton's phrase. Yet so much about this disease and the havoc COVID-19 has wrought in our lives reminds me of the R' Yose's story. We

don protective face masks, not principally so that we will be safer but so that we will help others be safer, and hence indirectly we will be safer too. We even have taken to wearing homemade and other suboptimal masks, so that our health care professionals (may Heaven bless them all) will have the more effective variety. We have kept to our homes, in part to avoid this horrible plague but also so that we will not infect ourselves in ways that will deprive *others* of life-saving hospital beds, ventilators, or needed medical attention. The whole confusing metaphor of "flattening the curve" bespeaks a symbiosis of effort whereby our actions, not wholly altruistic and not wholly selfish, have finally improved the lot of our entire community and, hopefully, other communities in short order as well.

*Our Synagogue Re-Entry Symbiosis.* Our "Synagogue Re-entry Working Group" (combining medical, engineering, legal, finance, ritual, operations, and facilities expertise) remains committed to re-opening our Synagogue when it's safe. We are not rushing, but if there is any impulsion, it is so that our congregants who have lost loved ones or have anniversaries of the loss of loved ones can participate in the communal recitation of the Kaddish and Hashcabot. There are other events in Synagogue liturgy, for example communal prayer itself and the public reading of the Torah, that are also of profound importance. They would not be sacrificed were the sanctity of human life and the avoidance of the risk of disease less paramount in our religion. The Working Group's efforts to focus first on holding brief services on the outdoor portico reflects a moment of symbiosis worthy of R' Yose. Many of us will not be able to attend, since observing social distancing on the portico will not permit more than 10-15 people to pray there at a time. But we are willing to hold off for the sake of others. We will not stop at the portico. We will return to our Sanctuary in due course - when the Working Group, now with the help of engaged specialized architects and engineers, figures out an optimal way to do so safely. Even then, there will be sacrifices and symbiotic trade-offs we will have to make for each other. This will be especially true, we foresee, during the High Holidays, when we will all need to muster the wisdom and compassion of the blind man and his neighbors.

Finally, in our own effort to muster wisdom and compassion, on behalf of your officers and trustees, we wish to thank all of our Clergy for expressing, in different forums, our collective and adamant rejection of senseless hate and lawlessness from whatever quarter they emanate.

Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas