

July 15, 2021

Dear Shearith Israel family,

*Once More Up the Hill?* Covid-19 infections in Manhattan have doubled in the past two weeks. The base was very small, so the resulting number is still very small, too and yes, the vast majority of new infections were among those not (yet) vaccinated. Yet we all remember the rapidity of the ramp-up during the Spring of 2020. Doubling, well, doubles. And maybe you remember my discussion of the phenomenon (and deep religious significance) of doubling in my [email of March 18, 2021](#). Whatever, none of us wants to see that happen again – though come the Fall, the betting isn't good.

For now, however, we are not throwin' away our shot (if you don't know the reference, then you clearly have been sleeping like Rip Wan Winkle or Honi the Miracleworker, about whom (and there were two of them) Rabbi Soloveichik gave a mesmerizing talk this past Shabbat afternoon in our newly tented Paved Paradise). What I mean is that we are going to continue the protections and protocols that we have in place for indoor and outdoor minyanim and other programming, with the extra precaution that, when there are any appreciable number of us indoors, we should all be masked. To me, it's a trivial extra step to buy a huge amount of additional protection.

We intend to take some extra precautions on *Tisha B'Ab*, too. First, the unbelievably good news. Just a year ago, we could not join together in-person, let alone indoors to observe this holy day. This year, as we prayed last year (see my [email of July 31, 2020](#)), we are able to do so. With that as a First, there need be no second. If you want to join us, please sign up and fill out the required forms. You won't be allowed in without supplying proof of vaccination in advance. An outdoor service will also be held at night. Rabbi Soloveichik intends to speak indoors afterward. Another blessing.

*Tisha B'Ab Out of the Mouth of the Reverend Ezra Stiles*. I mentioned the other week (see my [email of June 24, 2021](#)) that Ezra Stiles, when he was Pastor of the Second Congregational [Presbyterian] Church in Newport and before becoming President of Yale, memorialized some of the customs and rites at our sister synagogue in Newport, Rhode Island. His descriptions are marvelous in part because the Newport Synagogue, populated in part by Shearith Israelites and with

Shearith Israel funds and religious articles, followed Shearith Israel's customs and rites as well. So reading Stiles on Newport is a wormhole into what we ourselves did centuries ago.

If you join us this coming Sunday morning for *Tisha B'Ab*, you will see, with uncanny virtual exactitude, the same service that Stiles described nearly 250 years ago. It is extraordinarily moving, in part because it permits us to visualize our own past, our own chain of continuum that we are a part of. As described by Stiles, referring to Tish'ah Beab, 1773:

"The place of the ark was covered with a black curtain, and the lamp was put out. A table, covered with black, stood before the Tabauh [Teba]; and on a low bench sat the Parnass and the Huzzan [Hazan]. The prayers were exceedingly melancholy, particularly when the Huzzan rose up and went to the place of the Holy of Holies, or the ark and mercy-seat, where he wrapped himself up in the black curtain, and slowly mourned out a most solemn, weeping and doleful lamentation, for the absence of the Debir and the Shekhinah, for the cessation of the oracle, and for the destruction of the holy of holies. The roll of the law was brought out, without any ceremony, covered with black, and read at the foot of the Tabauh; the portion was from Deuteronomy. Then the fourth chapter of Jeremiah was read, and three or four other chapters; then the book of Lamentations; then the beginning and the end of Job."

*In Praise of Shade.* I don't know why the 1980s slang, "throwing shade", is still popular today or has such negative connotations. What did shade ever do to deserve it? The Clouds of Glory protected the Israelites in the Wilderness for nearly 40 years. Similarly, the humanities, both in philosophical and literary writing, have cast shadows in very important lights (BIG prize for one or two of the most famous from philosophy and from literature). More recently, the brilliant physicist Freeman Dyson explained that the shade from clouds was a key determinant of the earth's ability to cool itself.

This week's daily learning of the Talmud, encompassing Tractate *Sukkot* pages 4-10, is a study in the brilliance of shade. It turns out that, to fulfill the command to build a *sukkah*, one only needs the intent to create a shady spot. The Talmud in these pages exemplifies the rigorous logic it taught the world to train on intellectual challenges by discussing the four possible outcomes when building

a *sukkah* on top of a *sukkah* – both are kosher, both are not kosher, the top one is and the bottom isn't, and the top one isn't and the bottom is – differentiating the outcomes by how much shade is created in both the top and bottom under different scenarios.

Many wiser and more eloquent than I have discussed what shade really is in the context of *Sukkot* and why it is so vital to human existence in its relation to the Almighty (in short-hand, shade is a powerful anti-arrogance antidote). My reference to shade today is different. I want to address why shade is an indispensable metaphor for how we should act towards each other in the post-modern anger-fest that seems to be suffusing our culture today. As we have been tentatively reuniting with friends over the past few weeks, Beth and I have twice spent a meal with two couples (one each meal). Our guests were people of high intelligence, professionals (including in the academy), living as far away as California, Pittsburgh, and The Bronx. In a way, they exemplify America (at least the smartest and most liberal 1% of America). We were saddened at how consistent the reports were of the modern penchant for explanation by vituperation, advocacy by ad hominem attacks, and the total absence of permissible diversity of opinion. I have several times remarked on how this last point – the abject fear of disagreeing with the mob – is totally antagonistic to the Jewish culture of learning. That polite expression of a diversity of viewpoints is a fundamental value of Jewish thought is manifest on literally every page of the Talmud.

I want to address the anger, the yelling, the personal attacks that seem to have become de rigueur. This is at its most concerning when it comes to recent antisemitic gestures and attacks, but it is not limited to those. The answer, imho, is the metaphor of shade. Shade is not only cool but calm. Shade is peaceful coexistence. We are all busy quoting Louis Brandeis' famous, "Light is the best disinfectant". We think that shining enough light on something is the best way to the truth, but what we overlook is that too much light can blind or certainly obscure crucially important nuance, or shadow, or shady spots. Imagine Da Vinci's Mona Lisa without the sfumato, the blurry edges of her smile. Calm and composed, respectful reasoning is the surest if not the only way to a just and correct answer to the hardest questions of life. It was the Almighty who taught humanity, by speaking to Elijah, that it was not the earthquakes and fires but the still small voice that would unearth the truth. Shade doesn't cancel. Shade

colors, so that the result is clear and visible, not blinding, not pyrotechnic. We are desperate for some shade now; I'm not sure we can wait until *Sukkot*.

*Half-Full Report.* Four great items to report this week.

*Our Next Fun Movie Night.* Final ballots having been counted, we will be showing *Field of Dreams* on Wednesday, July 28, at 730p. Sign up, come, and enjoy. Thanks to minyan stalwart Rudy Stern for reminding me that the Yankees just announced that in August they will be playing the White Sox in the actual Field of Dreams in Iowa. They asked us to use Paved Paradise, but we have an event that night.

*Traveling Songs.* Last week, for Summer traveling songs, I offered Canned Heat's *On the Road Again*. I did so *because* it isn't such a great song. Within minutes of each other, ad-men extraordinaire David Sable (also a faithful Trustee of our Congregation) and Alan Zwiebel (who has been adorning these emails with wit and cartoons for a year now) each independently offered Willie Nelson's *On the Road Again*. It's a classic. It's great. And it's right here, for you to listen to after *Tisha B'Ab* – [click here](#). The coincidence is even greater: both of these princes worked at the advertising giant Young & Rubicam. As Alan describes it, "I was the first *Shomer Shabbat* person at Y&R in 1963. I think [David] was the last."

*My Crushing Beatles Error.* There was I, making an innocent remark about *Day in the Life* being a great McCartney-Lennon collaboration and inviting suggestions for "favorite" Beatles songs. And, you know, I really knew better. In swooped Bill Schulder, with what in my day job is called the one-question cross: one simple question that completely destroys the witnesses. You ask it. You destroy the credibility of the witness. You sit down. Bill asked, "Favorite Beatles song? Do you have a favorite child?" Devastating. He asked it. He destroyed the credibility of the questioner. He sat down. Aura Bijou was kinder, offering *Here Comes the Sun*, surely in the top tranche. She also offered an unexpected choice, *She's Leaving Home*, and among my personal least-favorites, *Maxwell's Silver Hammer*. Laury Frieber voted for *Penny Lane*, which I pooh-poohed at first but then relented because of the horn parts. After *Tisha B'Ab*, I'm going to link to the greatest of the greatest hits. Until then, understanding that we love all our children equally, send in your favorites.

*Picturing Paved Paradise.* Another great week of pics, this week from Alan Zwiebel (top photo, by his truly) and a cool pick forwarded by Fran Altman, on a summer reading theme (extra points for the first to identify the building and city):



Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom. Meaningful fast to all.

Louis Solomon, Parnas