

October 28, 2021

Dear Shearith Israel family,

*Pandemic to Endemic.* This week *The Economist* had a big report on Covid-19 moving from “pandemic” to “endemic.” The *Wall Street Journal* also had a piece on what New York might look like as it passes from one phase to the other. Many of us feel it is premature to be talking this way. New York welcomes travelers from the world over, including from many places still seeing spikes in spread rates. There is also a subvariant of the Delta variant among us now, and several of our Working Group experts worry that it may create another wave of disease spread in the coming months. Fair enough. But even having said that, spread rates in our community are very low, under 1% in many places. It doesn’t seem too early to begin a thoughtful discussion of the issues pertaining to “endemicity”, even if implementation is a ways off.

Replacing the “pa” with an “e”, to turn pandemic into endemic, doesn’t seem like much. But it is. ([Moses Supposes](#) doesn’t really work in this context, but it’s a great song and scene, so here, enjoy it. [Tomato/potato](#) works a little better here, and it’s one of the greatest dance scenes on skates, so enjoy it, too.) The “pan” in pandemic has acquired a spatial or geographic connotation; the “en” in endemic seems to have a temporal meaning. A pandemic is all over the place, and it’s not good. Something endemic may be all over the place, but it’s not as bad, even though it will evidently be with us for, well, a long time. Colds are endemic. So is the flu. I’ll stop there.

This much is known. What is not known is how endemicity will affect our Congregation? I see three general categories of impacts, and your Covid-19 Working Group is thinking about this very issue. I solicit your considered reactions. More “Ps”, by the way – it’s the letter of the moment:

*Proportionality.* To address an endemic disease, even a serious one, the precautions we take need to be measured. They need to be meet for the task. Maybe all of us should have been washing our hands during cold and flu season more thoroughly in the past. Maybe all of us should have stayed home when we were not feeling well. When the risk of not following simple rules is feeling lousy for a couple/few days, that’s one thing. But when the risk is, for some of our congregants, much more serious, we just need to do it. I do not mean to limit the precautions to these, but I do think

all of us should be mindful of the little but effective things we can do to keep ourselves *and* others safe.

*Practicality.* Judaism is so wise in instructing heads of communities not to impose rigors and strictures that the community as a whole cannot follow. I see the same principle at work here. If we do not have to force fully vaccinated people who choose to attend a lecture or program to remain uncomfortably masked, then we should not do so. Nor should we to any extent undermine the will of those who want to remain masked. Let's be tolerant as well as practical.

*Pace.* This could also be *patience*. We need to embrace precautions that will allow us to play the long game. Precautions that are so hard or so expensive to adhere to, ones that over time will send us to the poor house or empty our synagogue, can't be squared with thriving and fulfilling our purpose over the long run. If the pandemic didn't break us – it hobbled us, but it didn't break us – the endemic won't either *if* we pace ourselves to be vigilant in keeping us safe but with the knowledge that a community needs to do in-person communal things, safely.

Is this all too abstract? Is it too mushy and general? I'm sorry if you have that reaction. Feel free to make concrete, constructive suggestions. For me, I'm delighted that we are at a stage where we can at least start to think about replacing "pa" with "e" – for when the time comes.

*More than Charity: Loving-Kindness.* If you had to choose one defining approach to life that Judaism has taught the world, it's hard to beat charity, or *tzedakah*. Innumerable *mitzvot* and *halakhot* guide our every step in helping the poor. We define ourselves by how generous we are able to be to those less fortunate. Our history as a people is as rich and successful as it is in large part *because* of our adherence to the Torah's ideals of charitable living and giving. For hundreds of years, charity has been one of the three pillars of our community, as displayed in our logo. When our daughter Lia, for her bat mitzvah, wanted to study and then teach our congregation about a profoundly important approach to life, it was charity that she focused on.

Yet our religion seems to place a few things as high as or maybe even higher than charity: one is loving-kindness, or *hesed*. In Tractate Sukkah, on page 49b (Sefaria edition) we learn:

The Sages taught that acts of loving-kindness are superior to charity in three respects: Charity can be performed only with one's money, while acts of loving-kindness can be performed both with his person and with his money. Charity is given to the poor, while acts of loving-kindness are performed both for the poor and for the rich. Charity is given to the living, while acts of loving-kindness are performed both for the living and for the dead.

These are not small differences.

*Hesed* is on full display in our *parasha* this week, *Chaye Sarah*, and it features importantly in our Daf Yomi learning cycle this week as well, on page 18a of Tractate *Rosh Hashana*. The *parasha* begins with the death of our Matriarch Sarah, who taught the world *hesed* by always having her house open to guests and strangers, always having enough food to serve them, and always having a welcoming light kindled during Shabbat. *Hesed* is also the defining characteristic identified by Eliezer in finding a wife for Isaac. The Talmud's references this week to *hesed* include the acts of *hesed* performed by the Sage Abaye, which the Talmud teaches is the explanation for his longevity. Even more remarkably, the Talmud goes on to say that Abaye lived a full generation (twenty years) longer than great Sage Rabbah, who was at least equal to Abaye in Torah learning but not as abundant in acts of *hesed*.

We observe this week the first anniversary of the passing of Twentieth Century giant, Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. Rabbi Sacks's acts of loving-kindness are renowned. His book, *Essays on Ethics*, devotes a beautiful chapter to *hesed* (pp. 27-31). In it, among other things, he records that it was not until William Tyndale's translation of the Hebrew Bible in the Sixteenth Century that the world even had an English word for *hesed* (coining "loving-kindness"). Rabbi Sacks's own terminology, that *hesed* is "love as deed", is a keeper as well.

In recent weeks, we have been pleading for charity to help fund necessary maintenance and preservation of our Paved Paradise. We are doing as well as can as a community. At the same time, as a community, let's go one better. Let's all pledge to make Paved Paradise, and our Synagogue as a whole, a place where *hesed* will be on full display, to our fellow congregants and friends as well as to the broader Jewish community and the *velt*. Support our Caring Connection. And, it is in this regard that special thanks must go to our Sisterhood,

who demonstrated not only *hesed*, by beautifying our Sukkah this year, but who also just undertook to pay for the wood needed for that Sukkah.

So *hesed* and *tzedakah* in one swell foop! Thank you, thank you.

*Half-Full Report.*

*Canceling canceling.* Given the many welcomed emails received on this posting last week, my two follow-ups are to thank Steve Tilly for making me laugh and Esther Ingber for making me cry. Steve describes the “thing” I was describing as “the Britbox Syndrome”. Esther describes the cancel culture generally as a “tragic movement”. Both so true.

*Reimagining Paved Paradise.* I think we need to get even more ambitious than we have recently. I’m challenging you to beat these:

First, Paved Paradise as a Garden of Earthly Delights:



Second, Paved Paradise as Marie Antoinette’s Garden at the Palace of Versailles (By the way, if you want a book that won the international award for Title Having Least To Do With Content, try Amir Alexander’s *Proof: How the World Became*

*Geometrical*, which spends *hundreds* of pages on the layouts of various gardens throughout history, mostly in France.)



Third, Paved Paradise as a Pleasure Garden:



Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas