

May 28, 2020

Dear Shearith Israel Family:

When a Sanctuary Isn't a sanctuary. How we all wish that completing the counting of the Omer, which we celebrate tonight with the onset of *Shabuot*, would coincide with returning to our Sanctuary, where this Shabbat will mark twelve weeks of absence and isolation. It is not to be. Although Governor Cuomo is now permitting socially distanced groups of a maximum of ten people per building to congregate for service, neither we nor any of our sister Congregations is scheduling services. Our Congregation's 15-member COVID-19 Working Group, mentioned in last week's update, is busy trying to figure out the safest and most suitable way to reopen our beloved Synagogue. Various options are being considered, including pilot attempts to focus on those saying Kaddish, use of the outdoor portico, forward thinking to Tisha B'Ab and to the High Holidays, etc. No option will be recommended until it is fully vetted by all relevant areas of expertise and when the Working Group will be able to say, with reasonable confidence, that no attending congregant will be exposed to any undue risk. We have no date by which that will happen, and we have no date by which we will be fully back to what we are accustomed to think of as normal. It will happen at the right time given the complexities and constraints being considered by a Group of extraordinary professionals whose goal is as prompt a return to a new normal as safety and prudence will permit. Right now, our Sanctuary is not the sanctuary of peace, dignity, and inspiration that our Congregation has had the privilege of experiencing for nearly 125 years. Now, unless used with scrupulous attention to medical protocol, our sacred space would be a possible vector for the transmission of disease. Without our members, our Hazanim and Choir, as well as visitors from the world over, our Sanctuary is a sad place. With notable, even glorious exceptions -- when our Clergy are there for brief moments for our collective benefit -- it is empty except for the silent cries of those bereft of loved ones, who want to be there but can't, and the "virtual" attendance by those of us trying to offer solace and condolence from a distance.

When a Congregation Truly Is a Community. But that's not even half our collective story, is it? Our recent updates have separated discussion of our efforts to find a safe way to reopen our Sanctuary (as above) and the monumental intellectual, spiritual, and ritual learning and teaching that Rabbi Soloveichik, Rabbi Rohde, and Reverend Edinger have been tirelessly sharing with us. The separation of space and spirit gives the former ostensible equal importance that perhaps it doesn't deserve. As beloved and sacred as our current Sanctuary is, what defines us is not our space but our unified community within our space. Our West 70th Sanctuary is our Congregation's fifth location since 1654 (where exactly we prayed as a

Congregation during our first few decades remains obscure). On the one hand, five Sanctuaries (+/-) in over 300 years isn't so many, so each is of great moment in our history. This is attested to by our Consecration Shabbatot, including the one for Crosby Street, this very Shabuot. We remember with song, prayer, and reverence each prior (and our current) space. At the same time, our Congregation has not been defined by any particular edifice or physical structure. In the past, when we moved, our then-Sanctuary didn't work for us, either because the size of the Congregation outgrew the space, or because the neighborhood changed, or because "civilization" moved north from the Battery (or because "The British Are Coming!"). As special and important to us as our space has been, and as truly glorious as our current Sanctuary is, what we remember is not the walls but what was within, the community, the Congregation that populated it. What defined and continues to define us is our community, our friends and neighbors, the spiritual strength we ourselves gain and give each other. As Shakespeare put it in *Richard II*, "I count myself in nothing else so happy / As in a soul remembering my good friends". Right now, our Sanctuary isn't working for us. (No, we aren't moving.) But our Congregation, our community, feels very strong. Our ritual leaders (with the help of our Executive Director and Staff) are the primary reason for this. But each of our congregants is a core reason as well. If we stay connected, we will not just survive but thrive as a Congregation no matter how long it will be until we can once again experience our Sanctuary as a community.

Thank you all. Bless us all. *Moadim L'simha*, and Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas