

March 30, 2023

Dear Shearith Israel family,

Covid-19 Update:

Negócios Como Sempre
(business as usual, in Portuguese)

Negócios Como Siempre
(business as usual, in Spanish)



Our Kohen gadol, Bentsi Cohen, as well as Laury Frieber observed that the Portuguese and Spanish spellings of our “business as usual” notice are very similar, apparently differing in only one extra “i” in the Spanish. This is fun. Send in your favorite non-English language translation of “business as usual.” Our community hails from over 50 countries. Imagine how great it would be if we captured many of those here.

Back in the Small Synagogue, Briefly. Last Thursday, to accommodate a function in our Sanctuary, we held minha/arbit services in the small synagogue. I think it’s been three years since we held a fully communal service there. It was happy and cheery and comfortable.



A Community Service Announcement for Community Service. On the back page of the weekly handout for Shabbat Zachor some weeks ago, Rabbi Rohde shared some beautiful thoughts about the importance of attending minyan. Emphasizing the structure that praying with a minyan gives to our morning lives, Rabbi Rohde also pressed the importance of “reading classical Hebrew and a number of the language’s important documents”. His words are thoughtful and deserving of careful consideration.

Let me echo Rabbi Rohde’s sentiment with a simpler, more prosaic message. Discipline and Hebrew skills can be practiced by praying at home; a minyan isn’t needed for that. There are some things, however, that communal worship can *uniquely* give an attendee. For example, there is comradeship, a fellowship, a bond that forms between and among regular attendees. Ok, so there’s no chest thumping. But there is a nice smile, a head nod, and nearly every day something to eat. For those of us who go to jobs that are either solitary or adversarial, that simple hello, that edge of the mouth smile to another tired congregant, works wonders.

Science Supports Synagogue Show-Up. And now we have the science to prove it. I loved Robert Putnam’s 2000 best-seller *Bowling Alone*. He demonstrates that social capital, *i.e.*, the positive interconnectedness between people, eroded during the Twentieth Century. Maybe the point is a bit on the obvious side; still, great writing and creative interpretation of data make the book a winner.

Now comes another heady, well-written, and statistically packed study by three economists, Tyler Giles, Daniel M. Hungerman, and Tamar Oostrom, titled, [*Opiates of the Masses? Deaths of Despair and the Decline of American Religion*](#). The authors defined “deaths of despair” to include poisonings, alcoholic liver disease, and, importantly, suicides. The thesis of the study is that such deaths began to increase in the early 1990s, *before* the opioid epidemic, and that

this increase was preceded by a decline in religious participation, and that both trends were driven by middle-aged white Americans. Using repeals of blue laws as a shock to religiosity, we confirm that religious practice has significant effects on these mortality rates. Our findings show that social factors such as organized religion can play an important role in understanding deaths of despair.

The article is fascinating. The authors find statistically significant (in many but not all cases) beneficial effects of church/synagogue attendance – not prayer at home, but actual attendance. This too seems on the obvious side, for any of us who have enjoyed communal services at our and so many other houses of worship.

When it comes to communal prayer, the elephant in the room is, well, that there is an elephant in the room. Communal prayer is itself an elephant, a thing. It is an end – a very important end – in itself. I have said this before: In Judaism, communal activities are qualitatively different from even identical individual activities in several key respects. I really could use some help explaining this with some key examples from our law, lore, and literature. The profound reality is that communal activity in Judaism is as integral to our religion as commandments regulating our activities vis-à-vis our fellow human being and vis-à-vis the Almighty.

If we all undertake to start attending services to help us make minyan *every day*, most of us will fail; our lives are too busy to sustain every-day attendance. However, if we commit to just one or two days a week in addition to Shabbat, then we, as a community, will stay strong and live long.

Goodbye for Now to Nazir; Hello Sotah. Our privileged participation in the worldwide Daf Yomi cycle will finish Tractate Nazir today. The Tractate ends with the truth that “Torah scholars increase peace in the world”. That same truth finishes four separate Tractates of our Corpus, which we’ve discussed before ([email of 7/14/22](#)).

Without promising anything – that’s the surest way of messing it up – I am eager for us to explore together some of Tractate Sotah.

Built Back Better.

Palindromic Dates, Riddle Partially Solved. Rabbi Eitan Webb is the active and beloved leader of the Princeton Chabad. Two points and a thank you to Rabbi Webb for solving the easier though still challenging question of when we next have ten palindromic dates in a row after 32023-32923:

42024-42924

52025-52925

62026-62626

72027-72927

82028-82928

92029-92929

If you are following this far, I have two remaining questions, each for a whopping three points. First, is Rabbi Webb right that these are the next 10-palindromes? Second, my real question last week is when do we have ELEVEN palindromic dates in a row? Think hard!

Quotes, Quotes, and More Quotes. We all love quotes. They are, well, so quotable, and as a result so memorable. They are their own mnemonics. Just think about how many times the Talmud uses aphorisms or short bursts of words to make or to remember a point.

Rabbi Shaul Robinson is the extraordinary ritual leader of our neighbor Lincoln Square Synagogue. Our recent quotes from Chaim Weitzman, Yehudah Avner, and the Rock Musical *Hair* about Manchester, England reminded Rabbi Robinson of the great Mark Twain quote about Manchester:

I would like to live in Manchester, England. The transition between Manchester and death would be unnoticeable.

Twain is among the greatest of the great quotemasters. In my own mind, however, the Manchester quote is not as solid as his great:

Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime.

Nor is it as great as the quote attributed to Twain but not actually uttered by him:

Reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated.

I have to say, though, that, as great a quotester as Twain was, Dr. Samuel Johnson, about whom we talked last week, is certainly on or above par. In fact I think Dr. Johnson likely uttered more memorable quotes, and these from more than 250 years prior to Twain. David Sable reminds us of a marvelous quip:

That fellow seems to me to possess but one idea, and that is a wrong one.

For two points each, and without looking, send in your Dr. Johnson favorites. For one point each, a little peeking just to quote check is ok.

The Shearith Israel Winter Song Book. In case you missed it, here is a [link](#) (thanks to Sarah Meira Rosenberg) and a Spotify [link](#) (thanks to Lia A. Solomon) to our Congregation's Winter Song Book. On to Spring, soon.

Sisters in Sainthood. In a recent note from me in our Spring/Summer Bulletin, I thanked the Sisterhood for their help to the Congregation in so many ways but thanked only some but not all of the individual officers. My apologies. Who knew the Sisterhood has such an august masthead:

Carla S. Schein, President
Rivka Shoulson Wiznia, Vice President
Rose G. Edinger, Treasurer
Laury Frieber, Corresponding Secretary
Lisa Rohde, Recording Secretary

Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom. Here! *Kaminando kon Buenos.*

Louis Solomon, Parnas