

June 18, 2020

Dear Shearith Israel Family,

One Source of True Nobility? Jonah has just told the seamen that, since he is running away from the Almighty, there is nothing they can do to save him, and they should pitch him overboard. The very next sentence, without transition, recounts: "[Nevertheless], the men rowed hard to return to the shore, but they could not, because the sea was growing stormier upon them" (Book of Jonah, Ch. 1:13 [Stone Tr.]). The seamen were average folks, left nameless in the story, just trying to save their ship and their own lives. And what they did, getting back to their rowing, was, well, pretty prosaic. Yet these average people made a heroic, if ultimately futile, gesture. And with that one gesture they remain symbols of human nobility thousands of years later. We know from Rabbi Soloveichik's marvelous, recent lectures on King David, or in his discussion of Moses's sister and mother, or of his discussion of the midwives in Egypt, that Judaism provides limitless examples of ennobling, heroic acts by common, average, even deeply flawed human beings. Similarly, American literature, drama, and poetry are chock-full of instances paying homage to heroic acts by the average, the limited, the errant (email me your favorite examples). The Everyman is ubiquitous in both Judaism and in American letters. So, as the combined product of the two, being American Jews, where but to the Irishman, Joyce's Leopold Bloom (happy belated Bloomsday everyone), or to the British poet Alfred, Lord Tennyson would we go for a moving quote? Even after countless recitations the end of *Ulysses* brings moisture to the eyes:

Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'

We are not now that strength which in old days

Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are;

One equal temper of heroic hearts,

Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will

To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

Nobility of the Shearith Israel Community. COVID-19 has revealed a nobility in so many of our congregants. I don't mean the heroic acts of our Clergy and Staff, who week-in, week-out are literally keeping us spiritually and intellectually alive. To them our thanks must be unbounded. And not just our thanks. As the final verse (Ch. 5) says in *Pirkei Abot*, the *Saying of Our Fathers*, "According to the effort is the reward". We also need to exclude from the Noble Everyman our health care providers. Were they ever average (doubtful), they have put their lives on the line, devoting their talents to serve both individual and community in superhuman ways. They will forever be among the pantheon of modern titans, not mere mortals. No, I'm talking about the rest of us. Even in the dim days of COVID-19, we have manifested a capacity to achieve true nobility in the most prosaic of gestures. We have shown it in making phone calls to our elderly, whose own courage in the face of their enforced isolation deserve a descriptor more noble than even "noble". We have zoomed in to shiba calls. We have helped deliver food to the home-bound; have attended to the Herculean task of caring for and educating our understandably restless children; volunteered to tutor and teach; and delivered notes of warmth and other packages. We are not finished with the scourge that has overtaken much of the world. So there is more to do and still more after that. If we continue and even add to these and other simple gestures of caring we will come out of this an enduring community of nobles.

And the Synagogue? This Shabbbat marks the fifteenth that our Sanctuary, and in turn we, will remain dark (only our lonely *Ner Tamid*, or Eternal Light, stands watch, awaiting our return). Fifteen is a precious number in Judaism. In Hebrew, it is summed as 9+6 rather than 10+5, for embedded in the Hebrew letters for 10+5 is the name of the Almighty. Fifteen deserved to see our Sanctuary in use, but it could not be done safely, and so it is not being done. At the same time, it is our hope, and at this point our expectation absent unknown unknowns, that before the July 4th weekend we will see the recommencement of weekday afternoon/evening services on our portico. We will be able to accommodate perhaps as many as 14 people including as many as we can who are saying Kaddish or are observing *Nahalot*, or anniversaries of the loss of a loved one. The Synagogue Re-entry Working Group has found as safe a way as they and our consulting engineers and architects can to configure that space. We have ordered the equipment needed for the task, and our Executive Director is in the process of preparing and beginning to test an on-line questionnaire for those interested in attending.

Restarting weekday afternoon/evening services is a small step. We have been made weak by time and fate. Yet it is the biggest step that we can safely take now, and so it is the right step. Slow, safe expansion of portico services at other times and days can follow after a decent interval. Other expansions will follow when safe. We will not yield until, the health crisis behind us, we will once again be able to experience spiritual sustenance from our sacred Synagogue spaces.

Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas