

November 5, 2020

Dear Shearith Israel family,

*The approaching precipice.* We zoomed our Hatanim celebration, the Rabbi keeps teaching via easy call-in technology, our other Clergy are remotely involving us, and we have, with some struggle, continued to maintain minyan for those needing it. Yet from all sides it seems that we are being challenged by increasing infection rates and a recurrence of bad cases of the disease. Congregants have lost family members just this week. Kids in hermetically sealed schools are calling home to say they've tested positive. The West Side still feels safe. But the numbers are worsening and worrying. If we are not super-careful, we will approach another cliff - indeed we may approach it whether or not we are super-careful. Our COVID-19 Reentry Working Group is considering additional recommendations for the upcoming weeks, as New York is changing its own guidelines, as students return home from semesters away, and as we expect an increase in travel for the Thanksgiving holiday. Please look out for announcements, and in all events, please, be cautious. We need to be especially vigilant in protecting the Synagogue and each other.

*Noble Knights!* Our patriarch Abraham, explained Kierkegaard, was a Knight of Faith: Abraham had such complete faith in the Almighty that he was able to act *in* the world but *apart* from it. This is epitomized by his alacritous execution of the Almighty's instruction to sacrifice Isaac, that unimaginable and monumental act described in this week's Parashat Vayera, which the Rabbi spoke about last night. The concept of being a Knight of Faith has always seemed a bit obscure to me. One thing about Abraham, however, is not fuzzy at all. Our first Patriarch had chutzpah, and darn it if he didn't get away with it! In this and last week's *Parashiot*, Abraham argues with the Almighty to lower the bar to save Sodom (Ch. 18:17-33). He laughs when he's told that Sarah will bear a son (17:17) - but when Sarah does the same thing (same word, anyway) she gets called on it (18:12-15). And in the greatest act of audacity, the plain text records that Abraham, while being spoken to by the Almighty, actually tells the Almighty, "wait a minute",

"hold a mo", so that Abraham could tend to his visitors (18:3 et seq, as interpreted in Tractate Shabbat 127a). True, Abraham thereby taught humanity forever how to treat guests and act towards others. In reality, these awe-inspiring stories show us what the Almighty expects of us. Now some of these I personally wouldn't try at home, but basically that's because I'm a coward. Abraham used faith as well as human ingenuity and agency; he (respectfully) used his instincts, intellect, and courage to follow a code of conduct that has been a light unto the nations for about 4,000 years.

I at least can't help but liken Abraham'schutzpah to how our Clergy as well as our physicians and scientists have acted during the COVID-19 pandemic. We have observed many times the obvious truth that, as trying and difficult and even dangerous the COVID-19 pandemic is, we must count ourselves very blessed in relation to past travails and challenges. Part of our blessing is that human beings, using ingenuity and agency, have courageously hung in there and made the best of what could have been a much worse situation. Our Clergy have taught, sung, prayed, and kept us together. Our health care professionals have attacked the attacker and come up with about as good as set of guidelines for keeping us safe as we could have realistically hoped for in the brief time since the disease surfaced in humans. They are all noble Knights in my book.

*Our Paved Paradise Project.* A number of Congregants have asked some fair and good questions about our project to clear, level, pave, and tent the outdoor space adjacent to the Sanctuary. I've written about this a few times already. The project is speeding forward but needs your financial support. I want to address three FAQs and apologize for this extended treatment:

*First, why now?* There are two answers: *Because there is a current need.* We need outdoor space close to our Sanctuary for a variety of activities that go to the heart of what we as a community can be doing during the COVID-19 pandemic. Included among our needs is outfitting outdoor space for *tefilot*, whether on Shabbat or during the week. (We no longer have the temporary

succah, fragile by design. This photo was taken this past Monday after the wind got the better of that temporary abode.)



No one really knows how much longer we will have congregants who will reasonably prefer outdoor venues to inside. I believe there will also be a felt need for outdoor space by other compatible non-profit entities. *And because there is a want.* During our Hatanim celebration this past Sunday, we reminded the Congregation of a comment made in early May of this year, that few if any of us have gone through the isolation, the limitation of our freedom of movement, the absence of social intercourse and camaraderie, the Groundhog Day monotonous repetition of monotony that the pandemic has imposed on us. The resulting malaise is still upon us and threatens to get worse as the restrictions continue. With signs that a second wave might be a'comin, it is even more imperative that we as a community lean into a project that will outlast the travails of the moment, that will bring current and long-term benefits to our community. Even if the pandemic passes sooner rather than later, and our Paved Paradise can be used for non- or less-socially distant al fresco classes, gatherings, life cycle celebrations (and even revenue producing rentals).

*Second*, what are we trying to convey when we estimate that the useful life of the expenditures we are now making will be 2-5 years? We arrived at that estimate by thinking about 1) how long the current COVID-19 challenges will be upon us, 2) even once they are in our rear-view mirror, for how long will we want to have and use outdoor space, and 3) when do we think we will be in a position to build on the site? It is my humble, lay opinion that, when we consider all those factors, we can think about 2-5 years as being the time period over which we will be using the 8 West space in about the same ways as we will be using it when it is ready for use in the next month or so. Your Board of Trustees considered a host of factors, including:

- Urgency: We need the space now;
  
- What if?: That need could increase any day or week, given the progress of the disease and the government's response to it, and that increased need and use could be for a week, a month, or even for as long as we've already been in the COVID-19 miasma, or longer;
  
- Vaccine, part 1: Even in the best case scenario, with an effective vaccine just around the corner, it will take months if not years to inoculate enough of the population to make an outdoor space preference by some a thing of the past;
  
- Vaccine, part 2: Even then we have elders in our community who will be more comfortable with outdoor space for at least part of the year;
  
- The real estate market: COVID-19 has hardly made building and selling property units in New York's West Side any easier or more profitable. Our real estate mavens tell us that we can expect those strains and hardships to last for quite a bit longer; and

· Our Community House: Even once that is all behind us, we as a community will need to make the deals and raise the capital for a new building. It is only then that we will have enough clarity and confidence to move forward with our new building project, and it is only then that we will have to worry about undoing any of what we are doing now. A lot of what we are spending - removing rubble and debris, excavating and flattening and resurfacing, etc. - will have all to be done in some form or another no matter which path we ultimately take to build on the site. That will come, but during the time all this is playing out, we should be able to enjoy the benefits of our Paved Paradise.

*Third*, how much? About \$250,000 for this phase. We can raise this amount. Our Board of Trustees and a few others have already committed close to \$100,000 of the \$250,000 budget. That leaves about \$150,00 to be raised from the Congregation at large and from other friends of the Congregation or admirers of the Rabbi - or both. Were the hundreds of listeners to his lectures each week able to send in \$500 or \$1,000, we would raise the needed funds over night. For those who are getting the most use of outdoor space, we hope you will be as generous as your circumstances permit. For others, pay it forward! We all benefit from making our Congregants feel comfortable in coming to outdoor services, and making room for more of them, whether for now, or in the Spring, or even for next year's High Holidays. We have all benefited, enormously, from what the Congregation has been able to provide us during the pandemic. We will all benefit from future programs and uses of the space as well. This is a fabulous use of the space - it has literally been a Heaven-sent blessing that the space is still vacant and has been approved for this temporary use by the City. Let's take advantage of it now.

Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas

