

August 4, 2022

Dear Shearith Israel family and Touro Synagogue Affiliates,

Safety in Numbers, Both Worsening and Improving. With Covid-19 infections continuing to increase in our area, we nonetheless feel confident that we are providing a safe environment for communal prayer. We intend to maintain our now-familiar precautions this Shabbat and Tisha B'Ab: When indoors for services, we will have both mask-only and mask-optional sections, in the mask-only section we will observe appropriate social distancing, and throughout we will have our air-filters working at full tilt mixing with fresh air. Shabbat morning we will pray outdoors on Paved Paradise, unless it's too hot. Kiddush will be on Paved Paradise. We were 80 strong last Shabbat. Let's surpass that this Shabbat Hazon.

We have found protocols that give maximum choice with appropriate safety. Safety in worsening [Covid] numbers. And safety in improving [congregant] numbers. Our capacious sanctuary and our Paved Paradise can each seat hundreds. So please, come.

Facing Tisha B'Ab. In the three weeks between 17 Tammuz and 9 Ab, we subject ourselves to what I call "mourning light". I discussed varying customs of the Three Weeks [here \(my email of 7/21/22\)](#). By the day of Tisha B'Ab itself (this year it's observed on 10 Ab, since 9 Ab falls on Shabbat), outward observances are very largely the same: we fast a full day, do not wear leather shoes, do not bathe/shower, etc. To be sure, our particular Congregation's communal observance is unique in a couple of respects ([see my email of June 24, 2021](#)). But I don't want to discuss outward observances or their uniqueness right now. With your indulgence, I briefly want to turn inward.

Tisha B'Ab day exhibits both recollection and remembrance on the one hand and renewal and redemption on the other. During the first part of the day, *halakha* dictates much stricter observances of mourning. For hours, we are in Synagogue, reciting (or chanting) *kinot*, or lamentations. These are elegies of historical tragedies. Different congregations recite or chant different ones. If you have not experienced ours, you should (and even if you don't come on time, there will still be plenty of time from 8 AM until past noon) to experience it. Your observance of the day will never be the same.

In the first part of the day, many of us look for ways to supplement the historical elegies of our *kinot*. Some of us contemplate more recent examples of Jewish pain, suffering, and tragedy. These are more immediate. This year, we thank Dr. Susan Lobel for this stirring photo from a Holocaust memorial plaque in Italy:



The Hebrew inscription is from the Book of Lamentations itself, which we read both at night (from our newly published Koren edition Tisha B'Ab Evening Service according to the S&P tradition) and again in the morning of Tisha B'Ab.

Let us also thank Barbara Reiss for her photos from Europe as well. First are some “Stolpersteine” or stumble-upon-stones from Salzburg. Barbara explains: “These memorialize people who lived at those locations until they were deported by the Nazis.”



Barbara also sent in a photo of a former DP camp in Saalfelden, Austria. Barbara explains that the “pyramid is part of a recent set of educational installations along the route that Jews journeyed to freedom in Israel (and elsewhere) after the war.”



Finally, Barbara captured a Judengasse (the old Jew street) in Salzburg:



In the second part of Tisha B'Ab (which also occurs at the end of various of the services during the day), the fasting and other outward observances remain. Yet a feeling of optimism is permitted and maybe even encouraged to creep into our consciousness. Our liturgy and some customs during prayer begin to reflect renewal and redemption rather than recollection and remembrance.

I confess that I sometimes find it hard to make the shift from remembrance to renewal, from recall to redemption. What often gets in the way is what we might inelegantly identify as inexhaustible inexorability. Inexhaustible inexorability is the apparent unlimited supply of negative energy that says that my bad or self-defeating traits and habits (physical and mental) can and will *never* change. We are what we are. As Elton John and Bernie Taupin unforgettably said it in *Grey Seal* (link next week),

*The roots were formed by twisted roots
Your roots were twisted then*

I have no single answer to where to go to find the strength to break the grip of inexhaustible inexorability. But I do have a place you might start: Barbara Tuchman's *The Guns of August*. The book is a masterfully written history of the First World War – more accurately of the events leading up to the war and basically the first month of it. (It was Churchill who described that first month of WWI as "a drama never surpassed".) One of Tuchman's main points, certainly not novel but of arresting interest to this reader in 2022, is how much of the last 100+ years was presaged by the events prompting WWI.

A second point, and the one I focus on here, involves a systematic refutation of the error of inexorability. Tuchman describes the many times that different leaders in different countries resignedly said that one or another act could not be stopped, could not be called back, could not be altered. Plans had been in place for years. Twisted roots had no choice but to stay twisted. But in her typically modest, light, and ultimately compelling style, Tuchman shows that in almost every instance the fact and tone of resignation were almost certainly wrong.

To take one example, Germany lost public approval, and ultimately lost the war, because, to invade France, Germany first invaded neutral Belgium and committed atrocities on the civilian population that had never been witnessed on that scale in modern times (this is WWI not WWII, mind you). It turns out that, at the beginning of August 1914, the German Kaiser in fact had last-minute qualms about the Belgium offensive and actually tried to get General Helmuth Von Moltke (head of German forces in the West) to move German forces on the West to the East instead in order to attack the truer enemy, Russia. Moltke refused, Belgium was invaded and destroyed, France was invaded, and the war to end all wars settled into four years of Hell with Germany the ultimate loser. Says Tuchman:

Moltke closed upon that rigid phrase, the basis for every major German mistake, the phrase that launched the invasion of Belgium and the submarine war against the United States, the inevitable phrase when military plans dictate policy – ‘and once settled, it cannot be altered’.

Tuchman shows that “it could have been altered” (p. 95). There was nothing inexorable about invading Belgium; real alternatives existed in the form of concrete plans that could have gotten Germany to focus on the true prize, Russia. What it took was the courage to see the future differently.

Admittedly, this may not be the perfect proof that *moral* courage can indeed change our individual and collective futures. But as we are standing on the brink of Tisha B’Ab, the day in our Jewish calendar when we mourn some of our saddest moments in our history as a People – the destruction of the Temple, the Inquisition, the Shoah – we need to know – deeply – that, before they occurred, there was no inevitability to those tragedies. And once they occurred, there was nothing inexorable about the next one. We are all strong enough to feel the optimistic feeling of Tisha B’Ab in the afternoon. We do not have to stay in the ruts that we let ourselves slide into, whether as individuals or as a community. We can straighten twisted roots and flourish.

Built Back Better.

The DSISL. We got some final suggestions for our *The Definitive Shearith Israel Summer Song List*. Carla Schein suggests *Summer Nights* from Grease. Lloyd Zuckerberg suggests *Hot Fun in the Summertime* by Sly and the Family Stone. Asher Reimer suggests *Saturday in the Park*, by Chicago. All of these great suggestions were recommended earlier. We therefore officially declare the DSISL closed. Next week, after Tisha B’Ab, look for the list. And, if one of you can help, we’d like to take the great suggestions of David Sable and Lloyd Zuckerberg and try to create our own Spotify playlist. Any volunteer (please)? Otherwise that effort may need to await our daughter Lia’s returning from camp later in August. But we finally have a DSISL (rhymes with Schlissel)!

We Are Family. I'm grateful that Ruth Moser Riemer agrees with me that *We Are Family* is a surprisingly mediocre and annoying song. But as Ruth rightly says, "the *nusach* captured the entire nation." Oh well.

"*Well Over the Fast.*" Jeffrey Goldman from New Jersey taught me that neat Britishism. It's great, and we hereby adopt it as having originated at Shearith Israel some 200 years ago.

Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom. Meaningful fast.

Louis Solomon, Parnas