

September 24, 2020

Dear Shearith Israel family,

Semblance as Substance. Rosh HaShana at Shearith Israel was wonderful. Services at both our outdoor (at Manhattan Day School) and indoor (in our Sanctuary) venues ran with amazing smoothness. The outdoor shofar blowing service on a traffic-free 70th Street attracted dozens of congregants and neighbors. Services were truly uplifting, albeit without many of the usual cast of characters who have for decades read haftarah, or stood on both sides of Rabbi Rohde during the Amidot, or handled our Sifrei Torah and opened and closed our Holy Ark. Most of us don't appreciate the enormity of the painstaking work that went into making less out of more this year, for our typical 5+ hour service was done in 2.5 hours. Legal, or Halakhic, liturgical, and lyrical considerations all needed to be pored over. Rabbi Soloveichik, Rabbi Rohde, and Reverend Edinger did breathtakingly beautiful jobs. Invaluable assists from Avery Neumark, Mark Aaron, and Hillel Neumark cannot go unmentioned. Nor can the help of our ushers, other volunteers, office leadership, and maintenance staff. On any realistic measure, Rosh HaShana was a success.

And yet it's no surprise that something important felt missing. We all look forward to seeing fellow congregants who in some years we only see on the High Holidays. We didn't see many of them this year, and those we did see (from a safe distance and only to the extent that masks allowed us to see each others' faces), we couldn't chat with. There was a profound absence of human contact. The silence of the communal part of our Synagogue prayers - the absence of singing, responding, chanting, listening to our choir - was palpable as well. The Harold Pinter-like silences, the silences between the lines, could only sadden, and did. On Rosh HaShana we read the Torah portion concerning the sacrifice of Isaac. Our liturgy contains a daily reading of that passage, though with our shortened communal weekday minyan this most magisterial if enigmatic of passages - don't take my word for it, ask Kierkegaard - is not chanted. We are truly thankful for what we were able to observe as a community. At the same time we all look

forward to the swift end of the sacrifices, pale by any comparison, that we are making now.

OMG Are Things About to Get Bad Again? Kippur at Shearith Israel is of unparalleled awe and beauty. With my own eyes I have seen our entire Congregation literally lifted when singing as one unified *kahal* the *piyut* that begins *selihot* at minha (*Kah Shema Evyonecha*) or that begins the neila service (*K'ail Norah*) as the sun is setting. The melodies we sing stay with many of us well past Pesah of the next year. We are again offering two venues to our congregants, outdoor at MDS and indoor in our Sanctuary. We are also going to livestream Kal Nidre (which will be turned off before sundown, after which the Kippur evening service will commence) for those congregants who will not be attending either service. Our Clergy and Ritual Committee are hard at work shortening without neutering, a task even more difficult for the longer Kippur services than it was for Rosh HaShana.

We are taking every reasonable precaution to keep us safe so that we can come as close as we can to a normal Kippur service without undue risk. The challenges involved in doing so are not being made easier by upticks in critical COVID-19 metrics from the Jewish communities in Brooklyn, Queens, and parts of New Jersey. **If you have been to any of these places in any risky or unsafe way, or are in contact with anyone who was, please stay home for Kippur.** Did you or someone you have been in contact with attend the wedding in Deal, New Jersey, that apparently 1,000 people thought it would be safe to attend - over 100 have already tested positive for COVID-19? Did you or someone you have been in contact with attend any function (including minyan) in the shuls or other places in Williamsburg or Flatbush? Did you take the subway where any large segment of the ridership was crowded and unmasked? Have you flown recently in unsafe conditions? Did you greet a child returning from school from one of the 35 restricted states or territories, or is your child now attending school in New York or nearby? The potential vectors for the transmission of COVID-19 are many and varied.

Who You Callin' a Sodomite! On the day before Kippur we will learn, as a worldwide community, page 49 of Tractate Eruvin. (Rabbi Shalom Rosner's learning of this page, found on the OU.org website, is mindbogglingly brilliant, as he usually is.) We there learn about a character trait that is discussed in *Pirkei Abot, Ethics of the Fathers*, which in Chapter 5 speaks of the person who says, "what's mine is mine, and what's yours is yours". This, the Mishna in Abot says, is a trait of the average person. An average person? Ok, maybe that's not so great -- but it's not so bad either, is it? In the same Mishna, Abot immediately goes on to say, in essence, "alternatively, this same character trait can be considered that of the Sodomites" (the Talmudic version thinks of the conduct there described as "akin to that practiced in Sodom"). Yikes! Who wants to be that? And how can it be one or the other, either Average Joe or Jane, or SODOMITE!?

The term "sodomite", as used in the Talmud and in Jewish learning since, describes one who dwells in a community that outlaws the helping of others, as where a community prohibits its residents from taking in guests, helping the poor, etc. With only a slight alteration, it's hard to think of an analogy more apt than this for us right now. Sodomites care about themselves and not others. Avoiding Sodomitism is crucial, not because, as I mentioned in last week's email, we have embraced for 5781 "Helping Others" as our two-word principle-to-live-by (the other, in the three-word category, being "Celebrating our Blessings"). More concretely, we seem to be approaching another inflection point in the travel of this miserable pandemic. Could we tip back to a Manhattan lockdown and an empty synagogue? Whether that happens will depend significantly on whether we live for ourselves or for others. Usually we know when we are being naughty or nice: We can observe our own behavior and its effects on others. With this insidious disease, we may not see that we ourselves are sick or are causing disease in others or putting others at risk. We cannot be Sodomites, oblivious to our impact on others in our cherished community. Police thyself. Err on the side of staying away from others. Enjoy any number of lectures, classes, and ritual moments that our Clergy is offering online if you might be at risk. Let's just be Average Joes and Janes and keep what we have to ourselves.

Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom and G'mar Tov.

Louis Solomon, Parnas