

March 11, 2021

Dear Shearith Israel family,

We Will Stand Our Ground - For Now. This week has brought the announced impending opening of NYC public high schools for in-person instruction and new CDC Covid-19 guidelines for vaccinated people in small, private gatherings. As intimate as Shearith Israel is, we are not a small, private gathering. The numbers around us are improving, especially for the most serious disease spreads, but the new variants are growing in strength and number. Our Synagogue guidelines and rules will remain unchanged for at least a bit longer. If you want to join us for outdoor or indoor services, and we would love for you to, you need to be comfortable in doing so, fill out the forms, and make the attestations required there. The form has grown over the many months in use, but our Covid-19 Working Group feels it remains meet for the task.

When will we change the rules? The answer is straightforward, if a little annoying: We will change the rules when changes are warranted. First and foremost is the health of our community, which attains halakhic status as the preeminent rule of decision. After that, a complex matrix of considerations is at play. Einstein said:

"Everything should be made as simple as possible, but no simpler."

Maybe that doesn't say it all, but it comes pretty close. The only part lacking may be filled in by our Trustee Segan Karen Daar, who says: "We wait for the science". Or, more lyrically, by Tom Petty, in his late '80s hit, ["I Won't Back Down"](#):

"Well, I won't back down

No, I won't back down

You can stand me up at the gates of hell

But I won't back down..."

The sheer repetitiveness of melody and words of that song gives it great predictability and strength. So too here.

An Approach to the Quadrant I Quandary. This week, our *daf yomi*, or daily Talmud study, includes *Pesahim* 108a, which discusses the tradition of reclining during the Pesah Seder (which we call the Haggadah) and especially during the drinking of the cups of wine. Reclining was instituted by our Talmudic Sages as a sign of freedom and nobility, since that was the custom in those Roman times. The Talmudic discussion records a difference of opinion concerning whether one should recline during the first two or the last two cups of wine. Finding no compelling way to dispel the uncertainty, the Talmud concludes, ok, recline during all four cups. I see you are rolling your eyes, saying "figures". But the fact is that it is not *that* common for the Talmud to opt for the "ok, then do it all" approach. Reclining is a special case because to act leniently (which we are generally permitted to do in the case of Rabbinic ordinances) would mean not reclining at all, which we *know* is wrong. Putting this special case aside, the general rule in the Talmud is not to adopt the most stringent of approaches absent compelling reason and little to no alternatives, though I acknowledge that "strict interpretation" is a popular way to describe the upshot of many halakhic debates.

This topic moves me to a related one of fundamental importance. More than one Torah giant has fairly asked, why recline at all "today". True, in Roman times reclining was in; free folks did it, and so it made sense for the Rabbis to introduce the practice during an evening when we are to act as free people. But for over 1,000 years many have found reclining while eating or drinking neither comfortable nor regal. If anything, many may see it as slouching, a sign of disrespect. This is a perennial favorite of a question. Why continue to observe anachronistic customs and practices?

There are at least four quadrants of possibilities in describing whether ritual and observances change over time:

1. We did x "then", and we do the same "x" now even though "the reason" for the practice no longer applies. Our current topic, reclining when drinking the four cups of wine at the Seder, fits into this category.

2. We did x "then", but we no longer do "x" now. This deserves a whole separate email, since there are many examples.
3. We did not do "x" then, but we do do "x" now. This shows the evolution of Halakha.
4. We did not do "x" then, and we still don't do it now. This is the least interesting in this context.

Talmudic as well as halakhic discussions since the closing of the Talmud (in around the Seventh Century) are replete with examples of each of the first three Quads. But Quad 1 does seem to attract a lot of questions, especially when the unchanging practice is not Biblical in origin. Perhaps the practice entered our religious observances 1,000+ years after the Torah was given. Perhaps it no longer seems to have resonance today. Reclining may be the poster child of an example. For Ashkenazim, another example may be not eating "*kitniyot*" on Pesah. *Kitniyot* are foods such as beans, lentils, peas, rice. (The debate comes down to us as Ashkenaz/Sefard from the Middle Ages, though Rav Huna, a Talmudic Sage, speaks of using rice on his Seder plate (Pesachim 114b).) The argument goes that the original reasons for not eating foods containing *kitniyot* - that the five grains comprising hametz were stored near the food sacks containing *kitniyot* or that, when cooked, the *kitniyot* foodstuff looks like food made from hametz - do not have to be applicable today. What's the justification for not changing with the times?

Read no further if you are looking for any deep insight. But I do have a view, and it's a view that I believe is consonant with who *we* are as a community. Judaism does not fragment our rites and observances in either time or space. We are one people, and *ahdut*, or unity, is as strong a force in our religion as any other. We celebrate geographic differences, to be sure, but only because they are differences around a central middle. So too with time. We feel ourselves integral to what I call "the J-Continuum" (borrowing from Star Trek, see [my email of July 16, 2020](#)). It's not that we are bent on experiencing the past. Experiencing the past is a special rule related to the first night of Pesah, when, as we say in the Haggadah, we should see ourselves as having been slaves and having been saved

in Egypt. In reclining, it is not *experiencing* the past that is the mood we are capturing; it is rather *paying homage* to the past in celebrating what our forbearers did -- because they did it. The past is profoundly part of who we are. We are Jews living today whose ancestors reclined because it was meaningful to them. We therefore recline, not because the practice has independent significance to us today but because those for whom it had significance are significant to us today.

Here at Shearith Israel, we pay that sort of homage to the past all the time, in ways big and small. We do change our tunes and melodies over time, but not often. We do change our dress over time, but not often. During and after services, our Clergy dress in Eighteenth Century not-singularly-Jewish vestment, not because the practice has independent meaning to us but because those for whom it had meaning have meaning to us. Your presiding officers wear morning suits and top hats for the same reason. We speak words of greeting and condolence in Portuguese or Ladino, which were spoken hundreds of years ago for that reason alone. Seen in this light, our respectful adherence to past practices shows a partnership through time with other Jews. It is not an example of weakness or of a fractured religious structure but a source of pride and a manifestation of our unity.

Congregation Half Empty but Half Full. Tomorrow will mark the anniversary of our first email to the Congregation on this thing called the "novel coronavirus". The specific occasion was announcing the make-shift reading of *Parashat Parah* but otherwise closing down our sacred Shabbat service - for the first time in our recorded history (no, I don't count when we fled to Philadelphia and prayed there during the American Revolution; we still had services then). You don't need me to remind you how dispiriting the click of the chronometer can become. A full year! You've heard a lot from me and others over the year about lives lost, health challenged, lives discombobulated, lives paused. For many of us, the isolation has been depressing. This is as real a set of dislocations as our blessed (and, for many of us, pampered) generation has had to confront. Yet I can't abide what one national periodical promises to be "a weeklong special series marking one year of pandemic life". Oh bother!

Here's what I propose instead. We will continue to report on Synagogue doings affected by Covid-19. We also continue to reserve the right to stray into other topics, as to which you've all been quite tolerant. My own jokes and contests may continue, but as we proceed into what we hope is the "back nine" of dealing with Covid-19 challenges, I solicit *your* comments, jokes, anecdotes, cartoons, pics, humorous distractions, good tidings, whatnot that might help us glass-half-full our second year together. Serve up almost anything to make us all smile. My three inaugural entries for the Half-Full Report (oh yes, I'm taking suggestions for a better name than that, too) are:

- Paying tribute to a custom of long standing in other Jewish communities, Rabbi Rohde has agreed to read the *parashiot* that we missed a year ago, one each week, to commemorate the weeks we were unable to join together in communal prayer in 2020. An anonymous donor has pledged \$180 per *parasha* but is willing to double that amount if others match the \$180 per *parasha* pledge.
- Who can most accurately estimate how many minutes of Torah and teaching Rabbi Soloveichik gave us in Year 1, and to how many listeners (counting the same person calling in to two lectures as two)? Barbara Reiss will have answers next week.
- Observing the passing or at least the sharing of the baton from "Paved Paradise" to "Prayground", our cartoonist-humorist-in-residence Alan Zwiebel offers the following:



Ok, now it's your turn. Come on team, let's "make 'em laugh" (singer and name of musical for two marks if you email me before Shabbat).

Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas