

September 10, 2020

Dear Shearith Israel family,

*Four's a Charm.* Allow me to report on four positive events:

*First,* High Holiday planning is essentially complete. We are at capacity in both our Manhattan Day School (outdoors) and Shearith Israel Sanctuary (indoors) venues for Rosh HaShana services. If you are unable to attend either service, we would be delighted to see you at our separate, socially-distanced Shofar blowing service that will be held at noon right outside the synagogue on 70th Street. If you still want to join us, please register online [here](#) or contact the office as soon as you can. We are so pleased to be one of many synagogues offering public outdoor shofar blowing services that will be available in Manhattan throughout the Sunday of Rosh HaShana. For a comprehensive list of times and locations on the Upper West Side, click [here](#); for East Side options, click [here](#). The lists themselves are the stuff of gladness; just look at them. Also, please tune in to the daily offerings by one or more of our Clergy. These will lift your spirits and ready you for the holidays.

*Second,* this week, our Congregation opened our Synagogue's doors to the 7th and 8th grade teachers and students from Manhattan Day School. The effort necessary to make this happen, especially by Bonnie Barest, has been herculean. Even with the challenges of health and safety, the week has gone well. For our Congregation, there can be few clearer statements that we are doing something right in this crazy COVID-19 chaos than the gratitude expressed by MDS's Head of School, Ms. Raizi Chechik, who said to us: "May the Torah learned by our students in your sanctuary be a source of blessing for your entire congregation, and may we all see a new year of health and happiness".

*Third,* I'm delighted to report that the City has granted the Congregation's interim application to clear, level, pave, and tent our current construction site next door to the Synagogue building. For important reasons, we have until the end of this calendar year to accomplish the work on the site, which, when completed, will add more outdoor space for our communal use. The price tag to get this work

done is a big one, but the benefits will be much greater. More on this after the High Holidays.

*Finally*, and for a truly cherished announcement, your Board of Trustees has determined to honor Rabbi Soloveichik as our Hatan Bereshit and Dr. Henry Edinger as our Hatan Torah for 5781. The role of Hatanim in our Congregation is ancient by American standards and is of constitutional dimension. This year, the specific roles they will play will be stunted, but for that very reason they may be more emotionally meaningful for us. We are planning some sort of celebration, may it not be solely virtual. Still, in the midst of all the travail we are communally facing, that two congregational leaders of such extraordinary merit are willing to serve is a blessing of biblical proportions, to turn Bill Murray's phrase in *Ghostbusters*. Please send your warmest congratulations to Rabbi Soloveichik and Dr. Edinger.

*Shearith Israel in the Fire Swamp*. I don't actually think *Ghostbusters* perfectly captures our current sensibility. But *The Princess Bride* surely does. The movie has too many great scenes to enumerate; indeed the movie ranks in the pantheon of timeless classic movies (funniest, most life-affirming, enjoyable at all ages). The scene in the fire swamp seems poignantly apt right now. Westley, the hero, is trying to run away from the feckless villain Prince Humperdinck with Humperdinck's fiancé, who is Westley's true love, Buttercup, the eponymous Princess Bride of the movie. The two are about to escape Humperdinck by fleeing into the "fire swamp". Before they enter, the two of them have the following exchange:

Westley: Your pig fiancé is too late. A few more steps and we'll be safe in the fire swamp.

Buttercup, *The Princess Bride*: We'll never survive

Westley: Nonsense, you're only saying that because nobody ever has.

Why has no one ever survived the fire swamp? Because it exposes the visitor to three deadly perils: flame spurts erupting from the ground to incinerate, lightning

sand (akin to quicksand but dry), and deadly beasts called "rodents of unusual size" (called ROUSs). Westley quickly learns to avoid the three perils, and he and Buttercup make it through the fire swamp alive. It must be obvious why the metaphor of the fire swamp is so apt right now to describe us. Like the fire swamp, COVID-19 has presented us with perils unprecedented in most of our lives. And at the beginning, the perils seemed, and were, deadly. Over the six months we have lived with the disease in New York City, the most serious of the perils have, for many of us, become much more avoidable. Incessant hand washing, wiping down groceries (are we the only ones still doing that?), mask wearing, and social distancing are as annoying as they are dispiriting after six months. But can we begin to count our blessings? Our scientists and health care professionals have found these simple techniques to avoid the most serious vicissitudes of the pandemic (and don't forget to close the toilet seat before flushing). I don't make light either of the perils or of our losses, communal or personal, caused by COVID-19. Yet living through the fire swamp required a resilience, ingenuity, and strength of will that we too are exhibiting, as a community, every day. We were out of our sacred space for over three months (108 days, but who's counting). Yet last Shabbat, back in our sacred space, we safely listened to a bar mitzvah boy recite his haftarah. We will safely pray with over 200 of our fellow congregants in several venues during Rosh HaShana. Just rent the movie; I think there may be one night when none of our Clergy has something scheduled between now and the New Year.

Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom.

Louis Solomon, Parnas