

May 20, 2021

Dear Shearith Israel family,

*Backing out of a lobster trap.* Last week, the CDC not only changed its Covid-19 guidance on mask wearing and social distancing for vaccinated people; it changed the very way it wants us to approach issues of safety and precautions against the spread of Covid-19. For the past year we have been taught that we as a community need to worry about every one of us in it. So for example, after briefly being told not to wear masks, we were told to wear them, not so much for our safety but for the safety of others. Now the CDC feels that those unvaccinated should worry about themselves, by for example staying socially distanced and masked. Earlier this week, New York appears to have followed suit.

Despite what the media is calling the whipsaw quality of the changes, this is all grounds for optimism. I'm not going to whine about inconsistent pronouncements or even vague ones (what do we do with the half of the population that is not vaccinated yet, for example, and what do you about kids, who need to be masked when their parents don't). We've been urging patience and understanding as well as caution, since at bottom the situation is both unclear and dynamic, hardly a good combination to justify table-pounding pronouncements that evaporate when the facts, situation, experience, and understanding change.

Despite how heartening the new guidance is, it will not surprise anyone that our Congregation is going to address the rate and scope of changes in the Covid-19 protections we have adopted in the context of calm, reasoned deliberations of our Covid-19 Working Group. After a year of sound and sage advice, the Working Group has gained our trust and confidence. Not once in over 50 meetings has anyone in the Group felt the need to accuse anyone else of "not following the science" or, frankly, of leveling any other unhelpful or ad hominem distractions. The Group is comprised of medical doctors, including infectious disease specialists, who have been seeing Covid-19 patients for over a year, architects/engineers, facility experts, Synagogue management, Clergy, and trustees. The meetings are often lengthy and "lively". Yes the Group, or individual

members in the Group, have biases, but they are *our* biases. We can count on the Group to continue to keep us safe as well as feeling safe. In [my email of April 29, 2021](#), I summarized the five-step taxonomy that the Working Group is using to analyze the issues. Even with the new guidance, it will continue to do so. A lobster can actually back out of an escape-proof trap, but only if it's done slowly, carefully, deliberately. Even a mare's nest can be made less confusing by thoughtful and aggressive contemplation of how to navigate through it (two marks for the etymological history of "mare's nest", which is a weird concept, right (mares don't even have nests)?)

We will have more concrete announcements to make by next week. In the meantime, please sign up and check the information about masking and social distancing, which will remain in place for another week for both indoor and outdoor services (the fact-specific decisions being made to accommodate certain types of travelers while not increasing community risk are being made with some frequency; if you present such a case, contact Reverend Edinger). The additional week will allow us to revisit some security issues as well, again as a means of making us not only be safe but feel safe as well. In all events, please come to services if you feel comfortable doing so. We as a community, and you, will benefit immeasurably as a result.

*Our Own Bo Bayom.* The Talmud tells a well-known, wonderful story that Rabbi Soloveichik has spoken on - the day when Rabban Gamliel was removed as Head of the Academy in Yavneh, or Beit Midrash, for what might be characterized as a clash of personalities with Rabbi Yehoshua or, alternatively, as fundamentally different views about how Jewish law should develop in the aftermath of the destruction of the Second Temple in ~68-70 C.E. There were several disputes - about the ritual purification of an oven, about how to calculate the date for Rosh Hashana, about the legal position of reciting arbit (whether voluntary or obligatory), among others. These were not frivolous issues, and the positions of the two Torah giants each had ample support. What sent things off the rails was a perception that Rabban Gamliel did not treat Rabbi Yehoshua respectfully, at one point requiring him to stand while being interrogated on a matter of law. This went too far, and Rabban Gamliel was replaced (it turned out temporarily). In

place of Rabban Gamliel, Rabbi Elazar ben Azaria was appointed *Nasi* or Head of the Academy.

It is this day that is remembered nearly 2,000 years later. It is remembered not just for the profound lesson we are taught about how to deal with disagreement, though that would be enough of a reason for us to retell these stories today. The day is remembered for a great many other, OUTSIZED things that occurred (whether because of the replacement of Rabban Gamliel or not - well that's a matter of debate). Let me list a few (see Tractate *Berachot* 28a). First, legal debates that has never been resolved were amicably settled. Second, other laws were clarified. Third, we learn that the entire potpourri of Mishnayot forming Tractate *Eduyot* was laid out and decided upon. Extraordinarily, this included six cases in which Beit Shammai was more lenient than Beit Hillel. The final super-normal event of the day was that the usual guarding of and limitation of entry into the Beit Midrash was removed on that day, the feeling being that Rabban Gamliel's rules were overly strict and limited people from learning Torah. As a result, as our congregant Dr. Meyer Solny reminded me, the Talmud says "many benches" were added to accommodate the overflow in the Beit Midrash. This event, real or apocryphal, is wondrously enlightening. The Talmud teaches that on that day enough new students entered to occupy 400 benches (the alternative calculation given in the Talmud is 700 benches). All this occurred "*on that day*" - or in Hebrew/Aramaic, *bo bayom*.

This past Monday, on the first day of Shabuot 5781, our Congregation experienced its own, magnificent *Bo Bayom*. We held morning services on our Paved Paradise. Our choir was present. Fellow congregants we haven't seen in over a year came to enjoy our special holiday melodies. That the weather cooperated beautifully was beyond fortuitous. Our friends and fellow congregants just kept coming. Our maintenance staff had to bring out extra chairs - and then more, and more, and more. In the end, about 118 congregants were safely praying on the sunny and green lawn adjacent to our synagogue building. The time and space were deeply beautiful. It was our *Bo Bayom* 5781, and it was spectacular.

Special thanks to Rabbi Soloveichik, who schlepped chairs into the women's section; to Rabbi Rohde, who could be heard by everyone, chanting the Ten Commandments at the foot of what our Trustee Vicki Bengualid described as the cavernous mountains (akin to Mount Sinai) of the surrounding buildings; to Reverend Edinger, for among other things planning, sign-up, safety protocols, and logistics required to make this happen; and to John Quinones and his able colleagues for the safe and stable execution.

And thank you to our itinerant and now-retired cartoonist-in-residence Alan Zwiebel for his Covid Ten Commandments:



*Half-Full Report.* With Shabuot intervening earlier this week, fewer of you had time to read or react to my request of last week for volunteers to help organize the several great programs we are planning for Paved Paradise this summer. So we are going to extend the deadline for another week. In the meantime:

- ***The green new spiel*** (doesn't anyone want to propose a competing name for this?). We first want to thank Rabbi Soloveichik, who is planning to commence an outdoor Shabbat afternoon class after Memorial Day.

- **Movie night.** Second, we want to thank Andrew and Jacqueline Klaber, who will help organize Movie Night on Paved Paradise. Email Barbara Reiss with movie suggestions for Andrew and Jacqueline to consider. I know Andrew likes *Ghost Busters*. I want *The Princess Bride* and, on behalf of an anonymous donor, have been authorized to offer a \$180 donation to the Synagogue if anyone can beat Rabbi Soloveichik in a fair and square quiz to see if anyone (on earth?) knows more about that movie than our Rabbi. Email me if you want to challenge him. Also email me if you want increase the stakes. This could get really fun! Who remembers Paul Newman in "The Hustler"?

Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas