

October 1, 2020

Dear Shearith Israel family,

*The Lopsided We.* Well, "we did it". So said Sam Mussabini to Harold Abrahams in Chariots of Fire, after Abrahams won the gold medal in the 100 meters dash in the 1924 Olympic games. The "we" in that line has always bemused me. Mussabini was surely entitled to some credit; any great coach is. But in the end it was Abrahams who did all the hard work. Rather than calling this use of the first-person plural the "royal we", let's call Sam's use the "lopsided we". I offer my own "lopsided we" in saying that, in successfully getting through our communal High Holiday services, well, "we did it". There are so many to thank who actually did all the hard work. Our Rabbi deserves our great thanks, not only shuttling between the two venues of our services (outdoors at Manhattan Day School, indoors in our Sanctuary), leading parts of the service in each and inspiring many hundreds of us with sermons and lectures before the respective holidays. Our other clergy, Rabbi Rohde and Reverend Edinger, deserve our humongous thanks as well, as do Avery Neumark (herculean in leading *four* services on Kippur on a moment's notice), Jack Daar, Rafe Sasson, and Jonathan Nathan, our tireless administrative team, our maintenance staff, and our ushers and other volunteers (including those tending to our Torahs).

But the list of thank yous can't fairly stop there. We need to thank those of our Congregants who did not come to services. Huh? Yes. They heeded our urgent request to stay away if they had any even remote reason to think they might infect others with COVID-19 or who were concerned that they might become infected themselves. To each of you we are sincerely grateful for making the interests of our community your priority. For those who did attend, we thank you, too, for you similarly made the interests of our community your priority. Can both groups be equally entitled to our sincere gratitude? Yes, equally. *We did it!*

*Unhappy the Eye that Did Not See.* We observed our beautiful High Holiday services as a community with little to no apparent health fallout. This was not foregone; given the worsening of the COVID-19 metrics that our Working Group is

reviewing daily, I'm not sure we could have pulled it off were Kippur even next week. COVID-19 is about the most anti-community disease most of us have ever experienced. Community observances in the time of COVID-19, therefore, seem even more ill-fated than *Love in the Time of Cholera* (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the truly great book by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, is even more magically unrealistic than *Cholera*, but *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is too grim a title under current circumstances). On Kippur, several of our most stirring poems, or *piyuttim*, begin with the phrase, "Happy the eye that saw", and end with, "Our heart grieves that we can but hear it". The references are to the fact that, when our Holy Temple stood, Israel could actually see the High Priest performing the sacred duties of the day, whereas with the destruction of the Temple the only way Israel could celebrate the glory of the past was to sing about it and thereby just "hear it". This year, alas, we could neither see nor hear. We could not hear because many of us did not or could not attend; because none of us was privileged to hear our singing in its full glory this year; and because a safe (rapid) speed for the services required omitting some of our *piyuttim*.

As a community we are going to try to extend our blessings and observe Succot together. It is our festival of happiness. As before, the blessings will be muted to the eye *and* to the ear. Again we will be masked, socially distant. Again we will be basically silent except for the muffled sounds of our Hazan. Again we will omit the communal pomp provided by our services, usually resplendent on Succot, such as walking around the sanctuary with our lulabim; enjoying a convivial repast in our succah, joining together for various festivities that we observe every year at this time. Our services will be different. But with the help of the Almighty they will be at both the MDS and Sanctuary. We will also offer modest kiddushim in a succah, on 70th Street, which, with the Sisterhood's help, will be both inviting and attractive for those few who will remain masked, socially distant, and pre-registered. We will be unhappy with what we are foregoing, both sight and sounds, yet give deep thanks for what we will be able to observe together.

*Not in Heaven, It is!* No, that is not some Yoda-like asyntactical aphorism that passes for something of great wisdom. It's my feeble attempt to translate "*Lo Bashamayim Hi*", which reveals truly profound wisdom. This famous phrase is

used several times in the Talmud, including on a page of daily learning that we study this week (Eruvin 55a). When used by our Talmudic Sages, it indicates that, in the partnership with the Almighty that is the Human-Godly interchange, human beings are obliged to take responsibility, to decide what kind of world we will have, and decide ultimately how to interpret and apply normative Jewish law. The original source of the phrase, however, is in the Torah itself, in Deuteronomy, Parashat Nitzabim (30:11-14). We read it just a few weeks ago:

For the commandment that I command you today - it is not hidden from you, and it is not distant. *It is not in heaven*, [so that you could] say, 'Who can ascend to the heaven for us and take it for us, so that we can listen to it and perform it?' Nor is it across the sea, [so that you could] say, 'Who can cross to the other side of the seas for us to take it for us, so that we can listen to it and perform it?' Rather, the matter is very near to you - in your mouth and in your heart - to perform it.

The power in these simple sentences lifts the world. The Ramban, or Nachmanides, says that the accessible commandment the Torah is talking about here being so freely available is national repentance - exactly what we just managed to observe on Kippur. To achieve Heaven on earth, it is both up to us (*Lo Bashamayim Hi*) and within easy reach (*Lo Bashamayim Hi*). All it takes is communal strength and communal commitment.

Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom and *Moadim L'simha*.

Louis Solomon, Parnas