

August 20, 2020

Dear Shearith Israel family,

*Vote or Stay Home.* The actual first day of Elul, the Jewish month preceding Rosh Hashana, is tomorrow. Yet like other Jewish months with two days of Rosh Hodesh, we observe today as Rosh Hodesh as well, while tomorrow, the actual first day of that month, we will be observing as a second day of Rosh Hodesh Elul. Our Congregation loves the month of Elul. We have preserved rare customs that remind us of the approaching High Holiday season. In the evenings during most of Elul, we say an abbreviated Selichot service. We also begin this Saturday night to blow shofar, also with an abbreviated set of sounds. We start focusing on the charitable giving that many of us do this time of year. This year, we have even more planned for Elul, including a lecture series by Rabbi Soloveichik and special observances led by Rabbi Rohde and Reverend Edinger. We can do all this because we as a community can remotely observe much of our traditional Elul practices. For Rosh Hashana and Kippur, however, that is not as easy. For those holidays, we need an accurate estimate of where our Congregants will be, whether they want to join services indoors or outdoors, whether they independently want to hear shofar blowing, etc. The office is now sending out a steady stream of emails soliciting your input. Please, it is important that we hear from you, now, so that we can make sure that every single Congregant who wishes can be a part of our communal observance of these holidays.

*Great Lessons from the Talmud.* Tucked in among abstruse discussions of Tractate Eruvin, we find, in the daily page of the Talmud to be studied this Shabbat (Daf 13), three related comments almost unsurpassed in their majesty: *First*, the Talmud describes how the two great schools of scholars, Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai, argued for three years over a technical legal issue until a Heavenly voice declared that both views represented constructive efforts to discern the Will of the Almighty (referred to

beautifully as the Words of the Living G-d). *Second*, the Talmud then immediately says that, legitimate as both views were, the law in that particular matter accorded with the teaching of Beit Hillel. And *third*, the Talmud then explains *why* the final disposition accords with the views of Beit Hillel. Rather than focusing on the merits or substance of the dispute, the Talmud teaches that Beit Hillel's view prevailed because of Beit Hillel's conduct towards those who disagreed with them: Beit Hillel, we are told, was respectful to Beit Shammai's opposing view, quoted that view rather than burying or ignoring it, and indeed quoted Beit Shammai's view first. It would take more time, intelligence, and learning than I can muster to unpack these timeless entries. Still, one can't help but feel that we witness something profound if not monumental in the transmission of these three passages to us today, nearly two millennia after they were recorded. How can we, in our own Congregation, be anything but truly transformed by being part of a religion that recognizes the validity of debate; that indeed rejoices in it; but that also recognizes that unity of conduct is preferred but without being judgmental of those who disagree.

*The Transcendent Spirit of Congregation Shearith Israel.* I don't actually know what alcohol some of our Congregants drink at Kiddush. (Ha! I bet you thought I was going to drone on about the *other* "spirit".) For those whose memories are fading, "Kiddush" was a very special time for our Congregation, after services on Shabbat mornings, pre-COVID-19. We will enjoy that convivial time again soon(ish). But I do know what our Congregation's spirit of choice *should* be, without question. We could not agree on schnapps; the internecine disputes over just the *spelling* of that Ashkenazi favorite with schmaltz herring would preclude even printing the word in our weekly handout. And we are not going to go in for the national drinks of other countries, whether whiskey from Ireland (anyway, unlike the Clancy Brothers we don't think whiskey's the devil) or whisky from Scotland or anything more exotic from international lists of national beverages. These are all too limiting, too bounded by space, time, and advertising whims. Without a doubt, the official spirit of our Congregation should be

bourbon. No, not because of the extinct dynasties of the House of Bourbon, those cadet monarchs and nobles from France and elsewhere. Rather, bourbon is us because it, like us, is a genuine American article. Since bourbon, the American whiskey, dates by name only from the 1850s, it has been vouchsafed in Congress, formed a century earlier, to declare that bourbon is one of the rare “distinctive products of the United States”. Likewise, it has been vouchsafed in us, formed more than a century earlier than Congress, to declare that Congress is one of the few “distinctive products of the United States”. But whether or not Congress is or is not distinctly American, our Congregation surely is. And so is bourbon. The rationale goes deeper still. The distinctive characteristic of bourbon is that it is made from a preponderance of corn, which, as corn or maize, is another unique product of the Americas. Corn is special to us, not merely because many of our Congregants eat it on Pesah (while none of us eats the basis of other whiskeys – e.g., rye, wheat). Corn is special because corn is useful, edible, important whether as a single kernel or as part of a larger mass. So too us; we are each of us individuals, special and unique. But our truest value, certainly to others, comes from our being part of our community. Tolstoy, describing an 80,000-strong Russian Army, said in *War and Peace*: “Every general and every soldier was conscious of his own insignificance, aware of being but a drop in that ocean of men, and yet at the same time was conscious of his strength as a part of that enormous whole.” That’s corn. That’s bourbon. That’s us.

Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas