

Dear Shearith Friends:

Over the last month, our staff and lay leadership have explored numerous scenarios for the upcoming High Holy Days and, due to COVID 19 concerns and precautions, we have made the difficult but prudent decision that we will not gather as a community inside our sanctuaries this year, but rather offer a combination of virtual, in home, and socially distanced outdoor prayer and ritual experiences. We are saddened we will not spend the holiest days of the year together in our beautiful sanctuaries, but we are already hard at work at creating an unforgettable series of services and events that will provide all of us with the spiritual sustenance we need at this difficult time.

Please know, this decision did not come about lightly. Once we realized that “business as usual” of gathering thousands of people in our building and at Beit Aryeh was not a viable option, we looked at a number of hybrid options combining both in-person and virtual experiences. Each of these scenarios, at best, presented major logistical challenges and, quite simply, could place the health of our members at risk. After vetting each of these options in great detail, it became apparent to our leadership that we wanted to enhance inclusivity rather than discourage certain members of our congregation’s demographics. *The Klei Kodesh, Officers, Executive Committee, and Board of Trustees have all unanimously agreed that this is the best decision for our congregation, and one that is fully aligned with our shul’s Core Values in their emphasis on inclusivity.*

In making this decision now, three months in advance of the High Holy Days, it provides us the needed time to create different sets of spiritual and educational experiences for each of our various demographic groups that would be of the highest professional and creative quality. For each element of our High Holy Day programming, whether it be the Aaron/Kaplan style service (with Cantor and choir), the Beck/Beit Aryeh style service (no Cantor and choir), the Family Center services/programs, or the student (WFRS/Day School/High School) services and programs, it will require extensive re-imagining and hundreds of hours of staff time to plan and execute. However, we do not plan on doing this alone, as we need your partnership and investment in this process. Your voices, insights, and your well-being are the most important factors in any decision we make, and that is why we want to hear from you, our congregation, as we seek your assistance in this creative and innovative enterprise. Beginning next week, and continuing over the next couple of weeks, we will be holding focus groups via Zoom for each of our four aforementioned service groups. We invite you to register to participate in a focus group for a service/program you typically attend or the type of service you plan to participate in for this upcoming High Holy Days. Each focus group will be facilitated by a team of our Klei Kodesh, staff and lay leaders who will ask you to provide valuable input about what you personally find to be the most meaningful and impactful moments of the High Holy Day experience. Additionally, during these focus group meetings, we will share with you some of the exciting ideas that we have already begun to explore, including:

- providing you with a High Holy Day box, filled with ritual objects and projects to transform your homes into sacred spaces for prayer and reflection
- giving you an opportunity to sign up, as a family, to come into our sanctuaries to offer prayers before the Ark
- gathering in a socially distanced way to hear the sacred call of the Shofar
- time to greet both familiar and new faces before and after virtual prayer experiences
- honoring and remembering those we have lost over the past year and those we mourn every year during the holidays
- ways to reflect as a community on the most significant moments of 5780

Please use the links below to sign up for one or more focus groups and join us as we begin this journey to bring a sacred, solemn, joyous, reflective, and communal experience to life in a way none of us have ever before experienced.

Over the summer we will continue to communicate with you regularly as specific plans take shape as well as sending you a High Holy Day packet. In the High Holy Day packet you will be provided all of the information you will need on how to sign up for the various service/program options using a unique log-in which will be required for each service/program. Additional log-in slots will be available for purchase, as if you were purchasing additional High Holy Day seats, if needed. In the meantime, we thank you and ask for your patience and understanding as we continue to work on the many details and logistics involved in this process.

One year ago no one would have predicted we would be in this position and hopefully one year from now we will be preparing for High Holy Days 5782/2021 as normal. Until then, we are challenged as a community to transcend the darkness of this contemporary plague of COVID-19 and create a new and special sense of *kedusha*, holiness, over these upcoming High Holy Days. We hope to bring this difficult year of 5780 to a close and illuminate the path forward into a year 5781 filled with healing, rebuilding, and renewal. As we say at the end of the reading of each book of the Torah, “*chazak, chazak, v’nithazek*”—“be strong, be strong, and we will collectively be strengthened”. We will get through this *b’yachad*—together.

B’Shalom,

Shirley Davidoff
President

Ari Sunshine
Senior Rabbi