

October 8, 2020

Dear Shearith Israel family,

*Closing Assemblies and Renewal.* Tomorrow is the seventh and final day of Succot, the holiday that our Torah and tradition have fashioned as our most communal of the year. We will observe that final day, Hoshana Rabba, in our Sanctuary with one of our most beautiful services. Per force, much of the pageantry will be omitted this year, but still I think it will be a moving service. A portion will be live-streamed for those who cannot or don't wish to attend in person. Then, on Shabbat, we will observe another historically communal holiday, Shemini Hag Atseret, closely translated as the Eighth Day of Assembly. Its very name bespeaks a connection to the seven days of Succot preceding it as well as to an independent, additional community in-gathering. Shemini Hag Atseret closes the High Holiday season just as Hoshana Rabba closes Succot. In both Closing Assemblies, we celebrate our community, writ small and large. We will collectively pray, for forgiveness as a community, for plenty and bounty as a community (symbolized by rain), for a blessed future as a community. The renewal moment that follows on the next day (in the Diaspora), Simhat Torah, sets the whole glorious cycle in motion all over again with the reading of the end of the Torah followed immediately by the reading of Bereshit, the first chapters of the Torah. The circle of the Jewish year closes and opens with community.

As we did with the earlier holidays this season, we will again be offering both indoor (our Sanctuary) and outdoor (Manhattan Day School) services on Shabbat. On Sunday morning, however, that is, on Simhat Torah, we will all join together as a unified community in one venue, our outdoor venue at MDS. There, we can celebrate our great good fortune that, as announced before Rosh HaShana, Dr. Henry Edinger and Rabbi Soloveichik have agreed to serve as our Hatan Torah and Hatan Bereshit for the coming year. We will be masked, muted, two-metered, and possibly muffled. But as a community we will be very happy to fête these great people who have done so much for our community.

*End of the Beginning?* My emails quote others pretty freely. But I've never quoted Churchill. Why not? Because quoting Churchill is like trying to populate a favorite song list on Spotify with the Beatles *and* other artists: Once you start including the Beatles they take up the entire list. Once I start quoting the British Bulldog, one of our greatest of modern orators, there would scarcely be room for anyone else. Notwithstanding the evident veracity of that truth, I venture to quote Churchill when he said:

"Now this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning."

Churchill made that comment at the Mansion House's Lord Mayor's luncheon, when Britain had (finally) won a battle, dubbed the Battle of Egypt. I'm sure I'm not the only one thinking this way now. But given the worsening COVID-19 metrics and the utter, bewildering confusion over the optimal steps to take simultaneously to stay safe *and* sane *and* solvent, I have a sinking feeling that, if indeed we are at the end of the beginning in overcoming COVID-19, then the middle of the end and the end of the end of that journey may not be just around the corner. Churchill made his unforgettable "end of the beginning" remark in November 1942. The war would continue, brutally, for another 2.5 years.

*Our Congregation's Phase Next Manifesto.* Churchill reminded his listeners in 1942 what he had been saying since his first cabinet meeting in 1940: "I have never promised anything but blood, tears, toil, and sweat" (oh so now *two* Churchill quotes? You know; in for a penny, in for a (British) pound). For some reason the "toil" has gotten dropped in common parlance, and the words rearranged, certainly by the eponymous rock group Blood, Sweat & Tears popular in the 1970s. It seems that it was Churchill who *added* "toil" when he borrowed the otherwise three-term phrase that had been in English poetry since Donne and Byron. Whatever the order, and whether or not "toil" or even Shakespeare's "toil and trouble" are added, the litany of blood, sweat, tears, toil, *and* trouble does seem a fitting description of just what we all want to leave behind as we enter, not Phase 2 (term already in use), not Phase B (awkward to label phases with

letters, no?), but, well Phase Next. I offer the phraseology of "Phase Next" since who knows how many more there are going to be. The question is not whether we all want to leave the *tzuris* behind but whether the *tzuris* is going to cooperate? Second waves and re-lockdowns are not only being predicted; in many places they are now a reality. Color-coding neighborhoods is the latest fashion trend. Schools open, then close. Mind-numbingly, we can't even seem to follow with any rigor and reliability the simple precautions that do appear to work reasonably well to keep COVID-19 at bay. Even optimistic forecasts of an effective and ubiquitous vaccine rely on time-scales measured in many months after launch and, for centers of international commerce and travel such as New York, years. Friends, we need to pace ourselves.

As this season's holidays come to a close, I offer a four-step manifesto for Phase Next for our Congregation. Write me if you can improve on these. My recipe is simple. It is guaranteed to keep our collective spirits up, bracing ourselves not just for Phase Next but for any Phases that follow:

First, our Clergy - each of Rabbi Soloveichik, Rabbi Rohde, and Reverend Edinger - has enthusiastically agreed to continue to offer their astonishing array of remote lecturing and learning. These never disappoint. Mostly they boggle the mind and lift the spirit. Call in. Zoom in. Tell your friends. This teaching and learning are essential to our communal well-being, and they will continue.

Second, we will continue to offer Congregants cautious, communal participation in daily, Shabbat, and holiday services. We will be masked, distanced, and silenced for a long time, I predict, so let's make the best of it. (And hey, there is at least one virtue in the uncomfortable masking -- how else can I get away with secretly reading Kohelet during services this Shabbat, when much of the rest of the Jewish world reads that timeless piece of ultimately life-affirming optimism, but we don't.) Please, come when you safely can. We can, we must, keep our communal services and our unique *minhag* alive.

Third, we need to throw into high gear the first of our two "principles to live by" for 5781, as announced on Rosh Hashana: Help Others. Two words, creating about the most powerful answer to the new musical ballad, *The COVID-19 Blues*. We need to find sustaining ways to Help Others. Call our elders. Meet up with them in the park. Without exaggeration, 5-10 minutes a day in reaching out to or helping someone else is a gateway to experiencing Heaven on Earth. Money back guaranteed if you are not fully satisfied.

Fourth, we need to Celebrate Our Blessings, which is the second of our 5781 "principles to live by". Our clever and creative Clergy and executive staff are thinking about ways we can do that remotely or, when in person, safely. We will celebrate our *Hatanim* remotely soon. Please join us. How can this be hard? It's three little words. Yet it too often eludes us. If we can learn to Celebrate Our Blessings as a community, we will survive and even thrive in Phase Next.

Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom. Moadim L'simha.

Louis Solomon, Parnas