

July 2, 2020

Dear Shearith Israel family,

*Back in Our Synagogue!* Much of the rest of the world seems still to be in the throes of an “emotional coronacoaster” – an apt neologism spreading nearly as virally as COVID-19 did and sadly in many places still is. Yet here in our microscopic corner of reality, our Synagogue this week took the first small, timid, but concrete and positive step back to normalcy. As mentioned in recent postings, the Congregation’s Board of Trustees and the Synagogue Reentry Working Group concluded that that the additional safety measures installed on our effectively outdoor portico were sufficient to permit minha and arbit for 10-14 socially distant congregants who can fit there. Big deal, you might say. Yet to me, to borrow the timeless observation of R’ Yohanan ben Zakkai (Sayings of the Fathers, 2:9), it was for this that we were created. It’s a mighty big deal, and one we should all be proud of. After 108 days without a minyan, our Synagogue is once more available to those saying Kaddish or observing a *nahala*, the anniversary of the passing of a loved one. We all hope that this is the first step in what will ultimately be a fuller reentry. Almost certainly, that path will not be linear. I had the privilege of being part of the “test” minyan. Nearly half of those present were saying Kaddish. Being able to participate with them ranks as high as nearly anything I’ve been able to participate in during these difficult and confounding times. Everyone in attendance felt buoyed even by a masked, shielded, muffled, and plain-chanting Rabbi Ira. We are not done. We are actively analyzing other areas where safe services can be held. By the week after next, we hope to announce plans for a meaningful Shearith Israel observance of Tisha B’Ab. We are tirelessly trying to find suitable ways to observe Rosh Hashana and Kippur together as a community. With the Almighty’s help, something will work out.

*Oh Our Songless Service!* At our portico services this week, much of our demeanor was less strange than you might think. In our capacious main Sanctuary, many are the times when I’m standing or sitting six feet away from my nearest co-congregant. And, as previously observed, we aren’t a handshaking crowd anyway, so the absence of that wasn’t at all weird. Masks *were* weird, true; but by now even that has taken on a degree of normalcy in COVID-19 Central. None of these superficialities, however, compare to the fact that, for the protection of others, our services are without singing other than Rabbi Ira’s beautiful, piercing plainchant. Ella Fitzgerald said, “The only thing better than singing is more singing”. Who knows that better than we? Many of us have

rightly dubbed our Congregation a “Singing Synagogue”. Yet we have accepted silence rather than staying dark. It’s a tradeoff worth making, certainly for now. Our musical tradition, our canon, has taken shape over hundreds of years. It inspires and exalts. Many of us can’t get the tunes out of our heads throughout the year. And it’s a good thing. For in silently saying the words of our *tefilot*, we need to *think* the music, *imagine* it. To go without our songs and melodies in our Congregation can only be temporary, justified only by the profound necessity of the moment.

*Carry On.* After my essay of last week, our dear Congregant, Steven Beispiel, wrote me a beautiful note. Steve’s note reflects our collective feeling that, as sad and hard and depressing and lonely as these past months have been, our current travails need to be seen through the perspective of our families’ respective narratives and more broadly through the continuum of our people’s history (though the tragic moments of these months will never be forgotten). Ten years ago, on the occasion of our daughter Tess’s Bat Mitzvah on Hanukah, Tess drew a menorah using the names of the 52 countries our members hail from. What a remarkable, really incredible, legacy. And, no doubt, from each of those countries, and for each of the families comprising those Congregants, come stories as inspiring of those of Steve’s family. As we are lifting our heads, a little, we hear what Steven Sills (then a member of Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young) seared into our memories 50 years ago: “Rejoice, rejoice, we have no choice but to carry on”. Or, as the group Fun. sung more than 40 years later, “If you’re lost and alone/Or your sinking like a stone/Carry on”. Rejoice we must in digging out slowly and safely. For 108 days we were lost, alone, and sinking. Yet we will all, together, as a community, carry on.

Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas