

February 18, 2021

Dear Shearith Israel family,

Lots on Purim. We have lots to say about the holiday of lots. Purim is a week away. It is certainly time to start worrying about whether holiday-celebrating New Yorkers will muster the brains, discipline, and fortitude to avoid regressing back to being the COVID-19 epicenter of the world. The City might not have helped matters by reopening indoor dining just this week. The infection and disease numbers on the UWS and in the City are generally improving. But they are still far higher than where we viewed the tolerable ceiling to be earlier on. Our own physician experts are observing cases of COVID-19 infection even among those who have already had their second dose of the vaccine, albeit in apparently milder form. Our experts do not yet have enough data about the vaccine to make new recommendations.

Looking a week ahead to Purim, Japan has made headlines maintaining consistently low rates of COVID-19 transmission by avoiding the 3Cs -- closed spaces, crowded places, and close-contact settings (though I'm pretty sure those Cs are not Japanese words). Even in the dignified Shearith Israel Purim celebrations of yore, we have practiced a C or two ourselves. Not this year. As a Congregation, we are not going to blink in maintaining as safe an environment as our Working Group experts have been able to design given who we are, what we can afford, etc. No one will enter the synagogue or Paved Paradise (wait till you see the suggestions for renaming below!) without filling out the required forms and attesting to compliance with strict safety precautions. At the same time, we are doing everything *halakha* permits to broaden access to *Megillah* reading next Thursday night and Friday morning. (And don't forget that this Shabbat is Shabbat Zakhor; if you want to hear the reading you need to sign up in advance for in-person attendance for the entire service, out- or in-doors, or even just the five minute recitation of Zakhor.) Sign up for in-person participation on Purim if you feel comfortable for yourself and responsible to others in doing so. No one will be turned away because of space limitations; we will simply add more readings. Join by Zoom if you cannot join in person (but sign up for that, too). In either case we

have safe ways to give gifts to the poor (*matanot l'ebyonim*) through our [online portals](#). Giving can hardly be easier (I marvel at how much harder it is to earn it than to give it away.) Give generously. If you do, every other worry on Purim will vanish, guaranteed.

I'm already saddened that so many of us who are rightly apprehensive about the health risks will not be joining us in person for Purim. But, not just for our Congregation but for the Jewish communities everywhere, it is our hope and prayer that, in celebrating Purim this year, the only crap shoot lottery concerning the safety of the Jewish people will be the one we read about in the *Megilla*. To the extent we can, we hope and pray that all of us will feel both joy and gladness in this happiest of our holidays (it's actually tied for first; I know you know the other holiday in first place - my question is from where do we first learn the ranking?).

Trifecting the Terrific. The refrain of the 1971 Three Dog Night hit, *Just an Old Fashioned Love Song*, goes:

Just an old fashioned love song
Coming down in three-part harmony
Just an old fashioned love song
One I'm sure they wrote for you and me

I am sure that the magic of the "three" in the "three-part harmony" is lost on no one ([see my email of palindromic 1/21/21](#)). This week's Torah *parasha* of *Terumah*, together with the prior two of *Yitro* and *Mishpatim*, form a three-part harmony of their own, a deep and important harmony that maps onto our Congregation and our religion more generally, most poignantly in our collective consciousness and aspirations.

With the giving of the Ten Commandments, the *parasha* of *Yitro* presents among the BIGGEST ideas of all time. That *parasha* is connected, quite literally, to *Parashat Misphatim*. Indeed Rashi famously cites the connecting Hebrew letter

Vav - denoting "and" - in the first word of *Parashat Mishpatim* and observes the deep connection between the grand, lofty principles of the Ten Commandments in *Yitro* and the equally important yet more micro-principles in *Mishpatim*. The third of the trifecta, *Parashat Terumah*, is all about the painstaking, detailed laws for the building of the Tabernacle. The Tabernacle was the small (btw, it wasn't really that small - can anyone calculate how many square feet all in?), portable temple that accompanied the Jewish people throughout their 40-year sojourn in the desert (and then some). The Tabernacle is the heuristic if not architectural model for congregations and synagogues post-destruction of the Second Temple in ~70 A.D.

The combination of these three *parshiot* is any lawyer's dream, especially if that lawyer happens to be Parnas of this glorious institution. *Yitro* and *Mishpatim* are packed with laws - and what lawyer doesn't love laws. *Mishpatim* is certainly a lawyer's cornucopia. It contains 53 separate legal affirmative edicts and negative proscriptions. Literally thousands of pages of our Talmud are devoted to decoding the Biblical verses in *Mishpatim*. More varied than the Bar exam, the topics covered in *Mishpatim* range from the treatment of servants and the enemy in war to criminal laws such as murder, other homicides, and bribery; from the law of tort (the goring ox) to the commercial law of bailment and lending. Laws governing the relations between human beings predominate.

Terumah, while it contains precious few precepts in actual use today and involves the Almighty's blueprint for the Tabernacle, is just as clearly a Parnas's favorite. Why? Because *Terumah* provides the major theoretical explanation for communal worship outside the Temple. Without exaggeration, the *parasha* explains why Judaism remains a vital religion for so many of us today. The central premise underlying successful community building is laid out in the second verse of *Terumah*:

"And the Lord spoke unto Moses, saying: Speak unto the children of Israel, that they take for Me an offering; of every person *whose heart maketh that person willing* ye shall take My offering"

The essence of congregational support and endurance is the freedom to be a part, the freedom to create and sustain living institutions. It is that freedom that creates communities of the faithful. It has ensured the continued vibrancy of Jewish communal life for 2,000 years.

It is due to the combination of the principles taught in these three *parshiot* that we have survived and thrived as a nation. Big ideas become moribund or hopelessly jumbled in practice without the admittedly prosaic detail that actually legislates how we get along with other human beings. And all law remains arid without actual people to live it. These three-fold tenets sustain the world - at least our world. The recipe is as simple, and yet as profound, as an old fashioned love song.

Renaming Paradise. If the sheer number of proposed alternate names for our newly cleaned, smoothed, and lawned parcel adjacent to our Synagogue is any indication, then "Paved Paradise" must be the worst name ever! Actually, I think most people - the right thinking among us - love "Paved Paradise", for all the reasons it connotes, for all the allusions it conjures. But there are a few who dislike it with such passion that, like elections in Chicago (sorry, Rabbi Soloveichik), some entrants voted for an alternative early and often. I got nearly 20 suggestions for new names. I have vetted them all with a panel of highly esteemed judges.

One (maybe two) of the proposed names is brilliant. Others are really good. But without wanting to put my thumb too heavily on the scale, I will list them alphabetically (omitting a few that were "parnas" laden):

- Astro Acreage
- Astro Assemblage
- Beit Bitumen
- Congregational Conclave
- Exterior Edifice

Garden of Extra-Earthly Delights
G-d's Little (Half) Acre
Grassy Greenery
Nuestro Paraiso
Peated Pavilion
Prayground
Tented Turf
Terra Asphaltum
The Tent Commandment
Turfed Tract

Vote for your top choice. Feel free to suggest yet another. But, just for the heck of it, maybe one vote only per entrant this time 'round?
Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Louis M. Solomon". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Louis Solomon, Parnas