

July 8, 2021

Dear Shearith Israel family,

*Steady as we go.* Do not worry that I'm running out of ways to say, "We are watching the dynamics of Covid-19 disease spread, and we are not embarking on any radical changes". No sooner had we welcomed the Delta variant to these pages last week than the disease spread numbers in the City have stalled in their weekly improvement. A scientific announcement from Israel also just reported that the Pfizer vaccine is only 64% effective against the Delta variant. At 64%, the vaccine is still as effective as most flu vaccines in most years. And if being vaccinated prevents most of us who contract Covid-19 diseases from getting seriously ill, you might say, well, why not just take the precautions we take against the flu. The point may be fair for individuals or families but seems insufficient for us as a Congregation. Your Working Group does not see its mission as keeping us about as safe as we are against the flu (and who knows whether, in the future, we will be more mindful about getting our flu vaccines and taking the easy and effective hygienic precautions to limit flu spread). Our current plan is to maintain the status quo for Shabbat and daily services and keep Paved Paradise available for lots of programs that can safely be done outdoors (especially if you like doing them in the rain!).

Tisha B'Ab planning is also proceeding as previously announced – but please, if you want to join us, you need to sign up. Our thinking is that we will open the Synagogue to more congregants and visitors than have been joining us recently. We plan to hold services indoors for those who are vaccinated and, assuming sufficient interest (and we are nearly there now), services outdoors for those who prefer. The Rabbi is planning to speak indoors after the reading of *Eikha*.

*Conclusions and New Beginnings.* This week marks two significant conclusions and two significant beginnings. This Shabbat, which is *Rosh Hodesh Ab*, we will read the double *parshiot* of *Mattot-Masei* to complete the Fourth Book of the Torah, *Bamidbar*. On Shabbat afternoon we will start the Fifth and final Book of the Torah, *Debarim*. This week (today to be precise) we are also finishing Tractate *Yoma* in the *Daf Yomi* cycle. We will immediately begin Tractate *Sukkah* tomorrow.

*Mattot-Masei* are wonderfully varied *parshiot*. Keeping promises; where to live upon arrival into Israel (isn't it fascinating how 2-1/2 of the Twelve Tribes did not want to enter The Promised Land after all the years (indeed centuries) of anticipation?); how inheritance should pass; cities of refuge; as well as a listing of the 42 places the Israelites had journeyed between the time they left Egypt and arrived at the brink of entry into Israel nearly 40 years later. The narrative of the *parshiot* reads like a positive version of The Beatles' *A Day in the Life* (which maybe is the best McCartney-Lennon collaboration but not the greatest Beatles song – which is your favorite?).

Ok, you will say, we have two *parshiot*-worth of stories, and together, at 244 verses, they are longer than any single *parasha*. Still, what a fitting way to end *Bamidbar*. The topics taken up are not only varied but, well, so normal. They constitute the challenges of a community that is moving away from constant complaining – which arose during the period that the Israelites were expecting “manna from Heaven” so to speak, instead of solving problems as a nation “on their own”. As I've explained (see my [email of April 29, 2021](#)), the doubling of the *parshiot* is done quite deliberately, every year, so that we can begin *Debarim* and the *Haftarah* of *Hazon* and its theme of consolation to conclude the three-week period preceding Tisha B'Ab.

Unlike the clockwork timing of the ending of *Bamidbar*, the conclusion of Tractate *Yoma* and commencement of Tractate *Sukkah* are not intentionally hard-wired into our calendars. Rather, it is our good fortune that we are able to begin the study of Tractate *Sukkah* at a time that will enable us to complete the Tractate right before the actual holiday of *Sukkot* itself this year. The timing arises from how the seven-plus year *Daf Yomi* cycle happens to fall this year. Now if you think that's coincidental, I say, respectfully, “Ha!” or maybe even “Double Ha!” Do you recall how vanishingly rare it was that we completed Tractate *Pesachim* right before *Pesah* (not happening more than once in a thousand years, see my [email of March 25, 2021](#)).

I will leave to you filling out why Tractate *Sukkah* comes right after Tractate *Yoma* (as in Kippur). Three things hit me as we begin the new Tractate of *Sukkah* this particular year. First, Tractate *Sukkah* teaches how little we can get by with and still feel, and be, blessed and happy. The Tractate's opening pages discuss how tiny a *sukkah* can be and still be kosher. A *sukkah* not too much bigger than a few feet by a few feet is kosher, and the Talmud discusses how

someone can fit in such a small space, whether upright or reclining, etc. Less is more physically. Second, by page 5 of the Tractate (and remember the pagination begins on page 2), we will have seen multiple examples of the logical principle of fewest-assumptions that I discussed last week, תפסת מרובה לא תפסת, תפסת מועט, תפסת, or in the transliteration of the first part of the phrase by which it is known, “*Tofasta Meruba Lo Tofasta*” (here let me digress to thank Rabbi Licht, who is a fount of information on practices, rituals, and *halachot* both Ashkenazic and Separdic and who responded to my email last week with a correct preference for how to transliterate a *kamatz gadol*). So the Tractate is also teaching that less is more logically, not just physically. The third lesson of the opening pages of the Tractate seems to be that our observance of the “just be happy” festival of *Sukkot* is also intimately wrapped up in community and in communal righteousness. There are constant analogies being drawn between laws or rites of *Sukkot* and *Sukkah* building and the rituals we spent so much time learning about in Tractate *Yoma* (e.g., comparisons between the height of a *Sukkah* and the height of Holy Ark; the size of various dimensions of the *Sukkah* and the size of the holy cherubim in the Holy of Holies). These analogies appear all over the Tractate, and they are unmistakable reminders that among the main purposes behind sitting in a hut are to welcome guests and to enhance our communal righteousness. These lessons should animate constructive reactions to the greatest challenges of the past year. We are fortunate to be able to learn these daily during this period.

*Half-Full Report.* Four items that are sure to lift your spirits (or at least not make things any worse!):

*Tenting Paved Paradise.* By the time you receive this email, our new, seasonal tent should be at least partially up on Paved Paradise (the incoming Tropical Storm may have different views). It’s beautiful – photos next week. We intend to keep it up until around Thanksgiving, take it down for the winter, and set it up again next Spring. Come and enjoy the cool shade. Thank you for the now-all-too-common superhuman efforts of Ari Sherizen and Barbara Reiss in making this happen.

*Our Next Fun Movie Night.* We are closing in on a date (July 26 or 28) and a movie (*Field of Dreams* or *The Natural*, though *Sound of Music* is making a late-stage rally). *The Ten Commandments* still can’t garner a plurality. Email your preference, if you have one. Hope to see you there in any case.

*Summer listening and reading.* For those who are planning trips, there are an endless number of great traveling songs. So there is no excuse for my reminding you of Canned Heat's 1968 *On the Road Again* (no internet link, for those who don't listen to music during the three weeks). The song has a monotonously repetitious melody that lingers in the brain but banal, perfectly forgettable lyrics that were never much of anything and are worse 50 some years later. As to books, again there are many great travel books. I remind you of one, John Steinbeck's 1962 *Travels With Charley*, which was great when first read and is simply gorgeous in its writing and calm tone 50+ years later, imho. Beth and I are also listening to a book on tape, Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall*, masterfully narrated by Simon Slater.

What are your favorite songs and books for this summer? Share so that others can benefit.

*Picturing Paved Paradise.* So now we're talkin'. Check out these great photographic achievements, the first from Esther Ingber, the next several forwarded by Ruth Lazar, and the last from our far-flung correspondent Barbara Reiss somewhere in Heaven-on-Earth. These are fabulous. MORE, MORE, MORE.





Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas