

November 12, 2020

Dear Shearith Israel family,

*Where have you gone, oh our Patriarchs/Matriarchs?* Last week we were skirting the precipice of a serious COVID-19 relapse in our broader region. The Congregation's COVID-19 Reentry Working Group was cautious, taking a watching brief. In the past week, however, two significant indicators of disease seriousness in New York have increased two-fold, and the infection rate is reported to have increased in New York City overall to over 2% (seven-day running average). At the same time, neither the rate of increase nor the absolute numbers have appreciably worsened in "our" zip codes, and other metrics have not worsened either. As of now, we will be having Shabbat services, though a last-minute decision on venue will have to be made (daily services will continue as scheduled). So that we can continue to pray as a community on Shabbat, it is imperative that whomever wishes to join us fill out the online forms and let us know immediately. Whatever happens, we will not be shutting down any of our remote learning. But we need everyone to exercise restraint and caution as the colder weather and the travel season arrive.

And we need a Joltin' Joe (DiMaggio, that is) to lift our spirits. I didn't like the movie, *The Graduate*. But the Simon & Garfunkel song too-associated with the movie (*Mrs. Robinson*) has two lines as timeless as they are needed urgently by us now:

*Where have you gone, Joe DiMaggio?*

*Our nation turns its lonely eyes to you*

Where can we turn for our Joltin' Joe? Fortunately, an answer is right in front of us. We are in *Sefer Bereshit*, where every week we are treated to greatness in action by characters who could have succumbed to their version of the COVID-19 Blues. We need to be inspired by them now especially. This week we mourn the deaths of monumental figures in modern Judaism: HaRav Dovid Feinstein, one of the leaders of the Torah community in the U.S., who died of COVID-19 complications; and Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, known so well to our community

and to the broader Jewish world that Rabbi Soloveichik is dedicating his "Friday Night Lights, on Thursday" talk this evening to teachings of Rabbi Sacks. The world is emptier, both of greatness and inspiration, by the passing of these two Torah giants.

*A Biblical Personality Test.* We don't need to read more than three sentences into this week's Parasha (Chaye Sarah) before we see how our Patriarch Abraham faced adversity. He had just lost his wife Sarah. He calls himself a "stranger" as well as a sojourner. The "stranger" is later actualized in the name of Moses' son Gershom, named because Moses too saw himself as a "stranger in a strange land" (Shemot 2:22). COVID-19 is threatening to make all of us strangers in what is becoming a strange land. Nearly every everyday event has been altered, certainly the public ones. And it's not changing - except where it's getting worse. There is certainly a risk that the bewilderment of the foreign will create strangers of us, to our community and to each other.

How did Abraham act as a stranger in a strange land? He acted like a paragon of probity and virtue. He exhibited integrity and forthrightness. He never lost faith or energy. The narrative of the Parasha shows him chiefly helping others, acting charitably (even overspending) in the process. When Abraham was describing himself as a stranger, he was in the midst of one of the great episodes in the Torah showing how to act in the conduct of business. Abraham was negotiating the purchase of a burial plot and cave for the interment of Sarah. The Torah shows Abraham unwilling to accept any favors from his hosts/owner of the land. Thrice they tried; thrice he politely declined. He wound up paying exorbitantly for the parcel - unless you calculate his return on investment in terms of its value to the formation of the Jewish people and to posterity, indeed to eternity.

How one acts in matters of money is one of the windows into the essence of a person - indeed the Talmud teaches that it is one of the three ways we can determine the true nature of a person: We just learned (Eruvin 65b) the unforgettable phrase in Aramaic, **בְּכֹסוֹ, וּבְכִיּוֹ, וּבְכַעְסוֹ**, transliterated B'koso, uB'kiso, uB'kaaso. The three-word phrase trips off the tongue. It means that true personality shows itself in how a person acts in three settings: with drink

(alcohol), in business (in his pocket or money purse), and in anger. Abraham taught us about generosity to others, even those who can't return any favors. If we emulate that as a community now, neither COVID-19 nor anything else will grind us down.

*Paved Paradise Project.* Speaking of *Stranger in a Strange Land*, no, not the Leon Russell rock-n-roll hit; I mean the sci-fi cult classic novel by Robert Heinlein (1961!). Remember what he did in the novel with "threes"? Everything. It was all very cool and mysterious. Our Paved Paradise Project, or P Cubed, or P to the Power of Three, is - well it's as grok as you can get (a word he coined and used for the first time in the novel, though it's taken on a much more coherent meaning since). Our PPP is underway; active site work began this week. Here is a "before" pic:



And here is an "after", at least as I imagine it:



Mind you, I'm not insisting on the final looking *exactly* like this. In that regard we should all have the generosity of spirit of the Twentieth Century philosopher and poet (among other things) George Santayana, who said with humility:

*I do not ask anyone to think in my terms if he prefers others. Let him clean better, if he can, the windows of his soul, that the variety and beauty of the prospect may spread more brightly before him.*

A thinker as great as Santayana could afford to be that magnanimous. Me, not so much, not on this project. Earlier this week, pledges passed the half-way mark to our goal of \$250k. Now we need *your* help. Really. Please consider the importance of having usable outdoor space adjacent to our Sanctuary. Don't you want the completed project to look like the image I have for it above, or something akin to that? It will probably look more like this:



But that is good enough; no actually it's great. In last week's email, I laid out many of the reasons why this project is so important to all of us now. By helping, you will join many of our other congregants and friends who are benefiting so magnificently from our continued functioning during this trying time. Get behind this; lift your spirits. Show the greatness of Abraham in matters of money. Let the glimpse into your nature in matters of money (יִסְרָאֵל) reveal a shining light. Overspend - in the long run you won't see it as overspending. Help us pave paradise, even if you yourself do not expect to be a direct beneficiary of the kindness. Click [HERE](#) and be as generous as your circumstances permit. Think about it this way: the sooner you donate and we reach our goal, the sooner I will stop these annoying fund-raising distractions from the fun of our weekly emails.

Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas