

October 22, 2020

Dear Shearith Israel family,

*Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.* "The more things change, the more they stay the same". This epigram is attributed to the Nineteenth Century French novelist Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr, of whose ample oeuvre I've ashamedly read exactly nothing. Today, the saying is overused; it has become trite. But it seems so true as applied to how Shearith Israel, along with some other houses of worship, have responded to the pandemic. And it's to our credit. Across New York, the country, and the world, COVID-19 incidence rises and falls, and then rises and falls again, worsens, lessens, upticks, flattens, morphs, transmogrifies, spreads, contracts. Someplace or another the disease is doing everything all at the same time. At the first sign of lower disease spread and incidence, many houses of worship opened, promoted or at least tolerated unmasked services, singalongs, and hug-fests, hosted massive weddings, etc. Moving in the opposite direction, many other houses of worship have gone fully to online prayer and ritual and have stayed there.

"Here at Shearith Israel" (who remembers how John Irving brilliantly used, "Here in St. Cloud's", throughout *The Cider House Rules*), we are doing our best to remain cautious, calm, and constant. We are trying to stay steady in the midst of continuous flux. Six months ago we articulated the rules that we would be guided by -- relying on our stellar Clergy to inspire with learning, lectures, and liturgy as best as online technology would permit; reopening to fulfill our core ritual function but observing best practices for health and safety, mindful of what our neighboring synagogues are doing. We've remained true to those principles. We will continue to for the foreseeable future. Five months ago we tasked fifteen of our members, expert in every relevant discipline, to help us plan and execute safe outdoor and then indoor communal services. This group continues to confer weekly, reviewing the latest trends and guidelines and reassessing the practices of our congregants and partners within and around our synagogue spaces. We've lived by their wise approaches, too. We are doing our best to maintain our communal ritual as much as circumstances permit. Rabbi Rohde even sang the

*Tenu Shebaha* to our Hatanim on Simhat Torah and on Shabbat Bereshit. Until external dictates require a different approach, we will maintain communal services. We will continue Torah reading and communal prayer, including minyan for people saying kaddish or observing a *nahala*, to maintain as safely as we can the laws, rituals, and traditions that we have communally observed for over three centuries. The more things change the more we intend to stay the same.

*Who Put the Reshit in BeReshit.* In this one-liner English idiom contest ("I put the X in XYZ"), my contribution would be my subheading. It's borrowed from Rambam, or Maimonides, as described by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, for whom we are praying for a full and speedy recovery. Rambam taught that the *reshit* in *BeReshit*, "In the beginning", signifies more than a temporal beginning or ordering. Rather, it suggests "the most significant element, the part that stands for the whole, the foundation, the principle" (R. Sacks, *Covenant and Conversation, Genesis*).

Parashat Bereshit's most significant, foundational elements are likely as many and varied as there are people reading it. Tonight begins Rabbi Soloveichik's parasha and art lecture series. It promises to be great as well as grand. But before the series starts, can I be blamed for offering my own short list of four foundational principles that verily leapt off the page on my reading this year of this first Parasha of the Torah? Thus:

- *First*, starting the cycle of Torah portions again with Simhat Torah, ending Debarim and starting the first book afresh, we leave the great discourses of Moses and return to storytelling. The masterful, penetrating discourses in Debarim are replaced by action; linear speeches are replaced by story and narrative. The stories of Bereshit are compelling and redolent with meaning. They don't just educate; they go deep; they enflame; they incite.
- *Second*, the stories, certainly in Bereshit, are effective in part because of their simplicity. The commands too are simple: Don't eat from that tree, don't kill your brother (ok, not explicit, but surely implicit). Yet everything runs amok only in the way human beings can manage to complicate reality.

The ratiocination of our Couple in Eden has to rank among the greatest set of excuses of all time. (Have we made much progress here? How different are the commands of "wear a mask", "stay a safe distance", "create good outdoor air flow". Look at how we've botched those.)

- *Third*, say what you will; our Holy Writ is all about us. The Almighty took the first 25 verses to create the cosmos and everything in it. The rest of the 5,852 verses in the Torah, indeed the rest of the 23,145 verses in our entire Bible, are all about human beings. We relive stories about human beings and their relation to the Almighty, and vice versa, about human beings and their relation to each other, and even about human beings and their relation to other animate beings and inanimate objects. Humankind is unmistakably the star of the show.

- *Finally*, the stories in our first Parasha emphasize, well, the utter humanness of humanity. At the end of the Parasha, the Almighty actually says,

"And the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (VI:5)

Yuck! The Almighty initially treats us like royalty - remember the midrash that the Almighty braided Eve's hair (a great collection of poetry and stories by Danny Siegel from, oh, 1980, bears that title) - until we show ourselves incapable not just of regal behavior but really of any behavior north of being stupendous liars, cheats, and murderers -- as Hobbes said in *Leviathan* of the life of human beings, "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short". Isn't it clear from the text that humanity needs the rest of the Torah just so that we can learn how to become, not angels, but just human?

*Voice your views about our new outdoor space.* I reported last month that the City granted the Congregation a temporary permit to occupy our vacant construction site adjacent to our Synagogue. Several congregants contacted me about that then. With the holidays behind us, and our need for an outdoor venue

close to the Synagogue, like the weeds in 8 West itself, growing daily, it is time to focus on this project. Write us if you have ideas. We will be presenting the best of them to the Congregation soon. Have a say. Play a role. Lean in.

*P.S.* Further to my email of last week, our Congregational friend from Washington Heights, Henry Reiser, sent me this picture from the Syzk Haggadah (which Henry has written an interesting piece on). With a magnifying glass you can actually see "*Semper Fidelis*" in the crest at the top! How cool is that! *Semper Fi!*



Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas