

September 17, 2020

Dear Shearith Israel family,

*Welcoming the New Year.* With continued providence, we will be going ahead with our communal Rosh HaShana services tomorrow evening, Shabbat, and Sunday. Other geographic locales, including places from which people are traveling or returning to New York City, are seeing upticks in certain key COVID-19 indicators. Our COVID-19 Reentry Working Group is following these developments. And in farther flung places, like the Holy Land, we are seeing renewed lockdowns and other severe restrictions over the holiday. But at least in New York City, we remain in a state of relative health and safety. We are psychologically exhibiting the equivalent of Saul Steinberg's once-ubiquitous poster of a New Yorker's satirical view of the world (in which a few New York City blocks dominate well over half the picture, with the rest of America and the world depicted in tiny spots off in the distance). We therefore think all is well. And so we hope, and pray, it will be. For us, the combination of outdoor (at Manhattan Day School) and indoor (at our *Esnoga* on 70th Street) venues (with an extra, shofar-only service) is enabling us to accommodate each of our congregant's preferences who wishes to join us. For this we must be deeply grateful. This necessary division of our Congregation into the separate venues is being done solely because of the exigencies of COVID-19. We are one Congregation, and we will remain one. Our first and only congregational split occurred 196 years ago, when some of our congregants, feeling we were too lax in our orthodox observances, left to form B'nai Jeshurun (!). With the help of the Almighty, we will never be parted again.

*5780 into 5781; curiouser and curiouser.* Imagine if Lewis Carroll, author of that immortal phrase in *Through the Looking Glass*, lived during COVID-19. Certainly the last half of the Jewish year corresponding to 2020, or 5780, has been more of an unnatural fog than many in our privileged generations have known. Here in Gotham, it all seems a bit clearer now in September than it was in March 2020.

Still, as we complete six months of dealing with the disorientations, dislocations, disappointments, and even deep sadnesses visited on too many of us by COVID-19, and as we enter upon Rosh HaShana, that Great Annual Reset, it's worth considering how a mathematical genius and writer/poet such as Carroll would have captured the moment of saying goodbye (good riddance?) to 5780 and welcoming 5781. Surely he would have made 5781 as special in a good way as 5780 was challenging in the opposite direction. It turns out that our Rabbinic tradition has accomplished exactly what Carroll would have. We are about to embark on a Jewish year that is one of the most singularly special and interesting in our calendrical cycles (thanks to Avery Neumark for sending my way this fascinating bit of obscurity). For roughly the past 1.5 millennia, the Jewish calendar has been "set", not subject to the testimony of witnesses to set Rosh HaShana and Rosh Hodesh. The Jewish calendar was thus fashioned in never-ending repetition but with an elegance, indeed a brilliance, that predated the most sophisticated computing algorithms by, oh, about 1,500 years. Our Sages and more recent commentators have categorized the years comprising our 19-year cycle of the Jewish calendar according to 14 different ways the holidays, Torah portions, and other happenings occur. And the coming year, 5781, is nearly as rare as you can get among the 14 different ways. It occurs only ~4.3% of the time. It seems so fair that, following COVID-19-laden 5780, 5781 will have special, even unique, positive features and occurrences. We will note some of these for your delectation as the year progresses. Now it is important to note that 5781 will bring an extra, large dollop of communal events, bringing us together in ways that rarely occur in any other year. (You want an example? Ok. The fast of the Tenth of Tebet, which is the shortest of the year in our Hemisphere, rarely but sometimes occurs on a Friday. It's the only fast that is observed on Friday, and we as a community will observe it together on Friday, December 25, 2020. Want another example? Because Hanukah will also start on a Friday [two weeks earlier], we will read the famous *haftarah* of Solomon [King, that is] ordering the baby to be cut in half as a way of discerning who was the true mother. We don't read that *haftarah* in December more than once in 20 years.) Having suffered through 5780, we deserve the fun and diverting curiosities of 5781, as a community, together.

*With A Little Help from Our "Little Sister"*. Our congregational friend Janet Neustein, emailing from Down Under, after thanking us for the "breathtaking talks by your extraordinary Rabbi Soloveichik", says: "Tread carefully and be well as we leave the shocks and surprises of 5780, unaware of what lies in the path ahead." Who can disagree with Janet about the shocks and surprises of 5780. At the same time, I am more optimistic, perhaps, than Janet in anticipation of 5781. True, we see the future only through the haze of the incense, the *ketoret*, burning near continuously in the Temple. At the same time, if we remain strong as a community, living by the simple adages that will be our two communal hallmarks for 5781 - to Help Others and to Celebrate Our Blessings - I think we can have more hope that 5781 will be rosier. Our dear Congregant Joel Schreiber expressed the sentiment in the first and last stanzas of his beautiful poem "Renewal", such a fitting name for a Rosh HaShana-time poem:

The ancient tree stood in the yard

Its leaves a withered gray,

Its arms bare of flowers that had

Been there - but yesterday.

...

And many men have gathered here

To reap her wondrous flowers,

That yearly come to show how life

Endures the tragic hours.

Lewis Carroll lived and wrote during the Nineteenth Century. About seven hundred years earlier, Abraham Hazan Gerondi composed a beautiful poem, or *piyut*, which Shearith Israel (along with many other congregations) long ago set to a beautiful melody. The *piyut* is called "*Ahot Ketana*," or "Little Sister" (referring to the People of Israel - you can hear a beautiful rendition by Rabbi Rohde [here](#)). The *piyut* is central to our Rosh HaShana evening service - at least it usually is, in non-COVID-19 years. Each stanza prior to the last ends with the prayer, "may the end of the year bring about an end to its curses", with the last stanza ending "may the new year begin, with its blessings". The point is meaningful to every generation. And we thank Heaven that ours is not a generation to have been as seriously tested, even with COVID-19, as nearly every generation in the past has been. Let us renew. Let us endure. And let us greet 5781 with all its blessings, together.

Thank you all. Bless us all. Shabbat shalom and Shana Toba.

Louis Solomon, Parnas