

July 31, 2020

Dear Shearith Israel family,

Remnant of the Remnant: Shearith Israel on Tisha B'Ab. Half-humorously, we like to say that our ancient Tisha B'Ab evening service is both our saddest of the year (the themes of forgiveness, renewal, and redemption of Kippur are *not* sad) but also about our most well-attended. Our morning services on Tisha B'Ab, which usually adds Torah reading, a beautiful haftarah, and *Kinot*, or lamentations, are equally special but less well attended. The ancient poems and elegies comprising the *Kinot*, with their unforgettably stirring melodies, contain point/counterpoint, question/answer formats throughout. Here are my proposed point/counterpoint entries for this year:

- COVID-19 killed our personal attendance at our beautiful sanctuary this year, oy;
 - True that, but our ritual leaders, the triumvirate of Rabbis Soloveichik and Rohde and Reverend Edinger, figured out a brilliant way to have a minyan of the intrepid in the Sanctuary to say Kaddish and also electronically beamed our gorgeous, truly transporting evening service to about 1,000 people live, with another 5,000 viewing it since. We witnessed a modern, if minor, miracle. It was tangible, palpable that we could reach so many. Special thanks to the American Sephardi Federation for their technical support.
- None of us could experience live Rabbi Soloveichik's annual evening lecture on Tisha B'Ab, where he gets away with teaching us deep and abiding thoughts of the day notwithstanding the general custom not to study Torah on Tisha B'Ab in the evening, oy.
 - True that, but his evening lecture reached as many people as did our evening service. And his afternoon talk, remotely reaching over 300, bookended this, our saddest day, with triumphal ideas of sacrifice, courage, honor, and commitment. View his evening talk. Then tell me whether net, although far from ideal, we didn't achieve about the most perfect imperfect we could have.
- Our morning mourning on Tisha B'Ab is older than the Republic itself. Ezra Stiles's diary (circa 1760s) movingly records the service, old at that time, at our Touro Synagogue in Newport, Rhode Island, which was the same as ours in that century and is the same as ours pre-COVID still. Today, we had a rushed minyan on the portico, and no one in the Synagogue to say the *Kinot*, or Lamentations, oy.
 - True that, but the stark blackness and solemnity of the Sanctuary were captured the night before on video; our *Kinot* were video-shared by over

170 people; and the remote connection permitted the participation of readers from Israel, London, California, Florida, along with those of us in New York and neighboring states. We could all sing, loudly, without fear of infecting others. We missed Rabbi Rohde's correcting of key and tune in the refrains, but speaking as one constantly corrected, I didn't miss that all that much.

- It's too hot on the portico, which can fit only 10-14 people anyway. And the singing is stilted, almost nonexistent, oy.
 - True that, but we now have the MDS rooftop and other MDS outdoor space for larger gatherings (see my email of last week). Last Shabbat, Shabbat Hazon, we had more people praying at MDS than the portico can accommodate. Eighteen in fact – a number so redolent with meanings in our tradition that I don't need to enumerate them. We will have services there this Shabbat as well. This Shabbat is the first of the seven Shabbatot of consolation leading up to Rosh Hashana. Join us for services. You will be uplifted by them.

But if this is the Remnant's Remnant, Imagine the Whole Bolt. A quiet, contemplative read through our liturgy on Tisha B'Ab is a trip through history. Our Congregation's name is translated into English as the Remnant of Israel. The Book of Lamentations and our *Kinot* are replete with references to the remnant that was Israel at various points in history. Sometimes the threads were gossamer; sometimes our people were indeed "livin' on a prayer". Now is not that time. COVID-19 has brought us down -- but not out. And if COVID-19 has caused our observance of Tisha B'Ab this year to be a remnant of the Remnant of Israel, we were still able to have three *minyanim* in person for those wanting to say Kaddish or who had a *nahala*, and we reached literally a hundreds or a thousand to share our piercingly sad but ultimately uplifting observance of the day. If indeed we are the remnant's remnant, then, as a wise mentor of mine, Robert Rifkind, once said, just imagine the whole cloth. Imagine how much stronger we will be once the pandemic is behind us. We will not forsake the efforts we are all making to keep in touch with each other, in person and remotely, including electronically. Yet we will also be able to experience the beauty of our sacred space as a unified community.

Shearith Israel as Wine. Judaism has so many enlightening things to say about wine. They seem to point in different directions. Noah nearly botched humanity big time through wine and managed to sire nations (Amon and Moab) that were arch enemies of the Jewish people. But Moab also brought us Ruth, ancestor of the Davidic Dynasty and in whose memory we chanted the *haftarah* on Tisha B'Ab. Wine featured in our holy Temple (see last week's email), and we begin and end our holiest day of Shabbat by sanctifying the time we are given on earth over a cup of wine. But as the Talmud teaches, wine is one of the liquids that can transmit spiritual impurity and is derived from

one of the two foodstuffs that have particularly complicated properties in the laws of Shabbat. I can't figure it out. I make only one simple observation: Wine gets bottled up for much longer than we are being during COVID-19; yet wine emboldens and improves as a result. And so will we. We have figured out how to ensure that our Congregants can publicly mourn their losses. We are now reading communal Torah in the periodicity required by our tradition. We have outdoor spaces for larger communal worship, and we *will* solve the nearly intractable issue of safely having the privilege of prayer with our elders during the High Holidays. We observed Tisha B'Ab and truly feel inspired and uplifted. We served individuals as well as the community in carrying on our ancient traditions, as best we could.

Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas