

July 16, 2020

Dear Shearith Israel Family,

*Two Steps Forward, Another Step Forward.* Prior emails have chronicled the slow steps we are taking as a Congregation to regain a semblance of what is passing for normal communal worship in the days of COVID-19. Prior to this week we re-engineered our portico, which is our only currently usable outdoor space. This week will complete three weeks of afternoon/evening services on the portico. We had minyan there on the Fast of Tammuz, when we were able to observe our *minhag* of donning *tefillin* during *minha*. Many congregants have been able to say Kaddish. Many have been able to observe *Nahalot*. All of us present have been able to enjoy a pale and shadowy glimpse of our communal service - and as I've said, at least we can actually see Rabbi Soloveichik, hear Rabbi Rohde, and be greeted by Reverend Edinger. *None* of us has gotten sick. This week we beta-tested a third important re-introduction: morning service including communal Torah reading. The test was successful. Next week we will be re-introducing morning services with Torah reading on Monday and Thursday as well as on Rosh Hodesh Ab (Wednesday). As of now these services will remain on the portico. Please look out for the announcement with the sign-up instructions in our emails. We may soon be able to share some wonderful news about the availability of another nearby outdoor venue capable of hosting an even greater number of Congregants. We announced our plans for Tisha B'Ab (again, please follow our emails for details) but do not yet have final plans for the High Holidays. We will, and they will include making sure that everyone who wishes to hear Shofar blowing will be able to.

*Are we living a Sci-Fi fantasy?* The perils and travails of the past four months feel very real in many respects but nothing short of surreal in others. We have more than once observed that, with tragic exceptions that will never be forgotten by individual congregants, their families, and our entire community, from the perspective of our Congregation and our people historically, the reality of our

surreality could be very much worse. Still, would any of us have thought that we would have been out of our Synagogue for 108 days and that even still we are not back to normal? Would anyone have thought that the "new abnormal" we are hoping to achieve may last another year or longer - and that it remains wholly unclear what things will look like given the evidence that COVID-19 may not be playing by the same one-and-done rule that applies to some other diseases. Would anyone have thought that even now, with the brain-power and talent devoting many hours to the task, we still haven't figured out safe ways to have our elderly - the most honored of our Congregation - return to anything resembling communal prayer? The sci-fi Star Wars movies come to mind. But even they don't capture the disorientation we feel when it's the very essence of our communal interactions that is the chief cause of our risks. I heard the sometimes beknighted, sometimes benighted Anthony Fauci tell a group of Jewish communal leaders that the attributes that set the Jewish community apart - communal participation, being together, hospitality shown to others including strangers, homage to our elders, joyous communal learning, prayer, and singing - were chief reasons why the Jewish community suffered so disproportionately at the outset of COVID-19's scourging of the West. To capture *that* reality in a sci-fi thriller we need to turn to C.S. Lewis's fantasies, and not to *Till We Have Faces* (the retelling of the incomprehensible Greek Myth of Cupid and Psyche) but to his Cosmic Trilogy: *Out of the Silent Planet*, *Perelandra*, and *That Hideous Strength* -- especially the third of those, which takes place on earth. There we see the very attributes of being human as the source of the surreal evil that befalls man or mankind. These sci-fi masterpieces, like the fantasies of Tolkien and J.K. Rowling, are apt for one other reason, one most befitting our own communal situation. In these novels, basic human attributes not only animate the evil portrayed in the stories but are the sources of salvation, too. And it is this that reflects our community at our best: the very attributes that Dr. Fauci and others have observed not only sank us so deep in the disease but have pulled us out emotionally as well: unity, loyalty, fellowship, sacrifice, commitment to others. We have shown these, our best qualities over the past four months, even in our hobbled, isolated state. If we continue to show them, we will be worthy of

inheriting our place among the eternal "J-Continuum" (to borrow a title from Star Trek).

*One Mystery Solved.* Manifold gratitude to our Honorary Parnas Peter Neustadter for explaining one of the mysteries I discussed last week: George Gershwin's piano organ, mysteriously with us for about 100 years now, was arranged to be donated to Shearith Israel by the executor of his estate, who was one of our congregants. I couldn't find this factoid in our official histories, and it seems unknown even to our Clergy. That Peter knew it and shared it from far away highlights one of the true blessings of continuity among our community. Now, what about my other two mysteries?

Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas