

July 9, 2020

Dear Shearith Israel family,

*Three Weeks, Three Mysteries.* Today, we begin to observe the three-week period between the Fast of Tammuz and Tisha B'Ab. Already Rabbi Soloveichik and Reverend Edinger have shared with us some truly inspiring insights. We look forward to the balance of Rabbi Soloveichik's series in helping us to appreciate this important period of the Jewish calendar. For me, in moving from the sacred to the more mundane, there are three mysteries that are bemusing me. I recognize that not all mysteries are created equal. But whether they are true mysteries or mere conundrums or just really hard, puzzling challenges, they feel like a trifecta of mysteries to me:

*Our Synagogue Reentry Mystery.* As reported last week, the recommencement after 108 days of our minha/arbit services on the portico has afforded some of our Congregants their first opportunity in months to say Kaddish or otherwise commemorate the loss of a loved one in a Jewish communal setting. Now nearing the end of its second week, minyan is running smoothly. Those of us privileged to be a part of this renewal feel blessed: blessed that our Sanctuary has finally taken down the "Gone Fishing" sign hanging outside it; blessed that many of us are healthy enough to help; blessed that we can once again hear Rabbi Ira's plainchant; blessed that we can actually see Rabbi Soloveichik, not just hear his radio voice; blessed that we can silently nod to our co-Congregants in the hopes that what we are seeing are smiling eyes rather than scowling or squinting on their otherwise masked faces. For the glass-half-full set, we have much to be thankful for. For the glass-half-empty among us, there is much more that needs to be done. We need to expand to morning and Shabbat services and, most critical to our Rabbi, begin anew the communal reading of the Torah on Mondays, Thursdays, and Shabbat. These challenges are hard but not insurmountable. Much harder is finding a way safely to enable many more of our Congregants to participate in services, and harder still is finding a way to enable our elderly to give us the blessing of their presence. Candidly, these last two tasks are so hard, so fraught, that they are bedeviling the smartest, hardest group of volunteers imaginable - our COVID-19 Synagogue Reentry Working Group. No one is giving up. But we will not put health or lives at risk. You will be seeing real progress overcoming many of the challenges to renewed normalcy. But we do not yet have concrete suggestions on the most intractable of them - yet. Stay tuned.

*Our Red Heifer Mystery.* Ok, maybe you will say that the above is not really a mystery, just a hard and painful challenge. But this next one surely is: When we left our sacred Sanctuary space in March, our final communal act was the reading of Parashat Parah, one of the four "special" Torah portions we read in the six+/- weeks leading up to the Shabbat before Pesah. The reading, one of my favorites because of the Hertz commentary on it, concerns the Laws of purification brought about through the sprinkling of water into which the ashes of a Red Heifer have been diluted. The Talmud teaches that the ritual purifies the impure while rendering the pure impure. It is surely one of the most enigmatic, mysterious portions of Scripture. Indeed it is a poster-child (so to speak) of what our Rabbis described as a Law that we not only do not understand but one that we cannot and will not understand - our very own ignorabimus. You might ask why I'm raising this now; Parashat Parah was in March. I'm raising it because, last week, the very week we returned to our Synagogue, was the very parasha from which the portion of Parashat Parah is taken. We returned to the exact Torah portion we left. Our absence was bookended by mystery - the exact same mysterious passages, which makes the whole affair a mystery of mysteries. In a real sense, our absence felt like an eternity. Yet because we grew as a community during the period, it was as if we picked up right where we left off. By remaining unified as a community, maybe we never left in the most profound sense.

*Our George Gershwin mystery.* But that's just two mysteries, or mystery squared. Now for the third. I commented last week on how strange it was that we chanted our portico prayers rather than sang our beautiful tefilot. I was thinking, where else do we find so much meaning in the music and not just the words? My thoughts moved directly to George Gershwin. The music of this exceptional Twentieth Century American remains with us today. He did not appear to write lyrics, just music. Yet his musical output, his songs and orchestral compositions, essentially defined the uniquely American institutions of swing and jazz. He himself was a unique American. His own life, an Upper West Side child of Jewish immigrants, taught but also self-taught, who experienced great highs, great lows (Porgy and Bess flopped when first released!), and who tragically died at age 38, can't but remind us of the exceptionally American institution that is our Congregation. As best we can tell, George Gershwin was not a member of Congregation Shearith Israel. So can someone explain the great mystery of why he gave us his own piano organ? Can someone explain why and how we still have it, a hundred years later, and can still play it? Mystery cubed.

Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas