



Rosh Hodesh Elul

Sunday, August 16, 2026 @ 11:00 am

Agenda

Welcome
Introductions and Opening Blessing
Candle Lighting
Shehechyanu
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Closing Prayer
Upcoming Events
Community Guidelines



Society Hill Synagogue Rosh Hodesh Gatherings

Our Community Guidelines

Rosh Hodesh Gatherings at Society Hill Synagogue are an open space where women (cis- and trans-gender) and non-binary people can be in community around issues affecting modern day Jewish women and explore religious, spiritual, and historic topics of Jewish women, womanhood, and the feminine. We acknowledge that these topics are often difficult to discuss, bringing up deep personal connections or strong moral or political feelings. We welcome a wide variety of opinions on these topics and aim to provide a supportive environment where all participants feel free to share their thoughts and opinions without judgment.

To foster this atmosphere of acceptance and support, we ask that all participants follow these community guidelines:

1. Treat all participants with respect. Be mindful of your language, your tone of voice, and the way you take up space in the group.
2. Assume good intentions. Start from the belief that people mean well.
3. All of us walk into the room with a variety of identities and experiences that inform who we are and how we see the world. Do not make assumptions about people's identities or opinions. Speak from your own experience. Use "I" statements rather than generalizing with "you" or "we."
4. Be accepting when someone offers an opinion you disagree with; you do not have to share their opinion to hear them out.
5. When offering your own opinion, be mindful of the language you choose. Avoid categorizing or stereotyping a whole group of people.
6. Feel free to push back on a thought or opinion you disagree with — that makes for healthy debate, but please use respectful language and tone.

Introductions and Opening Blessing

Introduce yourself! We invite you to use your Hebrew name and your mother's Hebrew name. If you or your mother do not have a Hebrew name, you are welcome to use any language that you are comfortable with.

Blessings:

*Barukh atah Adonai
Eloheinu melek ha'olam
shehehyanu vekiyemanu
vehigi'anu lazman hazeh*

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי
אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם
שֶׁהֵחַיָנוּ וְקִיַמָנוּ
וְהִגִיעָנוּ לַזְמַן הַזֶּה

Blessed are you, Adonai, our God, sovereign of the universe
who has kept us alive, sustained us, and enabled us to reach this season

May it be Your will, my God and God of my ancestors, to be gracious to me and to all my family and to give us, and all Israel, a good and long life. Remember us with goodness and blessing, and grant us salvation and mercy. Grant us abundant blessing, and fortify the places we call home. May Your Presence dwell among us as we gather here today. May we be blessed with wise and learned disciples and children, lovers of God who stand in awe of You, people who speak truth and spread holiness. May those we nurture light the world with Torah and good deeds.

Hear the prayers I utter now in the name of our mothers Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Leah, Bilhah and Zilpah. May Your light, reflected in these candles, surround us always. And let us say, Amen.

Rosh Hodesh Elul

Exodus 15:2

"This is my G-d and I will glorify Him (*Zeh Eli v'anveihu*)."

The rabbis understood *v'anveihu* to mean:

"Beautify yourself before Him through *mitzvot* (commandments)."

When we think about observing Judaism, we often focus on acts we are commanded to fulfill—light candles, eat matzoh on Passover, gaze at stars in a sukkah, and affix a mezuzah to our doorpost. While Judaism is deeply rooted in action, it also teaches that how we perform a mitzvah matters. The concept of *Hiddur Mitzvah*, literally "beautifying the commandment," encourages us to go beyond simply fulfilling an obligation, but to perform mitzvot with beauty, care, and intention.

This teaching reflects a broader Jewish understanding that aesthetics have spiritual significance. Beauty is not viewed as superficial or unnecessary; instead, beauty has the power to elevate commandments, or mitzvot, into sacred experiences. Lighting ornate candlesticks for Shabbat or hanging a colorful mezuzah does not change the commandments themselves, but it changes our experience of these mitzvot.

Discussion/Activity

- Group Question
 - How does it change the experience for you?

History of Hiddur Mitzvah

The Torah describes the construction of the Tabernacle in remarkable detail, using gold, silver, fine linen, richly colored fabrics, precious stones, intricate embroidery, and skilled craftsmanship. The Torah devotes many verses to describing these details, as well as describing the colorful threads used to make garments for the *Kohanim* (high priests), suggesting that beauty itself is considered part of worship.

Throughout history, Jewish women have been frequently excluded from formal religious leadership and from many skilled trades. Yet, while the synagogue is often considered the center of communal worship, many of Judaism's most meaningful holidays (Shabbat, Passover, Rosh Hashannah, and Hanukkah) are observed at home, where women have traditionally been the primary custodians of religious life — and in many cases continue to be. Every Friday we transform an ordinary household into a place worthy of welcoming the Sabbath. Clean linens, polished candlesticks, fresh bread, flowers when available, and embroidered textiles all contribute to creating an atmosphere of holiness.

In darker points of history when Jews were prohibited from practicing our religion, *Hiddur Mitzvah* became an act of spiritual resistance. Creating beauty in Jewish ritual life was a declaration that Jewish identity, dignity, and hope would survive despite the hardships surrounding it. Beauty became a refusal to let persecution define Jewish existence. Instead of allowing oppression to strip life of joy, Jewish families responded by making Shabbat more beautiful, holidays more meaningful, and sacred spaces more welcoming.

In modern history across Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East, Jewish women became accomplished textile artists. Embroidery has been one of the primary artistic outlets available to women, and we have used it to create ritual objects filled with symbolic meaning. Common embroidery themes include crowns representing Torah, pomegranates symbolizing abundance and the mitzvot, vines representing the Land of Israel, birds symbolizing peace, and Hebrew verses from Scripture. *Challah* and *maztoh* covers, *sukkah* walls, *tallit*, and holiday table linens have become treasured family possessions that are handed down from mother to daughter.

Today, women's artistic contributions continue as Jewish women are internationally recognized as ceramic artists, silversmiths, glass artists, papercutters, textile designers, calligraphers, and painters who create contemporary Judaica. We design *mezuzot*, *menorahs*, *seder* plates, and *challah* covers that combine traditional symbolism with modern artistic expression. These artists continue the ancient tradition of *Hiddur Mitzvah*, reminding us that Judaism is a living tradition that embraces both continuity and creativity.

Discussion/Activity:

In groups of 2 or 3, share the objects you brought in:

- Explain who the person is
- Explain why they are or were significant to you
- Explain what the object is
- Explain why it is significant to you

Financial implications

Although *Hiddur Mitzvah* is not intended to create barriers to Jewish life or to become a measure of one's piety or social status, wealth may influence how Jewish communities are able to partake in this mitzvah. Affluent congregations can commission elaborate Torah arks, ornate *bimahs*, and stained-glass windows, and wealthy families can buy finely crafted *menorahs*, kiddush cups, spice boxes, and ceremonial objects made by master artisans.

However, although most Jewish families throughout history lived modestly, this did not prevent them from embracing *Hiddur Mitzvah*. Instead, they expressed beauty through a handmade *challah* cover, candlesticks polished until they shine, or flowers gathered from a garden for the Shabbat table. In this way, beauty can be created with time, skill, and love rather than with money. We must acknowledge and appreciate that this is another example of women's role in preserving Jewish traditions through unpaid labor.

Further, this work is rarely recognized formally or publicly. Medieval Jewish legal texts, communal records, and historical chronicles were almost exclusively written by men, so women's contributions often remained invisible. Yet when historians examine surviving textiles, household inventories, and family traditions, a different picture emerges. The beauty that characterized Jewish ritual life depended not only on rabbis, scribes, and craftsmen but also on generations of women whose creativity and unpaid labor transformed homes into sacred spaces. Without women, much of what we associate with the warmth, dignity, and beauty of Jewish life would simply not exist.

In modern times, women have taken on new roles — both as artists and artisans and also in conceiving feminist objects such as *kippot* and *tallit* designed for (and often by) women or *Kos Miriam* (Miriam's cup) as additions to the Passover table.

Discussion/Activity:

1. Think about a simple object in your home that has deep Jewish meaning. What makes it beautiful to you, even if it has little monetary value?
2. Why do you think Judaism places such importance on beauty in performing *mitzvot*? How does beauty affect our spiritual experiences?
3. Can time, effort, and creativity be considered forms of "wealth" in practicing *Hiddur Mitzvah*? How does women's unpaid labor contribute to this "wealth"?
4. In today's world, where many ritual objects can be purchased online, what is the value of creating something by hand and/or passing down our mothers' and grandmothers' Judaica?
 - a. Does the commercialization of Judaica today change the meaning of *Hiddur Mitzvah*? Why or why not?
5. If you were to leave one beautiful Jewish ritual object or tradition for future generations, what would it be, and what story would you hope it tells?
6. Many of us are starting to prepare for the High Holidays. What beautiful objects will you use in your home? Will you pull out family heirlooms, purchase new items, use your children's art projects from Hebrew school, or create something yourself or with your family? What beautiful items will you look forward to seeing in synagogue during services?

Song of Songs - Shir Hashirim - Chapter 1:6

BLACK AND BEAUTIFUL

שחורה אני ונאווה

I am black and beautiful
As a lily among the thorns,
For my soul is lovesick;
Refresh me with apples.

שחורה אני ונאווה
כשושנה בין החוחים,
כי נפשי חולת אהבה
רפדו אותי בתפוחים.

I am black from the sun and beautiful
From my keeping of vineyards,
My beloved whom my soul has loved
Is the most handsome of young men.

שחורה משמש אני ונאווה
נוטרת את הכרמים,
דודי אשר נפשי אהבה
הוא היפה בעלמים.

I am black...

שחורה אני...

As I sleep, the voice of my beloved
Calls out: "Open for me, my sister,
For you are my heart and my being;
Come, O come to me, my turtle dove."

ישנה אני וקול דודי
קורא: "פתחי לי, אחותי,
כי את ליבי ומאודי
בואי, בואי, יונתי."

I am black...

שחורה אני...

Closing Prayer: Prayer for Women of the Wall

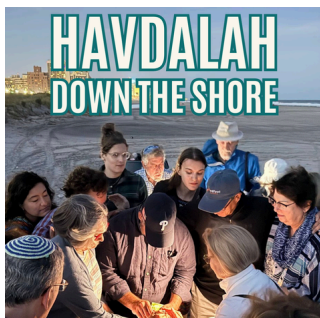
Written by Rahel Sharon Jaskow

May it be Your will, our G!d and G!d of our mothers and fathers, to bless this prayer group and all who pray within it: them, their families and all that is theirs, together with all the women and girls of your people Israel. Strengthen us and direct our hearts to serve You in truth, reverence and love. May our prayer be desirable and acceptable to You like the prayers of our holy mothers, Sarah, Rivka, Rahel and Leah. May our song ascend to Your Glorious Throne in holiness and purity, like the songs of Miriam the Prophet, Devorah the Judge, and Hannah in Shiloh, and may it be pleasing to you as a sweet savor and fine incense.

And for our sisters, all the women and girls of your people Israel: let us merit to see their joy and hear their voices raised before You in song and praise. May no woman or girl be silenced ever again among Your people Israel or in all the world. G!d of justice, let us merit to see justice and salvation soon, for the sanctification of Your name and the repair of Your world, as it is written: Zion will hear and be glad, and the daughters of Judah rejoice, over your judgments, O G!d. And it is written: For Zion's sake I will not be still and for Jerusalem's sake I will not be silent, until her righteousness shines forth like a great light and her salvation like a flaming torch.

For Torah shall go forth from Zion and the word of G!d from Jerusalem.
Amen, *selah*.

Coming up at Society Hill Synagogue:



Havdalah Down the Shore

Saturday, Aug. 22 @ 6:30 pm

Society Hill Synagogue members **Sivia and Leon Braunstein** are graciously hosting our congregation's Havdalah Down the Shore this summer, so come together for this special evening! We will meet at **6:30 pm** for a **light potluck dairy meal**, head to their bayside deck for our **8:30 pm lay-led Havdalah service**, and return for dessert.

www.societyhillsynagogue.org/havdalah-down-the-shore

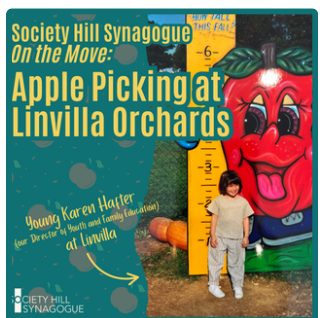


Save the Date: Open House Shabbat

Friday, Aug. 28 and Saturday, Aug. 29

Join us for our Open House Shabbat at the end of August, and invite your friends for a warm and welcoming introduction to our community! The Open House weekend will include **TGISHabbat**, **Young Families Shabbat**, our popular **Shabbat morning Torah discussion during services**, and **special treats!** There will be games for Hebrew School age kids (K - 7th grade).

Please note that there will be no TGISHabbat on Friday, September 4 (Labor Day Weekend); weekly TGISHabbat will resume with Erev Rosh Hashanah on Friday, September 11.



Society Hill Synagogue *On the Move:* Apple Picking at Linvilla Orchards

Sunday, August 30 @ 11:00 am

Linvilla Orchards (37 Knowlton Rd., Media)

\$11 per person

Join Society Hill Synagogue's Ann Spak Thal Hebrew School and the Young Friends (20s and 30s) on the move, as we head to **Linvilla Orchards for apple picking!** Come to connect with the earth — and each other — as we gather apples to enjoy on Rosh Hashanah. If cost is a barrier, please don't hesitate to reach out.

www.societyhillsynagogue.org/apple-picking

Coming up at Society Hill Synagogue:



Leil S'lihot Participatory Concert

Saturday, Sep. 5 @ 8:30 pm
Society Hill Synagogue

Join our congregation, Temple Beth Zion-Beth Israel (BZBI), and Leyv Ha-Ir ~ Heart of the City for a participatory concert on **Saturday, September 5!**

Complemented by S'lihot prayer, this concert will prepare our souls for the High Holidays. Starting at **8:30 pm** with Havdalah, we'll engage in an hour and 15 minutes of heart-opening song and brief reflections, led by clergy and musicians from three synagogues, including **Hazzan Jessi Roemer, Rabbi Nathan Kamesar, Rabbi Annie Lewis, Rabbi Yosef Goldman, Rabbi Kenneth Stern, Rabbi Julie Greenberg, and Rabbinical student Adina Ikeman.**

This is our 11th year of collaborating to create this musical kick-off to the High Holiday season! **The concert is free to attend, with advance registration required using the link below.**

www.societyhillsynagogue.org/leil-s'lihot-participatory-concert



Book Club: *Heart of a Stranger* by Angela Buchda

Friday, Sep. 18 @ 10:30am – 12:00pm

Our congregation's Book Club features great conversations about a variety of Jewish-themed books in the comfort of the Paula Kline Learning Center. Good company, coffee, and pastries are always guaranteed!

This month, we are reading ***Heart of a Stranger* by Angela Buchda.** Questions? Please contact our Book Club Coordinators, **Donna Tartasky** and **Judith Axler** at the link below.

bookclub@societyhillsynagogue.org