

July 1, 2021

Dear Shearith Israel family,

*The Delta delta.* We welcome to these pages the new name of the Covid-19 virus variant, the Delta variant or strain. The Working Group has been watching this variant for many weeks, which promises to be the dominant strain in the US shortly. Delta is even more contagious than its parent. And science and medical reports, from Israel and elsewhere, confirm that it can infect and sicken even those with Covid-19 vaccines. The World Health Organization is now encouraging continued mask wearing for public indoor gatherings. Various large geographic regions of the US (e.g., Los Angeles) are following suit. The CDC has thus far remained silent. It's impossible to sort out the medicine from the politics, the science from the social. Blessedly, we have in our Working Group professionals of exceptional ability, acting in utmost good faith, whose only goal is the welfare and well-being of our Congregation. As I've said before, they, like everyone else, have biases, but their biases are *our* biases. We will continue to follow their sage advice.

Even with Delta concerns, our synagogue rituals continue to move back to normal in both outdoor and indoor minyanim. Mask/mask-optional procedures are in place in both venues, as is social distancing. If Delta does not sweep too broadly in the US, and if the effects of vaccinations continue to result in lower incidence of *serious* disease and *serious* disease spread, we will continue our minyanim as well as our outdoor activities on Paved Paradise. As I mentioned last week, we merged our minyanim this past Shabbat on Paved Paradise. It was wonderful. We will continue to do that this coming Shabbat, this time indoors in our Main Sanctuary.

Even with the wildcard of the Covid-19 Delta, we are looking forward to coming together as a community in just over two weeks to observe Tisha B'Ab, which will occur on Saturday night and Sunday, July 17-18. Subject to known and unknown vagaries and to game-time decisions, our thinking is that we will open the Synagogue to significantly more congregants and visitors than have been joining us, although still not filling to capacity, as is often the case on Tisha B'Ab. Prior registration will be required and enforced. We plan to hold services indoors for those who are vaccinated and, assuming sufficient interest, services outdoors for those who prefer. The Rabbi may also speak after the reading of Eikha in the Main Sanctuary. And for those who are unable or uncomfortable attending, we will be

livestreaming the indoor service and lecture. We understand the importance of our public observance of Tisha B'Ab. We understand the importance of the continued health and safety of our Congregants. Stay tuned.

*Our Happy, Sad Three Weeks.* We are now observing the time between the Fast of the Seventeenth of Tammuz, which occurred this past Sunday, and the Ninth, or Tisha, B'Ab. The time is called the *Bein Hametzarim*, or between the straits, though Dire Straits would also do (no internet link to *Sultans of Swing* in deference to those who refrain from listening to (great) music during this period). The sad parts of this period you know: Moses broke the first set of Tablets on 17 Tammuz; the walls to the Temple were breached, the Temple service was disrupted even before the destruction; and several other calamities occurred throughout Jewish history. Three weeks later, beginning on the Ninth of Ab and continuing into the Tenth, the Temple was burned and destroyed. Cataclysms occurred with respect to both the First and Second Temples during this period (see Tractate *Taanit* 28b). Jewish history changed forever.

So why do I describe the period as not just sad but “happy sad”? Principally, because of the liturgy, observances, and events that Shearith Israel somewhat uniquely has during this period. It is a muted but real happiness that comes from empathic understanding. Our Fast Day prayer book – remaining in first place as the most confusing compilation of prayers known to us (thankfully Reverend Edinger and Rabbi Rohde constantly call pages to keep us in the right place) – contains many *piyyutim*, liturgical poems, dedicated to the days and weeks we are observing. Our prayers are accessible, understandable, and lay out the history with an immediacy that makes it feel like we are reliving it. So too our liturgy – there are special tunes, including for some of our prayers and for our haftarot during these weeks. They are beautiful, recognizable, and deeply spiritual. Every morning at the conclusion of services we together chant the last few, uplifting verses of Eikha itself. As a Congregation we feel we are moving through the time together, that we see an end to it, and that we know that, on the other side of Tisha B'Ab, there will be seven weeks of consolation and other uplifting events before Rosh Hashana. Our Clergy go all out this time of year. Rabbi Soloveichik's three-part lecture series began this week and is excellent. Rabbi Rohde and Reverend Edinger are each giving special lectures or talks.

Together these do not turn sadness into happiness. They do however permit the sadness and the happiness to coexist because we empathize with the sadness in a

way that is comprehensible, perhaps even consoling. We know what to expect, and we are in it together. The combination gives rise to a life-affirming set of weeks for those who devote the energy to experience it. Our liturgy and other programs permit us to understand the past and our place in it. It's a far cry from last year, which many of us spent in limbo not really understanding anything very much and until recently just waiting, waiting for the other shoe to drop. I hope you will participate in these weeks and will join us on Tisha B'Ab.

*Back-to-Back Brilliance.* Page 80a of Tractate *Yoma*, which the Daf Yomi crowd learned this week, contains two unforgettably insightful passages occurring right next to each other, back-to-back.

First, in several places in the Talmud, discussion occurs about the strength of inference that can be drawn between a stated principle to a concrete example. On this page of the Tractate *Yoma*, the specific issue is whether, in referring to a measurement as the size of an egg, the Talmud is comfortable with an inference to a large egg – here called a “bar-yohani” egg – or to the smallest size of an average egg, characterized as a hen’s egg. Here, as elsewhere, the Talmud articulates the logical construct that “if you seize a larger amount, you have seized nothing, but if you seize the smallest amount necessary, then you have indeed seized something”. In the Hebrew/Aramaic, the phrase is תפסת מרובה לא תפסת, תפסת מועט תפסת, or in the catchy transliteration of the first part of the phrase (by which it is known), “*Tofasta Meruba Lo Tofasta*”. The phrase and concept are neat, powerful, logically compelling. The reasoning ability of our Sages, page for page, issue for issue, application for application know no equal in any body of intellectual pursuit. The concept of *Tofasta Meruba Lo Tofasta* predates by, oh, 1,000 years the similar concept attributed to Fourteenth Century philosopher Occam and his famous Occam’s Razor, which similarly is said to have said (it’s not clear if he actually said it) that the fewest assumptions in a proof lead to the strongest set of inferences. Today, we just announce the K-I-S-S principle, or Keep It Simple, Stupid. Less is more. Our eternal debt is surely due to *Tofasta Meruba Lo Tofasta*. And it’s fun to say – direct it to your family, friends, or perhaps presiding judges when they next lapse into fuzzy thinking. Stand up and shout, *Tofasta Meruba Lo Tofasta!*

Second, Daf 80a then enunciates another logical principle, again trying to prove that a small (hen’s) egg is the correct measurement at issue. The context is not important here. What is important is the Talmud’s question whether it is

necessary for those in one generation to commit to writing exactly the *size* or *measure* of the food that they used to satisfy one law or another. The reason urged for writing down the size or measure is that another court, in the future, might change the required size or measure and thus retroactively call into question the acts of the earlier generation. The Talmud concludes that this is not a correct approach; rather, reliance on the size or measure governing in one's own generation is sufficient. This rule may be obvious, but it has profound implications. Untold cruelty has been visited on Jews of one generation because of a retroactive application of supposed law to an earlier one. In the beautiful but searingly painful reading of *Eleh Ezkerah*, which we say on Tisha B'Ab and Ashkenazim say on (Yom) Kippur, we remember how a Roman Emperor used the failure of Joseph's brothers to be punished for selling Joseph into slavery as a retroactive excuse for torturing and executing ten of our greatest Sages well over a thousand years later. This approach to intergenerational justice haunts us still and is a particularly unfortunate if not tragic phenomena in modernity. The Talmud says that we are to judge the *legal* effect of conduct by the laws in effect at the time of the conduct. What a powerful principle to employ in so many contexts today.

*Half-Full Report.*

*Our Next Fun Movie Night.* We are trying to plan our next installment of this super-fun activity for the week after Tisha B'Ab, say July 20-23. Candidates are *Field of Dreams*, *In the Heights*, *The Natural*, or *The Ten Commandments*. This is not a final list, so if you have a preference, please email soon. I'm not sure all of these are available. What I am certain of is that our first installment (*The Princess Bride*) was as fun as it gets. Please consider joining other congregants for a truly enjoyable evening on Paved Paradise.

*Picturing Paved Paradise.* This week's entry, from Barbara Reiss, is amazing, if a little disorienting. It reminded her of the famous phrase attributed to the Hassidic Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav that all the world is a narrow bridge, גשר צר מאד, but the essential thing is not to fear despite the scary things we see and hear. Send in your candidates for what our Paved Paradise might look like – or might not:



Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas