

September 3, 2020

Dear Shearith Israel family,

Our Plans Are Set; Are Yours? The High Holidays are now in focus. They are slightly more than two weeks away. We are nightly reciting our brief, beautiful Selihot and hearing the stirring sounds of the shofar. Rabbi Soloveichik will be delivering a special audio lecture series. If you have not called into his *Friday Night Lights* talks in the past couple weeks to hear him speak on several pre-Rosh Hashana themes, then you are missing something deeply moving. Rabbi Rohde and Reverend Edinger have each scheduled talks and workshops. We have secured ample outdoor space at Manhattan Day School; we are at capacity in the Synagogue itself; and just this week the City granted us a special permit to close 70th Street in order to have a special shofar blowing service at noon on Sunday, September 20, the second day of Rosh Hashana (we don't blow shofar on Shabbat, which is the first day of Rosh Hashana this year).

At a communal level, we are about as set as COVID-19 will permit. (Indeed, on behalf of our entire Congregation, I am delighted to wish a mazal tov to Phil and Ruth Bieler on the bar mitzvah of their son Charlie, who today celebrated our first live life-cycle event at our Synagogue since March.) But what about you personally? It is tempting to let the turmoil of the times terrorize or, not nearly as bad but still bad, tranquilize us. Please, resist these with all your might. Reach out to any of our Clergy, your officers, or the office staff if there is anything you need that we can help with. We are preparing a neat, little communal New Year's Greetings and Memorial Offerings e-booklet through which we can share our well wishes with each other while financially supporting the Synagogue. Contribute your thoughts and feelings. Despite the odds, if we *all* try, we can make this a meaningful holiday season for us individually and as a community.

Shearith Israel as Ward. The Talmud discusses the use and utility of a "*hatzer*", which is something akin to a courtyard or, more typical in Manhattan, a common outdoors space. In a *hatzer*, neighbors to a common street, alley, or thoroughfare pool resources to make the common space available to everyone in a way that

would otherwise be prohibited on Shabbat. Expanding on the notion of the joint effort of relatively small groups of citizens acting in their self-interest but for the common good, Professor Michael Lind, in *The New Class War*, revives the notion of a "ward". Ward was a Jeffersonian concept that deserves more air play today. It amounts to a group not defined by arbitrary number but by connection to each other and outward effectiveness. New York doesn't call its neighborhoods wards any more, though cities like Chicago still do. In so many ways, I see Shearith Israel during COVID-19 exhibiting the best attributes of a ward. Many of us attend services every day so that those few of us needing to say kaddish or to observe a *nahala* will have a minyan, a community, to do so. We make room so that anyone who has needed a minyan has had one. Now it is true that, for many of us, being able to listen to Rabbi Rohde and our timeless tunes is a treasure. But each of those attending is taking at least a theoretical health risk. We do it willingly, with a full heart, for the good of our ward. We are trying to accommodate all congregants who want to pray communally during the Days of Awe. It should please us all deeply to observe certain of our congregants. These are congregants who have been coming to services on these days for decades and who, under normal circumstances, could be expected to have a very strong sense of entitlement to "their" seats. Yet more than one has emailed or called to say that, if we are tight for space given social distancing requirements, they will stay home or attend just the shofar service. This is in addition to the quiet, ward-like service many of our congregants remain active in providing to others, including food delivery and making weekly calls to see how others are doing. Our ward is not limited to our Congregation; when, just last week, we needed help making a minyan on Shabbat, Rabbi Robinson of our neighbor, Lincoln Square Synagogue, instantly circulated an email to get us critical help. There is no magic to sustaining a ward, but there are miracles and wonders, to quote Paul Simon. And we are experiencing them. When we open our hearts to others we let light and blessing into our own. Let this be the legacy of COVID-19.

Winners, Winners Everywhere! Oh what fun it has been to read the nominations for top two- and three-word T-Shirt slogans to describe us as a community during these times of difficulty. Recall that my email of last week proposed "Live Slow"

and "Life's a Beach", explaining why I thought these were the greatest two- and three-word sayings ever. But I invited challenges, and challenges I got, a real run for my money. In the end, you decide. From our West Coast correspondents, Sam Neumark and his son, the adorable Isaac (in sunglasses), borrow from our governor, whom Sam calls "Rav Andrew Cuomo", the three-worger: "New York Tough". The more I thought about it the more I thought it was a contender. I also nominated the Beatles' "All Together Now" - it lost because, though the words couldn't be better, the melody of the song is so annoying. Francine Alfandary presented a T-Shirt designed by Sarah Lefton, saying "Yo Semite". That one also has the New Yorker's swagger despite its Western Frontier motif and deserves a shout out. Neighbor Steve Smith, breaking the rules but still deserving Honorable Mention, nominated the whole shebang of: "I can't wait to walk down the aisle one day and hear those magical words: This is your pilot speaking". The T-Shirt Makes the Congregation, the saying goes. You decide.



Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas