

Facing Many Directions at Once

The description of the cherubim in the Bible is vague and perhaps even contradictory, as opposed to the many exacting details given in the descriptions of other parts of the Mishkan and the Temple. One of the most obvious contradictions, which the Talmud in Baba Batra 99a noticed, is the direction which the cherubim faced. The Torah in our Parashah seems to say that the cherubim faced each other, as well as saying that they faced the “Kapporet,” the “Atonement (or Mercy) Seat,” which is the top cover of the Ark of the Covenant, over which they are placed. So that would seem to indicate that they faced downwards. Certainly their wings spread over the Kapporet. And while other sources in the Bible are referring to cherubs which were in Solomon’s Temple, which may have been quite different from the cherubs in the Mishkan, they give yet other orientations, which may either mean simply facing “inward,” or facing the “front of the Temple.” The Talmud suggests two famous reconciliations: that the cherubim’s position actually (magically) changed, depending upon whether it was a time when “Israel obeyed the will of the Omnipresent,” or a time when “Israel did not obey the will of the Omnipresent.” The other reconciliation was that the cherubim didn’t move, and that their position was a compromise someplace in between, generally facing each other and yet partially turned “sideways.”

We can imagine, of course, plenty of good reasons why the Bible and our Sages deliberately preferred to keep the description of the cherubim vague, leaving them to our own imaginations. But the contradictions in the facing direction seems to open up a real ambivalence. Perhaps it depended upon the particular arrangement at the time, and left room for artistic interpretation. But it’s also probable that there is a real irreconcilable problem which the Talmud is trying to wrestle with and find a compromise: The cherubim must in some way be facing in all of these directions at once.

Many interpretations have been given to this problem, and to the meaning of the cherubim in general, to the extent it could or should be discussed, but to add my own homiletic interpretation, I’d say that there is a fundamental tension in the direction we Jews should face. Perhaps nowhere is that tension more apparent than here in our sanctuary at Shearith Israel: After all, the pews face each other. So when we stand, we face inwards, towards each other, right? Then there’s the place at the front of the room where the Sifrei Torah are kept, the Hekhal, the “Palace,” what the Ashkenazim call the “Aron” or “Ark.” Often people face that direction for important parts of the service. Then there’s the Reader’s Desk, the Tebah, towards the back of the center of the synagogue, from which the Torah is read and from which the service is conducted. These days, many congregants are used to facing the eastern, front Hekhal for much of the service, but if you look at the Shulhan Arukh, there is considerable ambiguity and the answer is far from clear.

That ambiguity is deliberate. We must reconcile the need to face our fellow man, to join each other as one community, with the need to each face God both individually and collectively. We must also face the demands of justice and law and truth and the Divine commands of the Torah. There are highly significant and apparent contradictions in reconciling all of these orientations, and the task of reconciling them is more of an art than a science, so there must be left significant room to the discretion and expression of the individual. There is communal politics involved here, there is Divine sovereignty involved here, there is friendship and support, love and awe, harmony and tension. We cannot simply choose one direction to face; we must each rather find a way of making our own reconciliation of the need to face all of these directions at once.



Shabbat Vayaqhel-Shekalim

February 25-26, 2022 | 25 Adar I, 5782

SCHEDULE

Hertz: p. 373 | Haftarah: p. 992 | Shekalim: p. 352
Kaplan: p. 464 | Haftarah: p. 1270 | Shekalim: p. 440

Candle Lighting | 5:25 pm

Friday Evening Services | 5:30 pm

Friday Night Lights | Rabbi Soloveichik | Following services | *2021-22 season sponsored by the Julis-Rabinowitz family*

Zemirot | 8:30 am

Shahrit | 9:00 am

Youth Groups | 10:00 am | Fidanque Room | Supervised by a Teen Leader

Kiddush | Outdoors | following services | *Sponsored anonymously*

Shabbat Afternoon Class | Rabbi Soloveichik | 4:40 pm

Shabbat Afternoon Services | 5:25 pm

Habdala | 6:15 pm

Virtual Habdala | 6:30 pm | Rev. Z. Edinger

Rosh Hodesh Adar II begins on Wednesday night.

Weekday Service Times

Morning Services

Sunday: 8:05 am

Monday-Friday: 7:05 am

Evening Services

Sunday-Thursday (Minha/Arbit): **5:30 pm**

*Masks are now optional in designated areas.
To read our important policy updates, see inside.*

THIS SHABBAT

He's LIVE AGAIN FROM SHEARITH ISRAEL...

Friday Night Lights

THIS FRIDAY, February 25

IN PERSON with Rabbi Meir Soloveichik

Following 5:30 pm Evening Services with the Shearith Israel Choir

2021-2022 Season of Friday Night Lights is sponsored by the Julis-Rabinowitz family

Shabbat Afternoon Class

Rabbi Meir Soloveichik

This Shabbat | IN PERSON | 4:40 pm

45 minutes before Evening Services

COMMUNITY ANNOUNCEMENTS

Mazal Tob to **Laurie & Dr. Eli Bryk** and to **Ellen & Robert Kapito**, upon the birth of a grandson, born to their children, Alyssa & Aaron Kapito.

Hazaka u'Berukha to **Gail Propp**, upon receiving an honorary doctorate from Bar Ilan University, to be bestowed on May 22 in Israel.

Updated Policies for In-Person Activities:

- Registration no longer required to attend services
- **Mask Optional Seating:** Southern Pews (Men's and Women's sections)
- **Mask Only Seating:** Northern Pews (Men's and Women's sections)
- Masks are optional at *Friday Night Lights*, classes, and other events that take place before or after services.
- Masks are still required in all other areas of the synagogue building including entryway, hallways, and bathrooms, and when entering or leaving the building.
- **We do ask EVERYONE who can to get boosted. We do require proof of vaccination and the best way to provide that is for ALL congregants (even if you've previously submitted your vaccine/booster proof), to update your vaccination and booster status by completing the simple form at: shearithisrael.sbulcloud.com/form/vaccine-status. This will make it easier for us to admit you to our services and other in-person activities.**

COMING UP

With blood donations still in short supply, join Shearith Israel in conjunction with Lincoln Square Synagogue, Obab Zedek, & Or Zarua for another:

Blood Drive for the NY Blood Center

THIS SUNDAY, February 27

Held at Lincoln Square Synagogue (180 Amsterdam Ave)

Saving a life takes just an hour of your time!

Refer to our emails to schedule your donation slot on February 27th.

Parent-Child Learning - Torah & S'mores!

Led by our Parnas, Louis Solomon

Saturday Night, March 12 | 7:00 pm

For elementary school children and their parents or grandparents

To register, visit shearithisrael.org/csiyouth5782.

The Sisterhood Presents:

Judaica Papercuts with Artist Dena Levie

Saturday Night, March 5 | 8:00 pm | On Zoom

Join the Sisterhood on Zoom as professional artist Dena Levie helps participants create their very own Judaica-themed piece of papercut art.

This is a great activity to do on your own, or with kids or grandkids old enough to handle an exacto knife! And, because it's on zoom, you can do it from anywhere. Dena will give a virtual tour of her studio, explaining the principles involved in her artwork, and will help us all learn a new, fun skill for creating beautiful objects.

Register at shearithisrael.org/papercutting.

Festive Purim Dinner Returns!

Catered by Sherry Herring

with a spirited conversation between

Shearith Israel's herring aficionado, Rabbi Meir Soloveichik, and Sherry Herring's New York rep, Alejandro Benchimol

Purim Evening, March 16 | After Megillah Reading & Children's Activity

We are delighted to be offering this relaxed, in-person, communal meal. And what better time than Purim to finally see each other's *punim*? This year's Purim Dinner will be catered by Sherry Herring, the hot new kosher Upper West Side outpost of the famed Tel Aviv hotspot.

Register at shearithisrael.org/purimdinner5782.