

September 30, 2021

Dear Shearith Israel family,

Trifecta. Rosh Hashana, Kippur, and Sukkot/Shemini Hag/Simhat Torah. We are still in the teeth of a world-wide pandemic, with many places in the U.S. and elsewhere experiencing significant Covid-19 disease spread. We at Shearith Israel could have been a worrisome blip on the disease spread map. We were not. We were not thanks to the tireless efforts of our Covid-19 Working Group, coupled with responsible compliance with rules by most of our congregants and visitors. We had robust services throughout – we even had daily minyan morning and evening throughout the month of Tishrei. Perhaps “robust” is an odd way to describe communal prayer services, but in a pandemic, and compared to last year, that does say something. And our communal prayers were not just robust in terms of attendance; services were beautiful (great thanks to our Choir) and inspiring. They demonstrated that we indeed remain a cohesive community of the faithful. We came together to celebrate our traditions and rituals. We were led by extraordinary Clergy and lay readers, chanters, lifters, binders, and the like. We will circulate a list of all the thank yous in due course, and we intend to celebrate all them as part of our Hatanim Celebration this Shabbat. Now we can try to get some work done, as the total blur of past several weeks opens up to a vanishingly short two days before Shabbat again. (See the blurb at the end of this email, courtesy of Dr. Susan Lobel via Barbara Reiss.) We all should be buoyed by our good feeling that we made it through, together.

When absence is presence, and when it's not. There are two arresting facts about the last parasha in the Torah, V'zot Ha'bracha. They are remarkable and in one case astonishing. The first and the more remarkable is that V'zot Ha'bracha is not read on any Shabbat morning of the year. Depending on your synagogue of choice for Simhat Torah, you will hear V'zot Ha'bracha read once, nearly twice (like at Shearith Israel), or many times (at those many places that follow the custom of giving aliyot to every male or to everyone present). But it is the only parasha never to be read on Shabbat itself. For a calendrical system more precise than the highest precision instruments ever designed, clearly this was intentional. The second remarkable fact is that, when conferring blessings on all twelve tribes, Moshe does not mention the tribe of Shimon. Instead, the count of twelve is made up by separating the tribe of Joseph into Ephraim and Menashe, named for Joseph's two sons. Now it is true that Scripture treats Ephraim and Menashe as separate in other places as well, but why here, and why at the expense of Shimon?

Let's take these one at a time first. In a brief 41 verses, V'zot Ha'bracha tells us of Moshe's final blessing to the Jewish people, tribe by tribe (nearly), of his solitary trek up the mountain to die, and of the final, incomparable encomia given about Moshe by the Almighty. The parasha is short, beautiful, noble, but a bit sad. We do not find much commentary on why this parasha is not read as a congregation on Shabbat. The only one I could find, and to find it I needed the help of our son Yosef, is the commentary of Rabenu Manoach. This work is itself a commentary on the Rambam's opus, Mishna Torah. The point made by Rabenu Manoach (comment 12 to Chapter 13 of the Laws of Prayer) is that Moshe's life deserves a separate day of reading – Simhat Torah. But that doesn't really explain why we do not read the parasha on *both* the Shabbat preceding Simhat Torah and on Simhat Torah itself. The commentary goes on to state that Moshe's life deserves the “extra joy” that the most joyous of festivals Simhat Torah can give. That at least may explain why one day and not the other. But don't we in other contexts think of Shabbat as a joyous time – at least an uplifting time of peace and tranquility? The one thing we do learn from Rabenu Manoach is that the reason can't be because the death of Moshe is too *sad* to read on Shabbat. He says just the opposite, and in any case we read it on an unadulteratedly happy day, Simhat Torah.

Concerning the failure to mention Shimon, here commentators remind us that Shimon, like Levi, showed extraordinary loyalty to their sister Dina and in so doing were brutal in waging a bloody battle with Shechem (Bereshit, 43:30). Their father Jacob saw Shimon and Levi as using “swords as weapons of violence” and wanted the families-cum-tribes of both of these brothers interspersed among the rest of Israel to dilute their potency. And indeed they were dispersed: Levi lived in 48 towns located in different parts of Greater Israel, and Shimon was largely absorbed into the geographic area given to Judah (Joshua 19:9). In part as a result of that dispersion, Shimon’s numbers in Israel dwindled (dropping between the two censuses taken at the beginning and end of the Israelites 40 years in the desert, see Bamidbar 26:14).

I want to venture a thought that may answer both remarkable facts. I wonder if, in addition to the answers above, there is something *incompatible* between V’zot Ha’bracha on the one hand and the Shabbat of Sukkot, which is when V’zot Ha’bracha would be read, on the other. And I wonder if there is something incompatible between the parasha itself and the tribe of Shimon. Think of what else we read on the Shabbat on which V’zot Ha’bracha would be read. In the Torah portion which we do read on Sukkot, we read about the universality of the holiday of Sukkot. This is not fully consistent with the final story of Moshe, which is individual in the extreme and in any case seems manifestly inconsistent with the attitude exhibited by Shimon (and Levi) in Bereshit. Then, in the haftarah, we read of the mighty and terrible battle of Gog and Magog, which would seem to be incompatible with the teaching of peace of Moshe, but also inconsistent, because the haftarah ends on a positive note of inclusion, with the character of Shimon (and Levi) as described by Jacob in his final prayer to Shimon and Levi. Finally, in many (many) synagogues, Jews read *Kohelet* or Ecclesiastes on this Shabbat. The existential dread of the brilliant and most-human of megillot does not seem consistent with the personality of Moshe. Moshe was servant (or slave) to only one thing: to the Almighty. Of what other human being can that be said? And he was the most humble of people – also a unique attribute in someone so great. Yet Moshe was utterly human. He preferred to be blotted out of his own story unless the Almighty agreed to forgive the Jewish people for one sin after another. (And thank you to Beth for pointing out how poignantly relevant Kohelet is this year, when, in Chapter 3:5, it speaks of a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing. Who is your favorite voice of these enduring words, Judy Collins? Pete Seeger? Mine is [The Byrds](#).)

Our religion lives by the Torah of Moshe. He is called Moshe Rabenu, Moshe our collective teacher. Like our most memorable, effective, and beloved teachers, he is ever-present in our lives, as his life and teaching are forever with us. To quote Rabbi Sacks in the last of parshiot he studied (p. 361 of Book V of *Covenant and Conversation*), “Moses does not exist in Judaism as an object of worship but as a role model for each of us to aspire to”. His absence from a Shabbat only makes his presence in our lives more real. His absence *is* presence. At the same time, we have evolved away from the anger and tactics of Shimon. We do not judge him, but he and the tribe following him do not share enough of what Moshe taught us to have them happily share the same Shabbat. His absence is not a presence but a welcome absence.

More than Half-Full Report.

Hatanim Celebration. I’ve departed from our usual “half-full” nomenclature. The fact that we have successfully celebrated as a community all of our many Tishrei holidays seems to place the glass of plenty, the cup of joy at way more than just half-full. This is especially true when so many of our communal services were held in the splendor of Paved Paradise, our truly beautiful

tented grassy pavilion. Talking from this vantage point, we still have one more celebration to go: We have two extraordinary Hatanim who will serve this year, Joel Marcus and Ariel Bengio. Each has shown great dedication to Shearith Israel. Each deserves to be feted and toasted, and we will do so on Paved Paradise after services this Shabbat, fittingly Shabbat Bereshit.

The Gift of Giving. We are a people who cannot but be thankful for the safety, security, plenty, and joy that we have been blessed with. That is not to detract from the sorrow and sadnesses of the past year and a half. And it's not to overlook the travail and challenges every one of us faces. At the same time, we cannot help but feel the blessings we have been granted. And it is that gratitude that should translate into acts of kindness and generosity by us to others. We have received beneficence and kindness from the Almighty and from other people. We in turn need to show that thankfulness, that *hakarat hatov*. The ability to give is itself a gift, and that gift benefits not so much the recipient as the giver himself/herself. This is not a new, New Testament idea (better to give than to receive). It is a fundamental precept of Judaism and has been so since before sacrifices of thanksgiving were described in Genesis. Even the daily page of Talmud studied this week (Beitza 32b) says that someone who does not show charitable instincts cannot really be an Israelite.

We as a community have a real need, right now. It is essential that we properly maintain and preserve Paved Paradise. And so we are asking our entire congregational family and friends to show monetary support to keeping Paved Paradise vibrant, attractive, usable. It cannot be overlooked that Paved Paradise saved us this holiday season. We need to raise \$150,000 so that we can keep the space in good condition, seasonally remove and replace the tent pavilion to avoid the winter snow loads, and deliver the events and programming on Paved Paradise that so many of us enjoy, both now and as we continue to use it in Spring and Summer of 2022. Contributions to our Hatanim Celebration will be directed to preserving Paved Paradise. Many of your Board of Trustees and Hatanim and their families have already committed to approximately a third of the \$150,000. Please do what your financial circumstances permit to make this, one of only two fundraisers this year, a success.



Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom. Happiest, and healthiest, renewed beginnings to all.

Louis Solomon, Parnas