

April 29, 2021

Dear Shearith Israel family,

*Our Gradual, Safe Resumption of Synagogue Life.* Our Synagogue is pursuing the general direction we sketched out last week: We are continuing to look for ways to make congregational events open to more congregants without materially increasing the risk of spread of Covid-19. Junior Congregation started up again, outdoors - see my note on this below. We are a week or so away from announcing Shabuot and post-Shabuot options, assuming the Covid-19 disease spread numbers continue to improve. The Covid-19 Working Group is hard at work to ensure that as we re-open we also continue to maintain a safe communal place for Congregants to say Kaddish and observe Nahalot, to listen to Torah reading, and to enjoy communal services, among other things.

We have all read or heard about the new CDC guidelines loosening some restrictions, notably for outdoor conduct. In light of the relief, enthusiasm, and/or trepidation they are causing, I want to lay out in a bit more detail how Shearith Israel is currently approaching the issues. For the next two weeks, we intend to continue to pursue the alternatives summarized in the paragraph above. At the same time, we intend to take a watchful approach to see if the new guidelines lead to an uptick in disease transmission. We should have pretty good data before Shabuot. In thinking about any given activity, the Working Group is considering whether we are materially increasing or reducing risk by analyzing five interrelated criteria:

- i. Having the activity outdoors,
- ii. Having the participants socially distanced,
- iii. Having the participants masked,
- iv. Considering some key information about the individual congregants who are going to participate, including whether they have been vaccinated, recently tested, recently traveled, or were exposed to those who have, and
- v. Considering some important miscellany including the size of anticipated attendance, the duration of the event, the size of our sanctuary,

the air scrubbers that we have been using inside since last Spring, and other ancillary but still important protections such as hand disinfecting, not sharing tallitot, etc.

It is to the great credit of the Working Group that they have added this thoughtful taxonomy to the public discourse. It seems to account for what science knows, or believes it knows, about the disease's spread at the moment. As we proceed, the Working Group and in some cases your Board of Trustees will be considering how opening or broadening congregational participation in an event might be affected by these criteria. We are concerned not just with real risk but with the perception of real risk. Congregant Dr. Susan Lobel says it perfectly. For some months now Susan has been a stalwart of our indoor minyan on Shabbat. She inspires others to attend. As she explains her decision to attend, she was

"greatly reassured with the all the work and 'science' that [the Covid-19 Working Group] went through to truly minimize the risk of Covid spread inside. I originally wore an N95 mask but now just wear a regular one, and frankly sitting so spaced out behind an air filter with the windows opened it is truly a "safe space", and as a friend of mine would say, 'there is no reason not to' go to shul"

(On the proper use of "shul" to describe our glorious sanctuary, see [my email of April 8, 2021](#) quoting Dr. Pool.) We are all trying to achieve the same goal of safe resumption of our Congregational life. So stay tuned, stay positive, and stay patient.

*Double parshiot.* This week's Torah reading, *Parashat* Emor, is the only one for many weeks that is not doubled with another *parasha*. Next week we will read two *parshiot* again. What's going on? The reasons for doubling are worth considering, especially as it relates to our strength as a community. Here's the interesting scoop:

There are 54 *parshiot* in the Torah. That doesn't vary. The length of a Jewish calendar year, however, does vary, depending on whether the year is a leap year (when we add an entire month of Adar II) and whether various of the Jewish months are 29 or 30 days. Further variance, not of the length of the year but of what we read on any given Shabbat, arises from the fact that, in a given year, there will be a greater or fewer number of holidays that fall on Shabbat. When a holiday falls on Shabbat, we do not read the *parasha* in sequence for that week on that Shabbat morning but delay its reading until after the holiday.

Following so far? Now, an "average" Jewish year has 354 days, so on average there are 50-51 weeks in a Jewish calendar year. In an average Jewish month, there are about 29.52 days. (Of course, there are exactly zero Jewish months of 29.52 days - just like there are exactly zero families in America with exactly 1.92 children. That's an artifact of using averages.) Anyway, when the Jewish year in question has a different number of weeks than 54 ( $29.52 \times 12$ ), and in years where there are Shabbatot when we read holiday readings and not the weekly reading, we have too many *parshiot* to complete the entire cycle within a "year" while reading one per week. So we double some *parshiot* and read two per Shabbat. In part we do that so that we start *Parashat Bereshit* on Simchat Torah, every year. There are a few other hard-wired rules, too, including the two interesting ones in the next paragraph. There are a total of seven couplets of *parshiot* that we potentially read as doubles: Vayakhel/Pekudei; Tazria/Metzora; Aharei Mot/Kedoshim (which we read this past Shabbat); Behar/Behukotai; Hukat/Balak; Matot/Masei; and Nitzabim/Vayelekh.

I have mentioned before that the Jewish year we are now experiencing, 5781, is special in some respects and nearly unique in other respects (see [my email of September 17, 2020](#), arguing that we deserve such a special year this year). This year, we are doubling many *parshiot* (indeed, virtually all we can). In part that's because of how the holidays fall. That is part of the specialness of 5781 (lots of holidays fall on Shabbat). But in part we double this year because of an ancient custom that Jews have been observing since the time of Ezra (during the Fifth

Century B.C.E.). As taught in Tractate Megillah 31b, Ezra decreed that one specific *parasha* needs to be read one or two weeks before Shabuot, and another specific *parasha* needs to be read one or two weeks before Rosh Hashana. The *parasha* before Shabuot is Behukotai. The *parasha* before Rosh Hashana is Ki Tabo. The reason we read each of these before the respective holidays is that each of those *parshiot* contains "*tochecha*", or remonstrations or chastisements - ills that will befall our communities if we fail to act in a way true to our religion. These admonitions need to be read before Shabuot and before Rosh Hashana so that we can reap the benefits of the associated holidays to secure forgiveness for our communities. In each case there are also beautiful words of consolation (Vayikrah 26:44-45), though in the case of Ki Tabo the consolation comes in Nitzabim, Debarim 30:1-2).

The point for us this year is clear. Between now and Shabuot we will be finishing our Spring fund-raiser, and we will be collectively figuring out how we can safely reopen our synagogue to more of our Congregation. We need to act as a cohesive community in doing both. Similarly, before Rosh Hashana, during the month of Elul, we will again be reaching out to the Congregation to help support keeping our communal doors open. Other than emergency moments and special projects, these are the only times during the year we intend to ask Congregants to help close the significant gap between collective dues and total expenses. Coming as they do at the same time as the *tochechot*, these fundraisers are perfect, and necessary, times for us to act as a community, together.

This year, we are doubling every *parasha* that is normally doubled. We also are doubling every *parasha* that is only occasionally doubled. But, to make sure we do not miss the final step of our Sages' brilliance, this year we do NOT double the *parshiot* that are almost always doubled: Nitzabim/Vayelech. Indeed, this year, that is the only set we do *not* double. Why? Because next year, 5782, which starts in September 2021, there are two Shabbatot between Rosh Hashana and Succot, and so we need one *parasha* for each of those Shabbatot (one for Nitzabim and

one for Vayelech). That way we can start all over again with Bereshit on Simhat Torah.

The magic of our cool calendar will continue into next year as well. I can't wait to report on it. I'm sure you can't wait either. And the beat goes on.

### *Half-Full Report.*

*Second to Last Call.* We are coming together to agree on a bunch of safe uses of Paved Paradise during the upcoming warmer months. Barbara Reiss and Bonnie Barest convened a group last night of over a dozen congregants to discuss the prospects. We eagerly await their suggestions. In the meantime:

*Everyone into de Pool.* I've received more pool puns reacting to the hilarious "De Sola Pool" cartoon and pun challenge of last week's email. My favorite so far is Aura Bijou's, that she "had a sinking feeling thinking about a pool in our multi-porpoise area. But that's water under the bridge".

*Learning and Laughter.* In [my July 23, 2020 email](#), I quoted the famous dictum in Tractate *Shabbat* 119b teaching that the entire world exists due to the effective learning of children. How much more so their laughter. Find whatever insipid or even profound quote about the laughter of children. Even the best of them will not match the cheer and joy from observing the gaggle of giggles, shouts, and fun of the kids who were running around Paved Paradise after services this past Shabbat. Enormous thank yous to our Congregational parents for their oversight and to the kids for just being kids of the following families:

Family Epstein/Jackson (Gabriel)

Family Fleisher (Max and Astrid)

Family Gelman (Ness and Hella)

Family Sasson (Barbara and Moshe; Elie, Ronnie next time)

Family Sherizen (Ruth and Abe)

Family Wiznia (Neta, Zahava, Dov, and Lev)

And here's the even better part. There was plenty of room for even more families and kids on Paved Paradise to enjoy the space in a safe way. Sign up for Junior Congregation. Make the rest of us *kvell* with good cheer! The miracle of the Covid-19 vaccines include that they are 90+% effective as stopping or reducing physical disease in the inoculated person. The miracle of coming to the synagogue and witnessing the happiness of our congregational kids includes that it is 100+% effective in lifting your spirits. Guaranteed.

Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas