

Reinventing Synagogue Life?

We need your help...and the first step might be in reading this long message (sorry).

Over these last many weeks, the CSZ clergy, volunteer and professional leadership and staff began addressing the myriad processes for reconceiving life in “exile” from our building, including and especially focusing on member care and support. Simchas were postponed and mourning rituals reconceived, while live and recorded phone calls took place by the thousands along with countless Facebook posts and Facebook Live experiences, Instagram posts and Twitter tweets. Minyan and adult education opportunities went on-line and Religious School, Shabbat and YomTov services followed quickly thereafter.

All these worship experiences were and are conducted now with augmented ritual practice. They do not look or feel quite the same as they did in the “good old days.” Many of the decisions leading to these changes were made in the name of *sha-at hadachak* (the halachic category for extraordinary times in which normal Jewish practice cannot be performed), presuming that this period of readjustment would be finite.

We are now beginning to discover that, though some of the restrictions on physical distancing will soon phase out or at least relax a touch, many of our members will not rush to return quickly to the building and our leadership is prudently in no hurry to re-open the doors. Saving lives comes first. Further, even in the event that life returns to some sense of what-was, we anticipate the likelihood that another stay-at-home order will be issued, though we do not know when or for how long. And only now are we beginning to realize that our world may be forever changed, requiring at times small and at other times a dramatic reconceiving of Jewish life – or at least synagogue life – in America in the 21st century.

Out of Crisis, Clarity and Innovation

This will not be the first reinvention of Jewish life. When our ancestors were exiled to Egypt in their day, and to Babylonia in their day, and to Rome (and then throughout Europe) in their day, they needed to reinvent Jewish life. When our people returned to the Land of Israel – in the days of Joshua, in the days of Ezra,

and in the days of the *chaluztim* (early Zionist pioneers) – they needed to reinvent again Jewish life. Each location and each era brought new challenges and new opportunities which demanded at times evolutionary change and at other times, revolutionary change. Here and now, it is our turn.

The efforts we as CSZ leaders make will, at all times, maintain the highest commitment to serving God through Judaism and to strengthening the Jewish people. In commanding us to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, God set before us the lifelong pursuits of faith, peoplehood, and justice.

Prayer, learning and acts of loving-kindness (Pirkei Avot 1:2), as well as the lifecycle events that mark life's transitional moments, are the tools that Judaism has provided and must continue to provide to the Jewish People to confront the profound, eternal challenges of the human condition, including the confrontation with all forms of loss; the realization of that which we can and cannot control about our lives; the existence of suffering and inequality; and existential loneliness.

As the prophet Micah reminds us (6:8), "What is it that God demands of us? Only to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with the LORD."

Our Mission Remains Clear and Unchanged

In addition, we will pursue this reconceptualization of synagogue life utilizing the same values that Congregation Shaarey Zedek has embraced for its more than a century-and-a-half of existence and that distinguish it as a unique community in Metro Detroit and in the world: joy; wisdom; justice; observance of ritual tradition, especially on Shabbat and the holidays; innovation for the sake of inclusion; kindness; warmth; and humor. As Conservative Jews, we honor the notion that process matters: *halachah* (Jewish Law) is designed to be simultaneously both an anchor and a pathway forward.

We will seek to offer two defining elements which make CSZ unique from other synagogue communities: performative excellence that uplifts and engages, and the personal *heimishness* (warmth, intimacy) that makes each person in our community feel valued. We will seek to find the appropriate balance between formality and informality, humor and reverence, wisdom and lightheartedness, as well as the wants and needs of the oldest and the youngest among us. We are an

intergenerational family and we must continue to honor each other in that way, seeking to hear and to understand different points of view offered in the name of pursuing an “authentic” Judaism for the modern-age.

Of course, while even the conversation about change can bring with it a sense of sadness at missing “what was,” crisis can also bring with it clarity of purpose. Hope has been and must continue to be a central Jewish value and so we must be emboldened to find, discard and replace that which may have negatively affected synagogue life but continued through inertia and fear of change. Then, when a crisis brings clarity of purpose, it can lead us to positive change as well. We will try new ideas; sometimes we will fail and often we will succeed. And we will do it together.

We Need Your Help

Here, though, is where we need your help. Participate: though “attending services” in front of the computer (or for those who can, the television) is unusual, try it. Though some of these technology platforms, such as Zoom or Facebook, might be new or intimidating to you, try them. Though you may not have otherwise attended some of our experiences in the past – adult education, concerts, social gatherings, and yes, services – give them a try. Then, please let us know what you think: that which you like and ideas for how to improve. And if you need help with tech support to access these experiences, call the synagogue phone number: 248.357.5544.

Indeed, in the absence of a physical minyan, our services are now different (though Mourners Kaddish is still being recited). We are making unique efforts to build community and we are innovating on-line lifecycle experiences. We are also seeking new modalities by which to perform acts of loving-kindness for each other and for those around our community in need.

We anticipate in the short-run that even when we return to our building, many of these on-line experiences will continue as a complement to our in-person gatherings. I invite you to journey with us into this new era as we walk (virtually) arm-in-arm, together. We value your membership in the Congregation Shaarey Zedek family. You are important to your CSZ family, to the Detroit Jewish community, to the Jewish People, and to me. Your membership matters.

Of course, at any point, if you need assistance of any kind, please let any one of us in the clergy know. We are still only a phone call away. We want to help.

“Hope” Is a Jewish Value

I am reminded of the story of Rabbi Akiva (BT Makkot 24b) who comforted his friends with laughter after the destruction of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. When challenged as to how he could laugh in such a situation, Rabbi Akiva responded by reminding them that the prophecy for the coming of God’s kingdom cannot be achieved while status quo exists: in other words, the challenges of “change” are often the birth pangs for a new and blessed beginning. Like Rabbi Akiva and also like Theodor Herzl before us, our hope is not lost and we believe in a bright future for our congregation, our people, and our world.

I am grateful to the Officers, Board of Trustees, and to our Executive Director and professional staff, and especially to my Clergy brothers, for their vision, hard work and support. May we all know good health and long life as we seek every day to serve God, to honor our ancestors, to perpetuate authentic Conservative Jewish living, and to lead lives of gratitude, obligation, and joy.

Rebecca, our almost-bar-mitzvah-boy Caleb and our almost ten-year-old Ayal join me in wishing you Shabbat shalom.

Rabbi Aaron Starr
April 23, 2020