

August 27, 2020

Dear Shearith Israel family,

*Rosh HaShana, Last Call.* We are delighted at the positive responses to our requests for you to sign up for High Holiday inside services, outdoor services, or outdoor Shofar blowing. We are approaching maximum, socially distant capacity in both of our proposed venues. We are already counting the blessings of our relationship with Manhattan Day School, which is so generously permitting us to use their rooftop for the outdoor service. Still, we need to ask, once more, for as near a final count as you can provide. We need to know exactly who is coming so that we can group family units, get fans and air purifiers in the right spots, and make sure we can accommodate every congregant who wishes to join us. It is equally helpful to know who is unable to join our services (whether because you will be away or are otherwise unable to attend). If you have not already, please sign up now.

*Shearith Israel's Life: a Beach.* My favorite T-shirt saying is "Live Slow". I didn't mind the ungrammar. And I don't think my enjoyment came from the fact that it was our son who wore a green T-shirt bearing the two-word epiphany, even though, since he was 8-10 years old, it is likely the last non-white shirt he has worn. I loved the aphorism because then, over a decade ago, and until recently life was passing at a frightful pace even with the welcome time-stopper that is Shabbat. We all needed to be reminded to slow down, to be mindful of treasuring, for example, the non-work aspects of our lives. Oh how COVID-19 has reshaped our world and our lives. For many of us, being out of work, or remotely working, or having too little to do outside the home; the dispirit of not being able to be with friends and family, of mourning or grieving alone; the disconsolation of not having a thriving Synagogue to worship in as a congregation, where we can see friends, eat and drink together, and sing our beloved melodies -- all of this has slowed life, if anything, a bit too much. Some aspects of our daily subroutines have become monotonous. So I need another T-shirt, or at least

another T-shirt metaphor. I haven't seen it for years, but the double meaning/word play of "Life's a Beach" seems particular apt right now for many of us. And so that's my choice. Ah the beach. The poems, songs, metaphors of the beach, the ocean, the sea know no limits. "By the sea/by the sea/by the beautiful sea" sings the great American popular standard for over 100 years. Even my favorite iPhone ring tone is titled "By the Seaside". The beach is vast, endlessly varied. Almost irrespective of what we build on or adjacent to it, the beach is full of potential, optimism, promise. Master-guitarist and minor poet Mason Williams, of *Classical Gas* fame, put it perfectly:

Do not go down to the ocean  
With any notion  
Of what you will find.

Yet with all that promise, potential, even mystery, the beach can be a foreboding, even sad place. Its very vastness, and the vastness it faces, reminds us of our puniness, both in space and time. And it can be monotonous. True, it is vast and varied, but it is self-similar regardless of the measuring unit used to view it (inch, foot, yard, mile, from above the earth looking down). Coastlines were among Mandelbrot's principal examples of the never-ceasing self-similarity underpinning fractal geometry. The beach can do to our psyche what COVID-19 has -- and without an ozone layer it's even more dangerous. Matthew Arnold's *Dover Beach*, ostensibly about the time of his honeymoon, speaks of the beach's "eternal note of sadness" and famously (and depressingly) ends:

And we are here as on a darkling plain  
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,  
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

(Must have been some honeymoon.) It took seventy years before Yeats offered a rejoinder to Arnold's beach pessimism in *The Nineteenth Century and After*, where he said, in full:

Though the great song return no more  
There's keen delight in what we have:  
The rattle of pebbles on the shore  
Under the receding wave.

Grains of sand on the shore is how the Almighty communicated to Abraham both the promised multitudinousness of the Jewish people but also the fact that each of us, even the greatest of us, is simply one grain among zillions. Who would not now want to be even a single grain of sand so long as we could be socially *undistanced* with others. In the end, whether we are confused or clear-sighted, laden by struggle or uplifted, will turn profoundly on whether we can believe, and develop the inner-strength to experience, "keen delight in what we have". That above all will determine whether, for each of us and our community, Life's a Beach or, well, a Beach.

*Another Super-Fun Contest!* What are your entries for the greatest two- and three-word T-shirt sayings? Frankly I think I've captured the grand prizes with "Live Slow" and "Life's a Beach". But, hey, I'm honest (if not humble), and if you propose anything better, I'll let you and everyone else know. There *is* an objective reality. I *do* know what it is. And I *will* make you a winner if you deserve it. The entries can be from real T-shirts. Or you can make them up. Word contractions are allowed. Think you can best me? Try. Oh yes, don't bother with anything from John Lennon. You will be wasting your shot.

Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas