

October 29, 2020

Dear Shearith Israel family,

*Get Going!* There are abundant translations of the Almighty's directive to our Patriarch Abraham at the beginning of this week's *parasha*, Lech L'cha. Each can be the subject of homiletic interpretation and great erudition, both of which I wholly lack the capacity to provide. Clearly "go" is in the Hebrew "*lech*", and clearly "you" or "for you" or "to you" is in the Hebrew "*l'cha*". But do we have to be overly literal (what does "overly" literal mean, anyway)? We as a community are getting going, at least we should be. I hope that getting going does not need to have a geographic, traveling sense as it did in part for Abraham; the one thing that most of are NOT doing now is traveling geographically. We are, however, getting going in other ways, and for now these will have to suffice. We keep going to minyan, variously outdoor or indoor, on Shabbat and during the week. The Rabbi got going with his new "Art of the Torah" lecture series, (I told you it would be both great and grand, and it is). He is also getting going on "Friday Night Lights... on Thursdays", which is when we are scheduling it for after we change the clocks this weekend. We are going forward with our community Hatanim zoom-fest this coming Sunday. We are planning for Thanksgiving as well. And as a community we need to get going on "Paving Paradise", which I discuss below. At the communal level it feels like the "*lech*" is on some sort of track.

Now what about the "*l'cha*", the "you" part of all this "*lech*-ing". Is each of us doing all we can to help others or help the synagogue in ways big and small? Many of us are doing a lot. Could some of us be doing more? None of our elders will complain about too many phone calls checking up on them. No one I know will resent another invitation for a safe walk in the park, or a call, or anything that shows us reaching out to maintain our sanity and our community's unity. Let's take on one more act of kindness. Let's "*lech l'cha*".

*When the pox literally was on all the houses.* Does anyone know why the phrase that Mercutio thrice utters in Shakespeare's *Romeo & Juliet* has come down to us as "a pox on both your houses" (meaning both the Montagues and the Capulets). What he actually says is, "A plague o' both your houses!" Whether pox or plague,

COVID-19 has spread to more than two households -- but thankfully fewer than all. There have been plagues that have spread more widely and were much longer in duration. Read the 2017 book by Kyle Harper titled *The Fate of Rome: Climate, Disease, and the End of An Empire* (part of the Princeton History of the Ancient World series). Harper is a professor of classics and Provost at the University of Oklahoma. The book is fascinating, masterly researched, and, for a welcome change, humanely and humbly written. It is a *pre*-COVID-19 work adroitly covering not just history but economics, biology, micro-biology, ecology, climatology, and a good many other ologies to support the thesis that infectious disease plagues played perhaps an outsized role in the decline of the Roman Empire's hegemony over the world in the second half of its 1,000 year reign. Harper discusses three plagues in detail, the Antonine Plague of the years 165-180 C.E., which he and others speculate was possibly smallpox; the often overlooked Plague of Cyprian in the Third Century, which he speculates could have been a filovirus ("whose most notorious representative is the Ebola Virus"); and the Justinianic Plague that began in the year 541, a 200-year, devastating pandemic he and others speculate might have been the bubonic plague.

Harper's book is a *tour de force*, imho, though some of us might not find it easy reading material during our own pandemic. There are discomfiting similarities between the global spread of the ancient diseases he discusses and COVID-19 (incubation period, transmission to the unsuspecting, airborne particles, and the like). The one profound difference is that, while many of us today are as ignorant of "miasmas" as was the average Roman Empire subject, the scientific and medical profession then had little ability to help the population other than by bloodletting and "drying out" (there was some vague sense that isolation might help, but it wasn't practiced). Can you imagine if our physicians, scientists, and researchers today were as ignorant as the rest of us? "Here at Shearith Israel" we will continue to be thankful for and listen to our Working Group. As a community, we will not succumb to "compliance fatigue".

*Our Paved Paradise.* Joni Mitchell's 1970 song, *Big Yellow Taxi*, was a hit in her native Canada but never really here. When Counting Crows sang it 30 years later, it didn't do much better. It's a great song with the unforgettable refrain:

Don't it always seem to go

That you don't know what you've got til it's gone.

They paved paradise

And put up a parking lot.

Why didn't the song rise to the top of the charts? Poor title? Sure. No one can sing in Mitchell's register, an octave above High C? Also true, but no, I think the reason is that for many of us paving may precisely be a way to *achieve* paradise rather than *lose* it. That certainly applies to our Congregation given where we are right now.

The lot adjacent to our Sanctuary, long hosting our community house, has been a vacant, unsightly construction site for several years. I'm delighted to report that the Board of Trustees approved a plan for that site to become our paved paradise. Concretely, we will remove the existing rubble and construction fence and in their place compact the soil and install footings, a new chain link fence, gravel topping (uhm, paving), lighting, heaters, and a commercial grade tent. We are going to pave our paradise and in doing so create a different but worthy paradise for the next 2-5 years. Work is starting immediately. We will have a lot more to say about this. We will be coming to the Congregation for the funds necessary to do the project; current congregational coffers are needed for our normal operations, which, COVID-19 notwithstanding, continue to demand much more than we raise in dues. We will need your help. You can *lech l'cha* right next door to our paved paradise and help our Congregation enormously.

Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas