

December 3, 2020

Dear Shearith Israel family,

COVID-19 News: Clarification or Confusion? There has been lots of COVID-19 news since my email of last week. Two weeks ago, New York City, maintaining its adherence to numerical thresholds, reacted to worsening infection, spread, and mortality numbers by closing public schools. This week the City abandoned reliance on the numbers and announced that it will be re-opening some of the public schools, even though the numbers that supported the closures haven't improved. Judicial pronouncements have added to the public debate of the complex issues. We had a provisional ruling from the U.S. Supreme Court, issued near midnight of Erev Thanksgiving. The High Court granted a temporary injunction staying enforcement of certain New York State rules limiting the number of worshipers permitted in Houses of Worship located in designated "orange" and "red" zones. The temporary injunction was entered pending the Second Circuit Court of Appeals' expedited review of a trial court decision that made factual findings concerning the risks posed by COVID-19's spread. Those factual findings matter a lot to our consideration of the issues. The findings will need to be respected on appeal absent clear or legal error, but they are not of great use to us now pending the appeal. It is foreseeable that New York State, like New York City, will move away from numerical thresholds. To these events we must add over the past week a steady stream of data and conflicting views on the meaning of the data.

Where does all this leave us? Frankly, the recent events remind me of the cacophony at play six months ago, which I wrote to you about (e.g., [my email of May 22, 2020](#)). Then, in the midst of the confusion, we told the Congregation how we would be making decisions concerning the nettlesome issues pitting the profound importance of resuming and maintaining in-person prayer against profound concerns over the health of our members. I think it's time to repeat the methodology we articulated then:

We will honor and be guided by (i) dictates and directives of the government; (ii) the advice of our particular advisers, now called our COVID-19 Working Group; and (iii) particulars about our Congregation that we will take into account, bearing in mind what our sister congregations are doing in the area.

We will continue to adhere to this approach, though as the first of the guideposts -- the dictates and directives of our government -- get more fuzzy we will be placing even greater reliance on the second and third. Our COVID-19 Working Group feels that continued in-person prayer is still appropriately safe *if* we continue scrupulously to observe many precautions: wearing masks, staying socially distant, remaining essentially silent during communal prayer, limiting contact with our sacred objects, speeding up services to reduce overall time exposure. If and when we hold services indoors, we will also continue the numerous other precautions on which we spent considerable sums, like new a/c filters, new and expensive air scrubbers. We intend to continue to pray communally, essentially out of doors, until the Board of Trustees, with the advice of the Working Group, perceives that a change in one direction or another is warranted. We all hope for some improvement in the local data, while we wait for vaccines or some other modern miracle and find ways to keep up our spirits.

Faith and the Paving of Paradise. Our Paved Paradise Project grew largely out of the felt need for protective outdoor space coupled with the blessing that the lot adjacent to our Synagogue building could be retrofitted to fit our needs perfectly. The PPP has entailed clearing, leveling, draining, paving, tenting, and increasing temperature and air flow in the lot, braving the gauntlet of securing City permits, overcoming construction challenges, and cracking a considerable financial nut during a pandemic. Would anyone but a fool try to pull this off? Well, yes, those with faith and courage. It is the spirit of faith and courage that Congregation Shearith Israel has exemplified since our earliest congregants fought with Peter Stuyvesant for the right to stay, shortly after their arrival in Nieuw Amsterdam in 1654.

I have read about the Catholic doctrine of selling indulgences, where a monetary payment is promised to absolve one of past sins. We have all read about

promises of paradise made to the descendants of Abraham's other son, Ishmael. Verily, I can't keep my head above water in understanding Judaism, so I will not comment on any other religion. I can barely pronounce and surely can't spell soteriology. In Jewish belief, the Talmud speaks of people who achieve redemption with a single act (one place is Tractate Avodah Zara 18a). And, indeed, in one of the pages of Tractate Pesachim learned as part of the daily learning cycle (*daf yomi*) just this week, we learn that a person who makes a charitable donation while harboring the end-goal that a child, or indeed even the donator, will achieve salvation is nonetheless considered wholly righteous (*tzadik gamor*) (8b-9a). Now who doesn't want to be a *tzadik gamor*?

We believe that faith, when animated by the courage of action, sometimes achieves results. Whether we recite the Torah passages concerning the sacrifice of Isaac once a year on Rosh Hashana or every day at the beginning of services, we witness trilateral acts of faith that were ultimately stamped *PAID!*: The faith of Abraham, believing that the Almighty's promise of a future and of basic tenets of morality would not be undone; the faith of Isaac, that he would be granted reprieve from a sacrificial fate he did nothing to bring on; and the faith of the Almighty, that human beings could actually restrain their impulses for a greater good. The faith of each was paid, and repaid. Rabbi Sacks similarly defined "faith" with a teleological end-point or goal. "Faith means the courage to persist through all the setbacks, all the grief, never giving up, never accepting defeat". Doesn't Paul Simon mean the same thing in his great song *Proof*:

Faith
Faith is an island in the setting sun
But proof, yes
Proof is the bottom line for everyone

As a community, we have had faith that paving paradise was worth the cost. We acted with alacrity and courage. And we are nearly there. We are about \$25k away from making it a reality (a slight overrun for the flooring has brought our need to a smidge over \$250k).

This is the last call. We need a final helping hand. Please help us stamp the project *PAID*. [Click the link](#); create paradise. We will be ending our fundraiser in under a week. By December 10, 2020, the first night of Hanukah, we intend to be on our Paved Paradise and there light the oiled wick of our menorah, or hanukiah, that our congregation has lit for over 300 years. We will have a minyan to dedicate both the miracle of Hanukah and the miracle that we are here able to celebrate it, with the rest of us joining via Zoom. With [one more click](#) - do it now given the CARES Act's special tax rules for charitable donations this year - we will get there, together, as one united community.

The Punny Punsters of the Paving Paradise Project. As you know, I don't really go in for alliterations, clever turns of phrase, or puns. But don't good ones make you smile? And don't great ones make you want to donate to charity? I'm sure of it. So try these on: The first comes from Lia A. Solomon, a native daughter of our Congregation, who mailed it in from college that, far from doing what Joni Mitchell sings about -- "paving paradise to put up a parking lot" -- we are *actually* doing just the opposite: paving a parking lot to put up paradise. Clever, no? Cha-ching. [Hit the link](#), donate generously here.

If that doesn't boat your float, how about these from staunch, unceasing Congregational supporters Rachel and Jonathan Herlands? Rachel and Jonathan want all of us to "cement" our commitment to the paving project; to step up and "hit the pavement running". They think that "any member who doesn't support this endeavor should be TARred and feathered". "This project", they add, "like so many others, is a marathon, not a race, and we'll do our best to stay in the running". The best of all: Chiding me for stooping to begging for the remaining funds we need, they instruct: "No need to grovel; bring on the gravel". These are hilarious. They've loosened you up for a topping up or a new gift? [Hit the link!](#)

I'm officially opening a contest to beat the puns off of Rachel and Jonathan about our Paving Paradise Project. Send in your entries - puns, turns of phrase, some clever locution. Entries received with the promise of a check or donation, well, [wink, wink!](#)

Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas