

May 27, 2021

Dear Shearith Israel family,

Our Cautious, Further Opening. The Synagogue's Covid-19 Working Group has followed the protocols and taxonomy of considerations laid out previously (see [my email of April 29, 2021](#)). The Working Group has paid particular attention to the pervasiveness of vaccination within our community (based on the plentiful and helpful responses to our survey), data on the effectiveness of the vaccine in vaccinated people, data on disease transmission *by* vaccinated persons, and data on the differential risks of indoor vs. outdoor settings. The Group was also sensitive to who we are as a particular community. Based on a full consensus achieved by the Working Group through thoughtful, respectful celebration and discussion, we are pleased to be implementing the following additional steps toward the safe return to pre-Covid-19 normalcy in our communal services:

1. For this week, in our *outdoor* Shabbat minyan, there will be vaccinated and unvaccinated sections. Those vaccinated can sit in either section and may choose to be unmasked in the vaccinated section. Those unvaccinated, including vaccine-ineligible children, can sit only in the unvaccinated section and will remain masked. We will continue to observe social distancing, but we will begin to return to pre-Covid-19 rituals for our Torah service. Hazzanim leading services will be masked. Rabbi Soloveichik, if he speaks after services, will not be. Starting in June, in just over a week, the Rabbi will start giving an outdoor class on Shabbat afternoons, with the same rules for masking/unmasking. Daily outdoor services will be similar. You must continue to sign up in advance, but if you submit proof of vaccination, we expect the sign-up form will in due course be abbreviated.
2. For this Shabbat, our *indoor* minyan will retain the protections and procedures that we have been observing. We are delighted to be celebrating a bar mitzvah this Shabbat. (Mazal tov to grandparents Jacob and Malka Aaron, our bar mitzvah Zachary, and Zachary's mother, Gila, and sister, Skylar.) You must continue to sign up in advance. Weekday indoor services will be similar.
3. As we said last week, we have arranged for additional security.

Naming Names! I challenge you to identify a set of sacred texts more doggedly protective of the reputations of others than those of Judaism. We are taught to avoid evil speech about others, *lashon hara*, and indeed we are adjured to avoid even praising another person if the discussion could result in negative statements about that person. So concerned are we not to diminish others, we use aliases and other means of conveying information without “naming names” so that crucially important lessons of life can be communicated without even inadvertently hurting others. This approach is as old as the Torah itself and is so ingrained that we place people who are careful about their speech among the shiniest jewels in our diadems of greatness (in post-Temple times, second perhaps only to learned teachers?).

It is for that reason that we should find the recently learned (in the Daf Yomi) pages 35b and 38a of Tractate *Yoma* so interesting, even arresting. On page 35b, our Sages address the excuses various of us routinely give for not measuring up. Antedating by millennia the endless jokes that begin, “a rabbi, a priest, and a something”, or “a physicist, an economist, and a lawyer”, the Talmudic text literally begins, “a poor person, a wealthy person, and a wicked person come to judgment”. In each case the Heavenly Court asks a single question: Why did you not study more? When the poor person seeks to invoke his poverty as an excuse, the Talmud asks, oh yeah, were you as poor as Hillel? The Talmud goes on to tell the timeless story of how poor that great Sage was yet how he was so desirous of learning that, though unable to afford to enter the House of Study, he nonetheless climbed up to the skylight to listen in and nearly froze to death under several feet of snow (and you think we have changing weather patterns?). When the wealthy person tries to excuse his failure to learn by showing that with his wealth came many demands on his time, the Talmud asks, oh yeah, were you wealthier than R Elazar ben Charsom? The Talmud goes on to tell of that Sage’s wealth, and the enormous demands on his time, yet observes that he nonetheless made time to learn. And to the wicked person (really, one with uncontrollable appetites and desires) whose excuse was that he was so handsome that his evil inclination got the better of him, the Talmud asks, oh yeah, were you more handsome than Joseph? The Talmud goes on to tell both of Joseph’s physical beauty and of his ability to resist the urges of sin.

Comparisons to our shining lights is common when there is no criticism implied. But in this case, does the naming of names seem, well, out of character? That the

Talmud is trying to teach us something is made even clearer by considering the discussion on page 38a. To leave no room for doubt, the Mishna there condemns by name those families who failed to teach the next generation the unique talents they employed in the Temple service. The *House of Garmu*, we are told, refused to teach the intricate process of baking the *lehem hapanim*, or Showbread. The *House of Avtinas* refused to teach the recipe or process of making the *ketoret*, or incense. Hugas, a *Levite*, refused to teach a special method for music making in the Temple. And *Ben Kamtzar* refused to teach how to manipulate in one hand four writing instruments at the same time in order to write the four letters of the Tetragrammaton simultaneously. Our Sages, in particular Rabbi Akiba, tried to ameliorate several of these criticisms. But to the extent there is a colorable basis for exculpating the families' conduct, doesn't that make even more noteworthy the fact that the Talmud mentions them by name?

I respectfully offer the following. In each of the stories, the Sages are concerned about posterity, about the transmission of our beliefs, morals, ritual to the next generation. In the great stories beginning with the equivalent of "three people walk into a bar", the posterity inheres in conveying not just learning but the importance of learning – learning about learning. This meta-story literally takes the end of life for one generation and passes wisdom on to the next. In the Mishna about the four families (and, as the italicized parts of their names shows, the Talmud is emphasizing the generational legacies of these families), the continuity is about Temple ritual that, once gone, will never be re-learned. The ritual will be lost without transparent and selfless transmission. More fundamentally, the belief that the ritual will not be needed because the Jews and their religion would end was the most negative and damaging of beliefs that we as a nation could adopt. Our Sages needed to do everything they could to subvert what the brilliant word-ologist William Safire is said to have put into the mouth of the otherwise inarticulate Spiro Agnew, "nattering nabobs of negativism". It was so important that our Sages were willing to compromise on something so profound as not naming names.

["And When I Die" is a great song](#) written by the great songwriter Laura Nyro. It was recorded by Peter, Paul and Mary, though BS&T made it famous in the late 1960s. To capture the Talmud's teaching, I do not here quote the song's memorable couplet,

“I swear there ain’t no Heaven
But I pray there ain’t no Hell”

What I was thinking of instead was the three-liner, not as humorous but just as trenchant:

“And when I die, and when I'm gone
There'll be one child born
In this world to carry on, to carry on”

That is what the Talmud was trying to secure. It is what we need to secure for our Congregation. And if it takes naming names, for praise or criticism, well that far we cannot go, but we don't need to; the Talmud has already shown us the way.

Half-Full Report. Three items to report, plus 2 photos:

First, I knew my challenge would not go unmet. Instantly, proposed alternatives to the name of Rabbi Soloveichik's Shabbat afternoon class on Paved Paradise came over the e-transom from Faith Fogelman and Paul Beispel (no, I'm not going to tell you who proposed which – they are all super):

Inside the Gates
Learning on the Lawn
Maven on the Green

Now these are inspired. I'll let you all vote for your favorite (rank them please), but each of these is excellent.

Second, we got a handful of additional movie night suggestions, including *Young Frankenstein*. Victor Owen prefers *Cool Hand Luke* to *The Hustler*. Hopefully there will be more than one movie night. But there will only be one that is first. And overwhelmingly *The Princess Bride* is the preferred first choice. Of course the competition is unfair, but, as Peter Falk said, “Who said life is fair? Where is that written?” It's unfair because congregants are voting for *The Princess Bride* so that they can see our Rabbi compete to become *The Princess Bride* Champion of the Galaxy – *if* he wins the battle to see who knows more about the movie. We've already raised \$500, so that's good, but I really think we can raise more on this. What's not good is that no one has stepped up to challenge Rabbi Soloveichik in the actual contest. (If you know a ringer, let me know. We have neither pride nor

shame.) Come on people, our Rabbi is only mortal (though, to butcher a phrase from Orwell's *Animal Farm*, some of us are more mortal than others when it comes to movie trivia). Step up and compete. What's the worst that can happen? Third, we are going to organize tables and chairs on Paved Paradise for one evening during the week. Assuming you are vaccinated or suitably protected and can protect others, please come and sit, read, chat. If you have a preference for which day of the week, please advise Barbara Reiss. If you can commit to a day or two to "host" and greet others, please do that, too.

My "plus 2" are the attached photos. The first is titled, Lawnmower on Paved Paradise, and we have John Quinones to thank for the hilarity. The second, untitled, has nothing to do with anything except that it was snapped during our daughter Lia's camping trip in Virginia earlier this week. It's gorgeous, that's all – but hey maybe that's enough.



Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom. Good Memorial Day to us all.

Louis Solomon, Parnas