

May 12, 2022

Dear Shearith Israel family,

Roof Fiddling. It is Tevye who famously says that without traditions our lives would be as shaky as, yes indeed, a [Fiddler on the Roof](#). Good story or bad, good play or movie or bad, a moral, religious guidepost for us or not, I would hope we could all agree that one of the things we do *not* want is for us to create timeless traditions when it comes to Covid-19 precautions in our synagogue. We are not doing so.

We are, however, maintaining a status quo, keeping in place a complement of now-familiar precautions (mask-required and mask-optional sections during services, spread out seating where appropriate, air cleaners, outside Kiddush when the weather cooperates). These precautions are remaining stable over time even though the transmission rates in our area are increasing again. The Working Group is watching the numbers, but it is also observing that the risks of serious disease spread do not appear to be worsening. There are so many variables at work now that mapping reactions from a year ago onto current circumstances does not seem as intelligent as focusing on where we are now and making decisions accordingly. That approach results in our status quo set of precautions.

Over the past months, our congregation has shown inestimably fine tolerance of both the risk-taking and risk-aversion practices of some of our members. I have complimented us on that before. As we head into the warmer months, it is going to take an even greater amount of respect and tolerance to maintain the balance we have been striking. We can and will do it. We will not fiddle, and we will not teeter or fall. There are important considerations at stake. For every news item declaring an end of the pandemic in NYC, there are an equal number cautioning disease spreads and spikes if we do not remain vigilant. We have congregants who are more comfortable wearing masks and sitting apart. We can easily accommodate that. Because of the blessings of a capacious sanctuary and outdoor space, we have not had to face many hard choices. And when we have, such as how to deal with our reinvigorated and growing youth program, we have made the choices under the watchful guidance of our Covid-19 Working Group. We have not seen evidence that anyone is getting sick because of those choices.

We are nearly back to normal. We could be thriving if more of us return. So, come back, come in, feel safe.

Anna Karenina Meets Israel's Remnant. Earlier this week, we learned page 63a of Tractate Yevamot in the Daf Yomi cycle. We there encounter the beautiful adage:

וְהַמְלִיחָה סִלְעַת לְעַנִּי בְּשַׁעַת דְּחָקוֹ — עָלְיוֹ הַכָּתוּב אוֹמֵר: "אֵז תִּקְרָא וְה' יַעֲנֶה תְּשׁוּעָה וַיֹּאמֶר הַגִּבּוֹר"

[A person] who lends a *sela* to a pauper at his time of need, about him the verse states:
“Then shall you call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry, and He will say: Here I
am” (Isaiah 58:9).

I continue to believe that, in the Talmud, we are never more than a page or two away from reminders/discussions/exhortations to give to charity. It is one of the fundamental pillars on which our Jewish world was built and continues to thrive. And to be reminded that the benefit of our charitable instincts and initiatives is a life described by Isaiah, to many that feels like the ultimate life well lived.

As it relates to the importance of charity, we immediately understand the reference to Shearith Israel in the title of this section. We have only two general fund-raisers a year, in the Spring and in the Fall. We are not here fund-raising for extraordinary needs that occasionally arise, like turning the rubble that was our next-door construction site into Paved Paradise in two months. We need our semi-annual fundraisers just to keep the doors open. Congregational dues account for less than a third of our total annual financial needs. I’m talking about paying our Clergy, managers, staff, choir – the people who make our congregational lives so extraordinarily rich. I’m talking about taking care of four historic cemeteries, having an active program of supporting those in need in our community and beyond, supporting our growing youth program, maintaining our glorious Sanctuary, and carrying out our communal duties in countless other ways. This is the time of year (and again in the Fall) when we tell you candidly that we need your financial support – as generously as your circumstances permit. We need to raise \$250k, and with the generosity of about 75 of us so far we are about half-way there. If every family that tunes in to one of the Rabbi’s spectacular seminars or lectures would give an amount that each can comfortably afford, we will make our required goal.

So the “Shearith Israel” part of my title is clear. *Wassup* with the Anna Karenina bit? That’s a reference to the “Anna Karenina Principle” described in Jared Diamond’s *Guns, Germs, and Steel*. I can’t explain how I missed reading until now this world history, which won the Pulitzer Prize over 20 years ago. It’s a fantastic book of hard facts and brilliant speculations. The book’s strengths are sufficient to forgive the bias Diamond displays in parts of his analysis. The attention to rigor and factual detail in laying out 13,000 years of world history and the hypothesized causes of what passes for progress over the ages are, imho, first-rate. It’s a must read.

The Anna Karenina Principle comes from the first line of Tolstoy’s masterpiece, *Anna Karenina*:

“All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.”

Diamond’s argument in support of this principle is logically cogent and certainly factual in my experience. It’s that institutions need innumerable simple and complex things to go *just* right if they are to be successful and endure, whereas failed institutions fail in innumerable different ways.

The point is not irrelevant to the Remnant of Israel that is Shearith Israel. We could take pages to make what would undoubtedly be an incomplete enumeration of all the things that needed to go *just* right for each and every one of the 367 years that we have been in existence as a Jewish community trying to be a constructive part of the American Jewish experience. One of the innumerable things that needed to go just right is that we would have congregants and friends willing to dig deep into their personal resources to support the institution. And that is one of the innumerable things that remains essential.

The quote from the Talmud, above, is interesting in one other respect. A commentator pointed out that the phrase, who lends a *se'la* to a pauper at his or her time of need, is ambiguous: who does the “his” or “her” refer to? On the more common reading, the “his” or “her” is the pauper – meaning in the time of the pauper’s need. But on another reading, justifiable by the original Aramaic syntax too, the “his” or “her” refers to the person giving the charity – meaning the person giving the charity is in a time of need. On that reading, the Talmud is saying that giving, even when it is hard for *the giver*, is of such importance that it deserves the beautiful verse from Isaiah. This fits us nicely too. For some of us, the pandemic has been financially neutral or, weirdly, even positive. Others of us are still struggling to dig out from it, and those challenges have not been helped by geopolitical turmoil, market gyrations, inflation, whatnot. Even those of us in this hapless category must recognize the critical importance of keeping Shearith Israel going and of doing whatever our circumstances permit. Please, let’s all be a happy family in the same way, vibrant for another “year of years”, and financially secure – at least until our Fall campaign. Please, [click here](#), and give generously.

Half-Full Report.

Touro Shabbaton at Shearith Israel. This Shabbat, Parashat Emor, we will celebrate with a group of our friends from Touro Synagogue (Newport, Rhode Island), who will be with us for Shabbat. And we will be treating them and us to some special activities. Rabbi Soloveichik will be delivering a special *Friday Night Lights* talk, and on Shabbat morning, after services, the next installment in his *Sanctuaries & Cities* lecture series, this one entitled, *The Shofar of Moses Seixas and the Torah of Ezra Stiles: Faith and Philosemitism at the Touro Synagogue*. We could not be happier that our Touro Synagogue affiliates will be joining us. Please, come to services, enjoy a wonderful expanded Kiddush luncheon on Paved Paradise, and welcome our Touro guests warmly.

Beatles Bungle. Trustee and Segan Michael Lustig rightly corrected my attribution of the two-fer, [Uncle Albert – Admiral Halsey](#), to the Beatles. The song was written by Paul McCartney (with Linda) post-Beatles and pre-Wings. For one point, who can name other top-of-the-charts hits by McCartney during that same period? Please no internet helpsies.

Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas