

December 9, 2021

Dear Shearith Israel family,

*Who Knew!* My report on Covid-19 from last week is nearly as accurate this week, too. Disease spread numbers are worsening slightly, but in our community, where triple vax rates are high, they are not as bad as the *worrying* about worsening numbers is. Are we Omicroning ourselves into a little hysteria? We should not be. The reality will be what it will be, and until further notice we have in place good and adequate protections to be able to continue to offer communal prayer. Last Shabbat we masked up and kept socially distant. It was truly a glorious Shabbat, with the rare appearance of three Sifrei Torah on our Teba for reading (one for the weekly Torah parasha of Miketz; one for Rosh Hodesh; and one for Hanukkah). The Rabbi's *Friday Night Lights* lecture was as brilliantly illuminating (it was about Hanukkiot oh Hanukkah) as it was beautiful. This Shabbat we plan to observe the same Covid-19-related precautions. Outdoor Kiddush will again be hot and great. Come and enjoy the warmth in our cool sanctuary, cooler outdoor kiddush venue, and among the coolest congregants anywhere.

The hoot of it all, however, is that Covid-19 was not the part of my email last week that seemed to interest anyone. But boy The Who sure did. Steven Smith said that, finally, I was talking about real rock & roll. Michael Lustig offered [5:15](#), as a great Who song better than *Pinball Wizard*. And Jim Nuzzo offered [Baba O'Riley](#) (and also pointed out that the other WHO – meaning the World Health Organization – skipped “nu” and not just “xi” in naming Covid-19 variants. Of course he's right; I didn't mention that omission since the WHO's decision was a sensible attempt not to dare or goad a Covid-19 variant with the Yiddish “nu?”). All entries received are of great Who songs. Ok, no one beats *The Kids Are Alright*, but we have a solid and growing, fairly illustrious list of the Who's Who's Who. Join the fun with a favorite Who hoot. (David Sable is boycotting – for him R&R never really recovered from the young death of Jim Morrison – I wonder if he's right.)

*Time for a new paradigm?* Congregations remain vibrant in different ways. Some respond to the inevitably different preferences among congregants or groups within the Congregation by offering many different options for

minyanim: Ashkenazi and Sephardi, early *hashcama* and a “gentler” start time, formal or lay-led, etc.; what they serve to eat; and other fundamentally important things. Others try to keep one service with one minhag or set of governing customs. To the extent the preference for variety or change becomes too great, those with a single, monolithic approach may find themselves experiencing split-offs or break-aways.

Shearith Israel has not had many break-aways. Actually we’ve had exactly one. From 1654 to 1824 we were the only Jewish congregation in New York City. In 1825 we suffered our one and only break-away: B’nai Jeshurun split-off because the congregants who formed it thought that Shearith Israel was not religious enough (today’s BJ now calls itself non-affiliated). Since then we at Shearith Israel frankly don’t even love a second minyan on Rosh HaShana and Kippur. We are one congregation, one community.

I wonder if Covid-19 is presenting us with challenges to this conception. We willingly offered services inside in our Sanctuary and outside on Paved Paradise to accommodate different risk tolerances. We may go back to that in the Spring depending on Omicron and everything else. But in the main we are not going to be apart for too long when it comes to prayer and communal services. On the other hand, some have reasonably asked whether, given that Covid-19 is overstaying its welcome, perhaps, when it comes to synagogue activities *other than* communal prayer, is there more room for choice or differentiation? The reasoning seems sound enough. We set aside communal prayer, trying to ensure that for communal prayer we will be as safe (conservative?) as the most high-risk or risk averse congregants reasonably want or need. This makes sense, for if we are a true community we cannot say that attending services is “optional” (and indeed, we wish more of us felt compelled to attend midweek minyan). At the same time, when it comes to congregating after tefillot, such as for Kiddush or for a class, or for other activities, might we permit more choice or differentiation?

The reason we are going to need to face that question is that, whether before Omicron runs its course or after, Covid-19 is likely to become endemic in the population ([see my email of October 28, 2021](#)). So for some subset of

the population, Covid-19 is likely to pose either a threat or at least a serious annoyance for many years to come. The challenge posed by offering choice arises in part because of different philosophies concerning how much we should be telling others how to behave (like sitting apart, masking all the time). More importantly, Covid-19 presents us with near-constant information deficiencies. Yeah, sure, if the numbers are terrible, the hospitals filling up, we all get it – take every precaution. But what if instead we just don't know which way the wind is actually going to blow (an apt metaphor, for once). There is a time lag to learn about disease spread. There is also, on top of that, a lot of hype making headlines. Beth rightly says that we want our medical advisers to be super-knowledgeable and super-cautious. But I don't think we benefit (I don't anyway) from our news outlets over-doing, for example, Omicron. See [the attached](#) for an interesting take on that issue.

Is this a moment when we could say to nearly all, please come to *tefillot* – we will be maximally safe and cautious and scrupulously follow the most stringent and conservative advice we can find. But for classes or lectures or food-driven events, we will still, at a minimum, observe the strictures and dictates of our governments, but we will permit a diversity of approach and no pressure on whether or not to attend. Do not worry; we are not about to go hog wild (ok not my best metaphor for us, but there it is).

So now the question for YOU. In the coming weeks, we would benefit from hearing from you about whether and to what extent we can or should make accommodations to those who want, for example, to be able to eat something in the synagogue rather than at a restaurant, or who would rather listen to Rabbi Soloveichik without having to wear a mask. The Republic will not fall in either case. We've had the one break-away, nearly 200 years ago. We'll have no more of those. But the answer to this question may well influence how fast we return to our pre-Covid-19 status – and how Congregants will feel they are being treated in the meantime.

*G-d Forgive!* In our weekly Daf Yomi cycle, we are nearing the end of Tractate Taanit (I told you a few weeks ago that these shorter Tractates are the best way to ease into the joy of daily Talmud learning – next week you

can start another Tractate from the first page (numbered 2 – another story) – Tractate Megilla). Page 29a of this week’s learning discusses the calamitous events that befell the Jewish people at various times in history and on various specific days of the year. As part of that, the Talmud makes an interesting observation (based on our Commentators’ later puzzling question): When the Jews made and began to worship the Golden Calf in the desert after just witnessing the Glory of the Almighty in Egypt and at the Red Sea, they were surely punished. But the Almighty forgave them, and as a people we moved on. Yet very soon after that the twelve spies entered the Land of Israel, ten of them came back with a bad report, and the people wept. The day the spies returned was the day before Tisha B’Ab, and so the weeping went on at night – the night of Tisha B’Ab. The Talmud says that right then and there the Almighty said that the people really had no cause to weep but that history, alas, would give the Jewish people plenty of reasons to weep on what became and remains our saddest day of the year, Tisha B’Ab. It seems like the Almighty forgave the nation for a sin so great, a violation of at least one of the Ten Commandments (the Golden Calf was certainly a violation of the Second Commandment about graven images). But when it came to running scared from entering the land of Israel, the Almighty did not forgive the nation; indeed, that entire generation needed to die out before the Israelites could try again to enter the land, and the day has lived in infamy since.

What gives? Many answers present themselves. The one I think leaps off the page – at least if you are interested in community preservation – is that the sin of the Golden Calf was a most serious one, but it was “only” against the Almighty. The Almighty could quickly forgive it once penitence and penance were done. The sin of the spies, on the other hand, played out as a communal failure of will. That failure was much more damaging to the Jewish people as a whole. Its perniciousness lay in communal undermining. And it is that failure of community that has been the occasion of community tragedies since. Let’s not let it happen to us.

*Half-Full Report.*

*Oh, Ah, EE!* Commenting on my frail humor last week about the Greek letter “O”, especially about how many similar sounds Greek has for “o”, Guy Reiss points out that Hebrew, too, has its proud but peculiar pronunciation particularities. He offers [this link](#) to an attempt at a serious disquisition on the Hebrew vowel, *kamatz katan*. In fact it’s a very funny treatment (in a yekkish funny way), and I at least cannot make sense of it. Even funnier is Michael Gelman’s quip:

“Since apparently the Greek letter omicron is related to the Hebrew  $\nu$ , ... [should] there should be a specific Shearith Israel pronunciation for the variant’s name”?

*A Brief Farewell to Our Tent.* Paved Paradise is still there, but our tent has come down until the Spring. Barbara Reiss irreverently calls it topless, and Bonnie Barest belts: Let it snow/let it snow/let it snow! Thank you to Ari Sherizen for his tireless efforts on behalf of Paved Paradise and for snapping this perfect photo:



*Black Friday Revisited.* With apologies, I here correct my error of last week in not attaching Ruth Lazar's hilarious pic of a true Black Friday event:



Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas