



## SHS President's State of the Synagogue Address Jeremey Newberg

September 16, 2021

*Two years ago*, I shared with you that SHS is changing with a new generation of leadership, new members, a major building expansion, and new approaches to Jewish communal life. It was a time of great optimism. *Last year*, I shared with you, “COVID Social Distancing is disruptive to our Jewish communal life.” I also said: “We are Jews; we adjust and make the best of the situation.”

SHS is an example of how a community with shared values has grown in a thoughtful, caring, and connected manner. David Ben-Gurion said: *“Anyone who doesn’t believe in miracles is not a realist.”* It is my pleasure to share with you some of the realities we addressed and the miracles we experienced within the SHS community this past year.

I am most proud that no one got seriously ill from COVID as we incrementally and methodically returned to in-person activities. Our goal was to be transparent and inclusive in our decisions and communicate with clarity and frequency. The rise of the Delta variant forced us to conduct a last-minute poll to see who felt comfortable with in-person or remote participation in High Holiday services. This hybrid approach is the result of your input. Here we are. The bigger point is that SHS remains a vital part of your life. You all support SHS with your time, insights, love, and care so we may thrive as a vibrant Jewish community.

We are resilient. We will continue to thoughtfully respond to a changing COVID environment. We will also, with clear intentions, move forward in alignment with our values.

First, let us recognize and honor the SHS students and their families who graciously and courageously adapted their B'nei Mitzvah because of COVID this past year:

- Emma Salzman
- Luca Bahuriak
- Sammy Marion
- Margot Englander
- Samantha Goldwert
- Stella Wolson
- Luke Makuen
- Charlotte Rotter
- Jared Eizen
- Ezra Goldenberg
- Hannah Davidson

I remind each B'nei Mitzvah that “**SHS is your home.** We are here for you. As your life unfolds, remember to come back to your SHS home as your life unfolds. Make it a part of your life for the long term.”

**A. Membership and Communications**

Our membership has grown from 295 households last year to 301. With the improved facilities and a return to in-person activities, we expect this to continue to grow.

Thank you to Robin Feinberg and her mighty crew, who make Shabbat greeting calls to members. Sometimes, a kind phone call can foster connection on unimagined levels. Thank you to Judy Lalli and the Membership Committee as well as Sahar Oz, Rabbi Kamesar, and Hazzan Jessi, who do a remarkable job cultivating new and sustaining existing members.

**B. Religious Observance and Services During COVID**

*How many meetings does it take to safely return to in-person services during a pandemic?* Not sure, let's schedule a meeting to discuss...

In the spring and summer, we thoughtfully and incrementally returned to a mix of in-person services while maintaining remote access via Zoom. We upgraded our audio-visual equipment. Clergy, staff, and the tech crew led, by Bob Blackberg, enhanced the Zoom experience with a "we learn as we go approach." This venture is the result of close coordination among clergy, staff, and our Religion Committee, Building and Security Committee, and Education Committees. Let us recognize and express our appreciation to:

- Rabbi Nathan Kamesar, Hazzan Jessi Roemer, and Sahar Oz for managing this with thoughtfulness, urgency, and grace;
- Neil Cohen is a mensch! When I grow up, I want to be as proficient and nimble in chanting Torah and Haftarah as Neil. He is our rock;
- Marc Schwartz, Terry Novick, and Bob Blackberg and the Religion Committee and volunteers who help us prepare for High Holiday and ongoing services;
- This includes all previously mentioned, and Barbara Spector, who served and continue to serve as our minyan leaders throughout the pandemic;
- Libby Cone and Steve and Wendy Greenspan for their leadership with Torah study and POWER;
- Joanna and Micah Hart, who organize the vibrant Young Families Group. This is how young kids and parents deepen their bonds to SHS and their Jewish identities.

***Hey, does anyone remember TGISHabbat?*** It will return, and SOON!

**C. Social Action and Community**

If you believe the pandemic is a metaphor for something deeper, than please get involved with our Social Action Committee. Our goal is to cultivate opportunities to better understand each other and reaffirm a shared commitment to support values and institutions that promote a safer, more civil, just, and prosperous society across our rich diversity of backgrounds and orientations. *Thank you* to:

- Bob Kaufman and Laurie Krivo for their leadership with the Food Insecurity Initiative and voter registration;
- Julie Wilson, Deb Stewart, and Ami Fisher for their leadership with God's Unfinished Business, which makes calls, prepares meals, and visits those battling illness. This is one powerful way to deepen your connection with other members and make new friends;
- Thank you to Nancy Morgenstern and Lisa Eizen for sustaining Triple Chai as well.

*I hereby commission Judy Lalli* to re-group the Mighty SHS Players for a new dinner theatre production this spring... or summer. Check the *Kesher* for audition dates.

**D. Education and Programming**

With the completion of the Paula Kline Learning Center, we were able to grow from three Playschool classes serving 43 children to five serving 58 children in the 2021-2022 school year, including a new class for toddlers as young as 18 months old and a second class for 3-4 year-olds. We plan to add a 6<sup>th</sup> class to start in June 2022. Over half of our Playschool families are also synagogue members.

Our new three-story learning center and nearly 1,000 square foot rear yard have made a monumental impact on our ability to serve Playschool, Hebrew School, and Adult Education.

We are excited to welcome back our Hebrew School students for in-person learning with masks, primarily outdoors in our various tents in the rear yard and on Lawrence Court, with indoor learning resuming as vaccinations become available for children across younger ages.

This year, we have launched the Immersive Shabbat Hebrew School experience, moving the weekend day of Hebrew School from Sunday to Saturday. Now with, the Paula Kline Learning Center, we have the space to do this. As part of the Shabbat school day, we will bring together our students, their parents, and our congregants across generations in the Sanctuary. Very cool!

Thank you to Lilli Klotz Foster, Assistant Director of Education for Playschool, and Mike Roe, Assistant Director of Education for Hebrew School, and their teams of teachers, for successfully guiding our schools through such a challenging and unpredictable year with diligence, sensitivity, and passion for our schools and synagogue.

#### **E. COVID-19 Risk Mitigation and Safety Committee**

The SHS COVID-19 Risk Mitigation and Safety Committee helps our staff, clergy, and Board understand the risks and opportunities to mitigate such risks as we navigate the pandemic while continuing to be a full-service synagogue. SHS follows COVID risk mitigation guidelines provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the City of Philadelphia. Executive Director Sahar Oz, the Playschool staff, and our custodial team have done a remarkable job of messaging and practicing COVID health and safety guidelines. Parents and caregivers, and our sweet children, have followed the protocols. We are applying the lessons we learned from that experience to the next level of return to in-person activities with services and Hebrew School. So far, so good.

Thank you to COVID-19 Risk Mitigation and Safety Committee members Jerry Faich, Dan Feinberg, Shara Epstein, Libby Cone, Joanna Hart, Liz Heller, Rachel Cohen, Rebecca Fishman, Marc Schwartz, Neil Cohen, and Michael Yudell, for your insight, cooperation, and flexibility as we navigate this journey. The dedication and wisdom of this committee along with active participation of staff, clergy, Board, parents, and congregants has been indispensable to our successful operations and growth throughout the pandemic.

#### **F. Finances**

Thank you, all who contributed to the Caring Kehillah Fund. It helped, big time!

The combination of the Caring Kehillah Fund, two cash infusions from the SBA Paycheck Protection Program, a modest increase in dues, and fierce cost cutting from our Finance Committee, staff, and clergy resulted in a balanced budget. Thank you to our Treasurer, Brian Mono, and the members of the Finance Committee, as well as Rabbi Kamesar, Sahar Oz, and Rhonda Bello, who are vital to the safe and sound management of SHS finances.

Membership dues, Playschool tuition, and annual giving are the drivers to keep SHS on a sound financial footing. We are grateful that all of you continue to support the SHS community. We continue to honor your investment by serving as thoughtful stewards of synagogue finances.

#### **G. Facilities**

*So how do you like coming to services now?* Go walk around and check it out!

We completed construction of the Paula Kline Learning Center and improvements to our historic synagogue building generally on budget. *Thank you to all Capital Campaign donors who have made and/or continue to make payments on their pledges.* Thank you, Tom Kline,

and all who made donations with naming honors. Together, we moved a mountain and positioned SHS for success for generations to come. *Kol hakavod!*

Thank you to the members of the SHS Construction Oversight Committee: Jonathan Weiss, David Ladov, Carter Reich, Rafi Licht, Terry Graboyes, Jerry Roller, Michael Davidson, Ric Hayman, Alan Casnoff, Sahar Oz, Rabbi Kamesar, and Hazzan Jessi.

Every Wednesday, this group of architects, lawyers, a contractor, and a developer have met, reviewed, growled, discussed, and worked together to keep construction moving forward. They are our stewards to make sure your donated funds are spent in a safe and sound manner according to our plans. A special thank you to Joe Winchester of The Sullivan Company. He has served as an intrepid construction manager, a mensch, and an honorary member of the SHS community.

The Committee continues to meet to finalize furnishings and final touches. Carter Reich is the Chair of the regrouped Building and Security Committee, tackling maintenance, a new vision for the kitchen, and the sustainability initiative.

Thank you to the Honors Committee who applied their creativity to develop a design motif for the Donor Wall and individual naming honors that aligns with our values and celebrates the generosity of our membership. We look forward to sharing this with you soon.

When it is safe, we will have a proper dedication and celebration of the Paula Kline Learning Center and the related improvements to SHS.

#### **H. Board and Staff**

Thank you to our Office Administrator, Leanne Bendetti, and Staff Accountant, Rhonda Bello, and our entire custodial team. Thank you as well to our B'nei Mitzvah Tutor, Debbie Jaffe.

A deep heartfelt thanks to our thriving newish generation of leaders: Rabbi Kamesar, Executive Director Sahar Oz, and Hazzan Jessi Roemer! With the vaccines, we thought we had a smooth flight path toward return to full and safe in-person activities. Not so. Delta dominates, for now. Each of them has made deep and meaningful contributions to help us retain the vital aspects of our shared Jewish communal life at SHS. They have done so with thoughtfulness, stamina, urgency, and grace. Please take a moment to thank them for their service.

Thank you to the members of the Executive Committee and the Board of Directors! Carmen Hayman, Neil Cohen, Brian Mono, Micah Hart, and Harry Oxman. Sara Schwartz Chrismer, David Levine, Lisa Eizen, Rafi Licht, Robin Feinberg, Dawn Mechanic-Hamilton, Ami Fisher, Wendy Greenspan, Nancy Morgenstern, Carter Reich, David Ladov, Elliot Landes, Jared Susco, and Anna Weiner.

Thank you to Nancy Morgenstern, Josh Wolson, Natalie Lesser, David Ladov, and Carmen Hayman for updating our Bylaws and Board Manual. David Ladov helps the Board avoid quicksand, pinch points, and rabbit holes. He keeps us moving forward. Harry Oxman transitioned with grace to serve as a most active Past President. He is a Greek Chorus of Conscience, reminding us to push forward as we learn to live with COVID. Finally, a big shout-out of appreciation to Carmen Hayman, serving as the most thoughtful and caring of Vice Presidents in the history of SHS.



A few months ago, at a coffee shop in Ventnor, I bumped into two SHS parents who recently celebrated B'nei Mitzvah for their children. They expressed warm appreciation for how our clergy, staff, and congregation supported and celebrated their families, even with COVID challenges. I then said to both moms, "Get ready, you are on deck for leadership." They looked at me a bit surprised, paused, and agreed. "Ok. Yeah. We get it. Our time is coming." *L'dor vador* continues.

As we embark on the new year of 5782, Society Hill Synagogue is **resilient**. COVID forced us to make changes to how we convene Jewish communal life, but it will not stop us from living in alignment with our values. We may be a bit weary, but we are here, together participating in the Days of Awe, our tradition of reflection, repentance, and renewal, as a vibrant congregation. Let us be grateful and even a bit joyful.

It is my hope that soon we can safely meet in person to celebrate the dedication of the Paula Kline Learning Center and the new Donor Wall; and celebrate the service and love of Rabbi Avi Winokur, Rebbetzin Susan Berman, and son Rafi, *and* convene the installation of our newish Rabbi Nathan Kamesar, Rebbetzin Caroline, and Miss Lila with all appropriate recognition and welcome.

Author Sherri Mandell says: "**Resilience is not about overcoming, but about becoming.**"

On behalf of the Board of Directors, clergy, and staff of SHS, *g'mar hatimah tovah!*  
May you and your families be inscribed in the Book of Life for a healthy, prosperous, and joyful new year! Thank you.