

July 22, 2021

Dear Shearith Israel family,

*Prudence, Not Prescience.* Last week, we announced a reversion to indoor masking and social distancing due to the uptick in Covid-19 disease numbers. We re-initiated those policies for *Tisha B'Ab* with no ill-effects observed. Since our announcement, various public health professionals (including Dr. Fauci, for school goers) and politicians (including City Council member and Borough President primary winner Mark Levine) have said the same thing.

This past week, Covid-19 disease spread numbers have again increased. The Wall Street Journal also reported that deaths are increasing again, too (not in our geographic area - yet). In some communities, the Delta variant is spreading as fast as did the original virus in the Spring of 2020. In light of that, the Working Group has determined to maintain the status quo for now. Every Congregation is trying to keep its respective congregants healthy. We have abiding respect for the ways that is being successfully accomplished by our sister congregations on the UWS. Still, given the particular demographics of our Congregation, and given the blessing of our outdoor alternative on Paved Paradise, our decision feels right for us. It is virtually without any negative costs. So, please, join us in person for services. We'll give you a mask – and a whole lot more.

*Prayers and Pitchforks.* This week's Daf Yomi Talmud study includes Tractate Sukkah page 14a (learned yesterday). The pages learned this week continue the discussions of the stuff that is essential to the delivery of shade in a Sukkah, the *Schach*, and of a variety of related discussions and laws. But there is a homiletic insertion, on page 14a, said in the name of R' Elazar. The comment is as arresting in its articulation as it is in its unexpectedness. R' Elazar asks simply, "Why are the prayers of the righteous compared to a pitchfork?" Now to be fair, the English translation doesn't give any clue. In Hebrew, however, the great sage saw in the roots of the two nouns the same three letters, *Ayin Taf Resh*. The root is familiarly understood to refer to a pitchfork, and later commentators – not the Talmud, which expects you to know it without citation – remind us that the Torah uses that same three-letter root in describing the prayers of Isaac and Rebekah in *Bereshit* 25:21. R' Elazar says that, just as a pitchfork turns over the grain on the threshing floor and tosses it from one place to another, so, too, the prayers of the righteous turn over the Almighty's decree from a harsh judgment to mercy.

In writing to you, I wasn't going to dare the bottom of the topic of prayer - not me, not now, not ever. I am even more singularly unqualified to address this subject than I am other topics that occasion these emails from time to time. But then I saw this week's Torah *parasha*, the majestic, monumental, magnificent *parasha* (no, not because it's our son Yosef's Bar Mitzvah *parasha*) of *Vaethanan*. There, toward the beginning, before the repetition of the mighty Ten Commandments, before the first paragraph of the truly unique Jewish credo, our *Shema*, stands the verse: "What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to [the Almighty]"? (*Debarim* 4:7) The recurrence of the power of prayer in the *parasha* and in the Daf Yomi is too much to ignore. I humbly offer three related thoughts:

First, the well-known: In both treatments, that of the Torah and that of the Talmud quoted above, the prayers are spoken of in the plural. The point is fundamental to who we are. We are a people. We are a community. And our prayer is communal (that is particularly so at Shearith Israel, where our Hazan says so much aloud). We have all heard that, although our central prayer, the *Amida*, is said silently to oneself, its language – like that of the Torah and of the Talmud - speaks largely in the plural. Our morning and afternoon recitation of the *Amida*, as well as the additional services of all *haggim* and other holidays, are always said aloud, as a congregation (here at Shearith Israel we only say the afternoon service once, in an amalgam of silent and communal reading). Strength in numbers is an odd way to say it, since in *Vaethanan* itself is one of the seminal times the Torah teaches that our religion does not believe that we win with big numbers (“the fewest of all peoples”, Ch. 7:7). But the point is that only as a community, as a “we together”, can we muster the temerity to, as it were, dare to disturb the universe, as T.S. Eliot mused in *The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock*. (Actually the entire poem should be required reading over the *Tisha B’Ab* period. Speaking of which, I just listened to a marvelous narration of Goethe’s *Faust*, also fitting given our reading of parts of *Yiov* or *Job* on *Tisha B’Ab*.)

Second, I was surprised to see that R’ Elazar’s imagery used pitchforks to turn grain, but that’s what the Talmud says. Now, as you know, the Talmud Don’t Lie (I’ve said that before, and I’m standing by it). But doesn’t a whole lot of grain slip through the tines of a pitchfork? The closest I’ve gotten to one of those implements of destruction (to quote who/what?) is in seeing Grant Wood’s famous 1930 painting *American Gothic*:



Did they have different pitchforks in the days of the Talmud? If not, I want you to tell me how much grain is going to be tossed around with that thing? And what does that say about the success of our prayers? Maybe the point is that a collective of overlapping pitchforks, all

working in criss-cross unison, closes up the spaces left by each one individually. The image is fitting as it relates the Sukkah itself, by the way; the Talmud discusses the fact that, if one covers a Sukkah with overlapping (or at least adjacent) permissible and impermissible objects, the portion under the permissible objects (with details omitted) is still *kasher*. The image is surely fitting to our communal prayer.

And this brings me to *Tisha B'Ab* and my last point about the communal nature of our prayer. Our services on *Tisha B'Ab* are our most communal of the entire year. We assign different readers to each of the five chapters of *Eikha*, or the Book of Lamentations read both at night and in the morning. Our *kinot* in the morning service are read by different people, yet the refrain in each is recited by us all. I tried telling you in the past few weeks that it is among our most moving and beautiful services of the year. Dozens got to experience it in-person this year; hundreds participated virtually. This is surely among the greatest blessings of our relatively safer communal environment this year over last. Deep gratitude to Rabbi Soloveichik, Rabbi Rohde, and Reverend Edinger for performing their indispensable roles in making this year's services happen. Thank you as well to our readers of *kinot*, who made our most communal of prayer services among our most fitting and even uplifting as well: Mark Aaron, Jack Daar, Adam Jackson, David Lerner, Avery Neumark, Maimon Schwarzschild, and Boaz Alvarez Vega.

*Half-Full Report.* Three items to report this week.

*Our Next Fun Movie Night.* Last week, when I reported that we will be showing *Field of Dreams* on Wednesday, July 28, at 7:30 pm, I described it as our next "fun" movie night. I did that because we also had scheduled, for *Tisha B'Ab* in the afternoon, a screening of *Labyrinth of Lies*, a German film in the Holocaust genre. I can report that *Labyrinth of Lies* was excellent, wholly in keeping with the spirit of the day. Barbara Reiss' post-film live interview via zoom with the director of the film, Giulio Ricciarelli, was excellent, too. On to a fun evening of baseball and dreams. We hope to see you there. Come for services at 6:45 pm, and we can schmooze a bit before the movie.

*The Best of the Beatles.* Given my admission of error last week for even asking for a favorite Beatles song, you might have thought that I would drop the Sisyphusian challenge. Well, I'm not. I can violate the Second Rule of Holes as well as anyone (this Rule of Life teaches that, when you find yourself in a hole, STOP DIGGING!). One more week; send in your favorites. In the meantime, thank you to Fran Altman who took my praise of shade and improved it by observing that Paved Paradise is now shaded – only to then quote *Octopus's Garden's* reference to shade, which snatched defeat from the jaws of victory by referencing clearly and beyond doubt one of the WORST Beatles songs ever (actually it's one of the worst songs ever, whether or not by the Beatles)! And thank you to Aura Bijou, who captured shade perfectly: "Shade is like fine wine, it is cool, calm and composed as stated, but too much of it can destroy. The Shadow Knows".

*Picturing Paved Paradise.* It took Carla Schein, oh, a second (ok, two seconds actually) to name the pic in last week's email: It's the Kansas City Library in, yep, Kansas City. She won fair and square. This week's challenge may be a bit harder. What and where is this – and more important, can we get Landmarks approval to build it on Paved Paradise:



Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom. (Happy Jewish Sadie Hawkins Day, this Shabbat.)

Louis Solomon, Parnas