

June 25, 2020

Dear Shearith Israel Family,

*A Bicameral Shearith Israel Philosophy.* When we shuttered the doors of our precious Sanctuary sixteen Shabbatot ago, we all read, and hoped, that we would be isolated for, oh, three maybe even four weeks. We couldn't imagine how that would all work. Three-four weeks has turned into three-four months -- and I for one am still befuddled over how it will all work. During these trying months, we as a community have lived two existences, as "bicameral" as any dreamt of by the Princeton-Yale psychologist Julian Jaynes, who coined that term in his brilliant, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*. Our bicameralism is revealed, on the one hand, by the fact that our spiritual and intellectual communal existence is flying pretty high. We cannot thank our Rabbi and our other Clergy enough for that. On the other hand, our physical communal existence has been severely challenged. Even with all the phone calls, special deliveries, and outreach (please continue to make them), even the most curmudgeonly of us are feeling lonely; the most social among us are going either batty or into depression. By any historical measure our physical communal depletion is mild. Yet for us, here and now, the pain and dislocation seem very real indeed. For 365 years, our Congregation has been America, has lived, worked, supported, wept, died, joyed, and sung America. During that entire period, I cannot find any evidence of a sixteen-week period when our Congregation has not prayed together. The Twentieth Century philosopher Emmanuel Levinas is one of the many thinkers who have said, "Jews introduced into history the idea of hope and that of a future". More singularly, in words that seem apt today, he said, "[I]n crucial times, when the perishability of so many values is revealed, all human dignity consists in believing in their return." To us, in terms of our physical communal existence, our time seems crucial, in Levinas's phrase - at least it feels like we are at risk of approaching crucial. No doubt other congregations, Jewish and of other faiths, feel the same way. We have all hoped and believed in a future (our modern, impatient sensibilities telescope time, thus

needing a "future" measured in weeks or months). We all believe in the return of the value of community that we were all so used to but have had to park, to pause, to be without.

*Our Future Is About to Begin Anew.* Over the past months our Congregation has experienced both desolate deaths but also new life. The Talmud teaches that new life, as in the birth of a child, has the spiritual power to stop a plague, not just for the family experiencing the joy but for the whole community. Would that we could all, collectively, internalize that forward-thinking joy. We are regaining our future in other ways, too. This week, our Synagogue Reopening Working Group and the Synagogue's Board of Trustees approved the recommendations of the engineers and architects for commencing outdoor services on the portico. We are planning for these small minyanim to begin sometime next week. Please watch for instructions and announcements. Going forward, the Working Group just vetted an extensive series of reports from the engineers and architects for how to make one or more of our internal spaces as safe as practicable for the resumption of services there. Candidly, services on the portico, like services inside, are initially going to be pale shadows of the glory that was our communal services of the past. We will be severely limited in number. We will be spread out and masked. We will not be chatting going in or out. We will not be having Kiddush or any other social intercourse. Most painfully for many of us, we will not be singing, and our Hazan will be chanting not singing many parts of what will be, for the time being, an abbreviated service. In fact we will be, precisely, socially distant from one another. Yet if our idea of hope and our future right now is this partial, hampered reopening, then we must embrace that much. We must be deeply, profoundly thankful, to the Almighty, to our Clergy, to the members of the Working Group, and to each of us who has shown compassion during the dark days, that we are able to do that much. If even a few of our congregants can say Kaddish, or have a *Nahala* read for a departed loved one, or if soon we will be able to recommence Torah reading, or if over time, perhaps in shifts, we will be

able to return to our Sanctuary and bow to each other at a safe distance (no handshaking, but then we never did), then we will all be able to reclaim our future and reignite the community values that have sustained us.

Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas