

May 6, 2021

Dear Shearith Israel family,

Reopening, a crack. [Last week's email](#) laid out the considerations we are assessing to determine the sequence, speed, and scope of reopening. With that taxonomy in place, we are pleased to announce three initiatives, as important for what they do signify as for what they don't:

First, we will soon start collecting information on how many of our congregants wishing to attend in-person services and programs have been vaccinated. The data collection will be done on a voluntary basis. The information will enable us to consider options that may be good, may be bad, but that we can't even consider without the data.

Second, we will be expanding our outdoor service, both during the week and on Shabbat, beginning to put back in prayers and ritual that we have been omitting. One very special add-back is the choir (see below).

Third, at this moment we will be adding back a little but not a lot to our indoor service. Our Covid-19 Working Group is not yet at the stage where it believes any more relaxation of our protocols is warranted indoors, even an indoors as capacious as our sanctuary. It will come, but not right now.

Meron. Ashkenazim typically celebrate the end of the initial mourning period of *Sefira* on the 33rd day of the counting of the *omer*, or Lag (33 in Hebrew numbering) La'Omer. Sephardim typically begin that celebration a day later, on the 34th day. My guess is that Sephardim and Ashkenazim alike will long mourn on Day 33 in memory of the tragedy that befell hundreds of Jewish worshipers in Meron on Lag La'Omer last week. 45 lives were lost; many more suffered injuries. The pain being felt by the affected families and communities, and indeed by all of Israel (in a rare and beautiful showing of national unity), is unspeakable.

It was Emily Dickinson who tried to capture the dullness of feeling that is at times the only response one has to tragedy:

After great pain, a formal feeling comes -

The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs . . .

The Torah captured the point earlier: We just read that Aaron's response to the unexpected death of his two sons was that he fell silent (Vayikra 10:3). Some of us had the merit to see a way of paying a shiba call from great teachers and Rabbis, who went and were essentially silent. Relatedly, our Sages said, in this week's Chapter of Pirkei Abot (4:23):

"Do not try to console your friends when their dead lie before them."

Without wishing to disturb the silence, and following Rabbi Soloveichik's words of comfort last Friday, I respectfully offer the following on behalf of our Congregation.

In [my email of December 3, 2020](#), we discussed faith. My email quoted the lyrics of the Paul Simon song *Proof*. In one of the two double *parshiot* this week, *Behukotai*, faith is described in its more concrete, optimistic form, and that is hope. When in my email of a week ago I mentioned hope and consolation after the reading of the *tochacha* or remonstrations in *Behukotai*, no one could have dreamed that so many Jewish families would need that hope and consolation so badly today.

Behukotai lays it out simply. The Torah shows us the path of righteous behavior. If we follow it, the Almighty promises physical and spiritual benefits. Rains will fall in their season, "and the land shall yield her produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit, . . . and [you shall] dwell in your land safely, . . ." If on the other hand our souls abhor the good and the right, then national calamities will befall the Jewish people. The Torah's recitation of the calamities is much longer than its articulation of the blessings. And among the "curses" are that we will be so unsettled that "a sound of a driven leaf shall chase [us]". (It was this verse that Milton Steinberg borrowed for the title of his solo great work, *As a Driven Leaf*.) You would assume that's the end of the story. Simple. Reward and punishment. Cause and effect. Justice prevails as part of the fabric of reality.

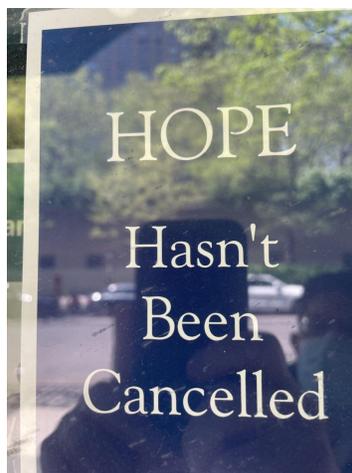
Yet the Torah narrative does not end there. It doesn't end there because, as our Sages taught, if we as a community truly were held collectively accountable for our actions, the Jewish people, and with it humanity, likely wouldn't merit

remaining in existence. Despite the relentless disasters foretold in the *parasha* for a nation gone astray, the Almighty then says:

"And yet for all that, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them, neither will I abhor them, to destroy them utterly, and to break My covenant with them; for I am the Lord their G-d. But I will for their sakes remember the covenant of their ancestors, whom I brought forth out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations, that I might be their G-d. I am the Lord" (Vayikra 26:44-45, Hertz translation).

Is the world, then, run by justice, or is it run by mercy? Clearly, the Torah is saying, there is mercy. "And yet for all that". It is the principle of mercy that engenders hope. The Torah clearly teaches the concept of hope. It teaches us to believe in hope, to embrace hope, to exhibit hope. Hope has been our standard and our individual and communal salvation for millennia. In another of his masterworks, Rabbi Sacks calls Judaism "the voice of hope in the conversation of humankind". *Future Tense: A Vision for Jews and Judaism in the Global Culture*. Put aside the lessons we are instructed to teach the world over the ages; how the families and communities of those lost at Meron need that spirit of hope themselves, right now.

At a time of life and death tragedies, our tradition includes expressing to the bereaved the words, *B'sorot Tovot*, or may your future tidings be good. Reacting to Meron, our hearts grieve. Our hearts are broken. There is nothing else to say except a hopeful *B'sorot Tovot*.



Losing the Forest for the Trees. I can't find a source for this expression earlier than the early Seventeenth Century. This week's communal Talmud learning, however, could not be clearer about the dire need to keep our priorities straight. This week's *Daf Yomi* includes Tractate *Yoma* 22a and 23a. 22a contains the first Mishna in the Second Chapter of the Tractate. The Mishna describes an unfortunate incident that occurred when two priests, or kohanim, were running up the ramp in the Beit Hamikdash, literally racing to see who might be the first to do one of the Temple service tasks of removing ash from the sacrificial altar. One kohen (accidentally?) pushed the other, and the one who was pushed fell and broke his leg. From then on, reports the Mishna, the practice was instituted to assign tasks by drawing lots (called *payass* in Aramaic), rather than by racing.

On the next page of the Tractate (23a), also learned this week, the story of an even earlier incident is told. Here, it was not pushing or tripping, but as two Kohanim were running, one zealous young Kohen actually stabbed and killed the other so as to be the first up the ramp. To make sure we don't miss the profound lesson the Talmud is trying to teach us about priorities, the Talmud then, in the words of the Great Bard, lays it on with a trowel (*As You Like It*, Act I, Scene 2). The Talmudic narrative goes on to say that the father of the stabbed youth ran into the Temple to find that his son was not yet dead but that, instead of immediately tending to him, cried out that the knife should be removed from the stabbed youth while he was still alive, lest the knife become ritually impure coming in contact with a dead body. The Talmudic discussion ends by recounting that the episode, though occurring during the Second Temple period, resulted from insensitivity to human life starting hundreds of years earlier, during the First Temple, in the time of Menashe, who was a King of Judah (II Kings 21:16). Of him it was said that he spilled so much blood that the streets of Jerusalem were filled with it, from end to end.

Our Talmudic Sages were brilliant. (My only quibble is with the unrelated interdiction on Page 23b of this Tractate, that a community should not appoint anyone as *parnas* (yes that's the word used in the Talmud) "unless he has a box of creeping creatures hanging behind him". Clearly this is the origin of "skeletons in the closet"; can anyone identify anything earlier? Still, you can sympathize why

it's, well, creepy, at least for me.) Our Sages understood human beings and the human condition with exquisite sense, sensitivity, and savvy. They have much to teach us right now, so that we keep our true priorities straight as we try to find a communally acceptable way back to "normal".

The Half-Full Report. A report dedicated to the positive, half-full nature of what we are all going through doesn't seem fitting today. I do want to note, with gratitude to the Almighty as well as to our synagogue clergy and administrative management, the return this Shabbat of our choir. They will be enriching our Friday night service this Shabbat as well as our morning service on the first day of Shabuot. Both services will be held open-air on Paved Paradise, weather permitting. If you are comfortable, please sign up and join us.

Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas