

August 13, 2020

Dear Shearith Israel family,

*More news, and a favor.* Building on last week's positive, if incremental, developments, the news this week is that the Congregation's Board of Trustees has approved 1) our making indoor prayer services available to our Congregants under appropriately limited circumstances, and 2) finalizing our arrangement with Manhattan Day School to host two of its grades within our synagogue spaces if, as, and when New York City permits schools to reopen. Our congregants will continue to use outdoor space for services when we conveniently can. And MDS's use of our space will not interfere with our own use of it. If it weren't so beautiful a blessing for our Congregation, I would trivialize our co-venture with MDS by saying it's a win-win. We are also heavy at work in planning for the High Holidays. And for this I need a favor from all of you. In follow-up to getting your input on our High Holidays survey, our dedicated staff is about to send emails asking us to indicate where we will be for the holidays, how many will be home, whether we prefer praying at social distance indoors or outdoors, whether we just want to hear shofar blowing, etc. Please, focus on the email, respond promptly, and try to commit. We aim to serve every single Congregant who wishes to participate, and we hope that everyone who is here will participate in some way.

*Zen and the Art of Art.* In explaining his flop-cum-bestselling cult classic of the 1970s, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, author Robert Pirsig said of his book: "it should in no way be associated with that great body of factual information relating to orthodox Zen Buddhist practice. It's not very factual on motorcycles, either". He's right on both counts. But he left out that the "Art" part of his title didn't have much meaning either. It is in that spirit that I address the subject of art and our Congregation. On display in our more open but still-too-empty Synagogue building are portraits of several of our former congregants. Without disparaging the illustrious personages there pictured, I don't confuse the portraits with art. Those painted or photographed sit there, still and

silent. Their portraits become art when, like the former Headmasters of Hogwarts whose portraits come alive, our forbearers quicken when they become animated by some historical factoid that we tell about them or through some narrative that one of our able docents or one of our "official" histories relate. Then they, their lives, and their portraits become art. Similarly, Rabbi Soloveichik has delivered many lectures that have included erudite disquisitions on art objects of various kinds. Some have been magnificent. But I confess that the parts I have been most moved by are not the "art" but the stuff that the art helps us to understand. Art, then, is an enabler, a causal link between thing and feeling. That is, if you will, the zen of art. And that is our zen, too - at least it could be. We are approaching Rosh Hashana and Kippur and Succot after that. It is clear that we will not be back to "normal" by then. In fact my guess is that, as relatively safe as New York is now, the many precautions we are correctly taking as a community will make the holidays seem irregular for some, lonely for others, "just another day" or worse, a "day in the life", as the Fab Four sang it, for still others. This is a real risk unless we, as a community, enable our way to an uplifting holiday season. We can do that if we act together, with unity and purpose. Whether you will be here or not, please think about one or two others whom you could call or safely invite or connect with in some meaningful way. Join the call-in lectures and zoom services. Collectively we can be the art that enables the transformation of these holidays into spiritual highs.

*And the winners are!* My challenge last week was to suggest a musical that best captured our Congregation. I want to thank everyone who weighed in. The entries were uniformly interesting and in some cases just marvelous. Thankfully, no one proposed Fiddler, from which I cleverly quoted a line in my email last week in the hopes that it would subtly discourage its choice. Let me share two of the most inspiring and beautiful entries. Esther Ingber's choice was Interrupted Melody. This biographical musical is about the Australian soprano Marjorie Lawrence (played by Eleanor Parker), whose career, Esther explained, was destined to come to an abrupt and tragic end in a wheelchair after suffering from polio as an adult. Through her grit and determination, and the help of her husband, Lawrence triumphed over her disease and made a successful comeback. Says Esther: "I

believe the Synagogue's metaphor for this tragedy is COVID and [that, with] G -D's will we will overcome and beat it too!!!!" When you've dried your eyes from that, consider the equally profound entry by Anna Schechter Zigler, who proposes Hamilton. Anna was not the only one to suggest that play; her explanation as to why Hamilton Is Us, however, is an inspiration to us all:

"1. A musical of great historical significance about the country's founding. Our synagogue is a small part of the tapestry of the founding, in that the congregation was already here . . .

"2. A little Latin flair, and I'm referring to Lin Manuel Miranda. While different, the Spanish and Portuguese synagogue has a Spanish flair, a flair which was transferred over a few centuries (15th-18th) to Puerto Rico. Miranda's family origins are there, in that his parents were born there."

These entries are priceless. We are enriched as a community to have Congregants with both the passion and compassion to share them.

Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas