

THE OXFORD SYNAGOGUE-CENTRE

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MONTHLY NEWSLETTER

October 2020

Tishrei/Cheshvan 5781

SHABBAT TIMES

🔊 Parasha - 🕯 Candle Lighting

🕯 Shabbat ends (Maariv & Havdalah)

For service times see page 2 & 4

9 & 10 October – 22 Tishrei

Shemini Atzeret

🕯 5:53 – 🕯 6:44

16 & 17 October – 29 Tishrei

🔊 Bereshit

🕯 5:57 – 🕯 6:48

23 & 24 October – 6 Cheshvan

🔊 Noach

🕯 6:01 – 🕯 6:52

30 & 31 October – 13 Cheshvan

🔊 Lech Lecha

🕯 6:05 – 🕯 6:57

6 & 7 November – 20 Cheshvan

🔊 Vayeira

🕯 6:10 – 🕯 7:02

RABBI'S MESSAGE

A FACE SHIELD WITH A (BLURRED) VIEW

I look down at my community from the pulpit. The angle of the visor covering my face distorts my vision and everything looks a bit like a blur. Or is it my eyes, misted over with emotion, that are making it difficult to see?

It is Rosh Hashanah and Shul is fuller than it has been in months. A month earlier we resumed services, using our small sanctuary, with a maximum capacity of around 25. This is the first time we

are using our main synagogue. But the law stipulates no more than 50 worshippers and our full capacity is over 1500; the empty seats outnumber the occupied ones by about 30-1.

Are they tears of sadness? Perhaps? But I am comforted by the fact that the sounds of prayer are once again filling the holy space; that pleas for Divine Intervention and songs of praise are heard where none have been for months.

Are they tears of happiness? Most definitely, as I begin to preach in our beloved shul, watching attentive faces (or should that be eyes?) turn to listen to the words of my sermon.

Are they tears of worry? I cannot deny they are. Our community has been seriously threatened by SARS-Cov2. And Oxford, as a Shul, is not short of co-morbidities: age (the Synagogue was founded in 1943 and many of our members were already born by then); demographics; the shtiebelization of Johannesburg... It is a fair concern that COVID-19 could deal the congregation a serious blow.

Are they tears of gratitude? Absolutely! Members and visitors alike have made Oxford their destination of choice these High Holidays. They will hopefully have their religious and spiritual needs met and will share their positive experience with friends and family.

Ten days later it is Yom Kippur and I am standing in the same spot, looking across at the community. The congregation is now larger—since the New Year celebration the country has moved to Level 1 and restrictions have been relaxed. But my guess is that it is not just a change in lockdown regulations that has led to the increased numbers. It is also the inexorable pull of synagogue, tugging at the core of a Jewish soul.

The dreaded face shield is there, once again obscuring my clear vision. And, once again, my eyes are welling up. But I can name those tears: they are tears of hope. Moments before I had excused myself (Thank G-d) during the Yizkor service, and joined children running and young people milling near the Shul's entrance (okay, observing social distance

protocols). A day earlier, I had launched our annual Yom Kippur Appeal—not, as I normally do, in my Kol Nidrei sermon but rather through a personal WhatsApp video to the community—and by the time Yom Tov had started the response was already most encouraging.

I look across at the vast sanctuary and picture, in my mind's eye, Yom Kippur 5782/2021. Fewer empty pews. Unmasked worshippers. No dreaded, distorting face shield. Still moist eyes but this time filled with only one kind of teardrops: thanks. Thanks for Oxford surviving Corona. Thanks to Hashem for having seen us through. And thanks to the community for their loyalty, ongoing generosity and unending support.

And tears of joy start to stream down my face.

Gmar Chatima Tova

Rabbi Yossi Chaikin

SERVICE TIMES

All services are currently by prior booking only. Phone the office for details and to book.

SHACHARIT (A.M.)

Sunday & Public Holidays 8:00

Monday to Friday 7:15

06/10, 07/10 & 08/10: 7:00 (Chol Hamoed)

09/10: 6:45 (Hoshana Rabba)

19/10: 7:00 (Rosh Chodesh)

Shabbat & Festivals 9:30

MINCHA AND MAARIV (P.M.)

Sunday to Friday 6:00

Shabbat 5:45

FROM THE REBBETZIN

When Bev gifted me an amaryllis in a pot, she told me that an amaryllis is like a good friend, it never lets you down. This was about 15 or 20 years ago and the amaryllis has never let me down. Every year I look at it a month or so before Rosh Hashanah and think, "not this year" but it always pulls through, and by sukkot it Sports a few beautiful flowers.

This year has been no different. The Amaryllis is beautiful once again.

Flowers and plants are quite amazing. I often wonder why it is that we love a bunch of flowers or a beautiful plant. I have thought a lot about what it does for me. Is it the beauty? Or the fragrance? Or just the message of love and care that it brings? It is all of those.

But for me, the strongest message that comes along is that of resilience. Year after year, my amaryllis wakes up and blooms. It doesn't worry whether or not people will see it and appreciate it. It simply does what it needs to do.

This year, the Rose Garden in London was filled with 80 different species of roses that no one came to see because of lockdown restrictions. Even the shul garden is looking beautiful, despite the few people who are coming to see it.

In Shir Hashirim King Solomon refers to us as a rose. He enumerates the different kinds of roses. The ones that need tender care and nurturing, the others that pop up from under the rocks and in the crevices of the mountains. He speaks of the

sharp thorns around the roses that both protect the flowers and threaten to rip up the surrounding bushes.

The last few months we have been those plants. Each in our own surroundings, we have to choose to either wither away, or to keep on blooming, despite the world around us.

Please G-d this year will bring us the relief we are all praying for. Meanwhile let us be as beautiful as ever.

Have a good month

Rivky

DVAR TORAH

Amid rising anti-Semitism, the People of the Book rejoice with the Torah.

*By Jeff Jacoby-- October 17, 2019
(bosttonglobe.com)*

On Oct. 14, 1663, the English civil servant Samuel Pepys decided to pay a visit to the Jewish synagogue in London's Creechurch Lane. Jews were a novelty in Restoration England. They had been expelled from the realm nearly four centuries earlier, and it was only in 1656 that they had once again been permitted to live on English soil. Pepys, knowing nothing of Judaism, wasn't aware that his excursion happened to coincide with the most euphoric day in the Jewish calendar – the festival of Simchat Torah, or "rejoicing with the Law."

What he saw bewildered him.

"But, Lord!" he recorded in his famous diary, "to see the disorder, laughing, sporting, and no attention, but confusion in all their service, more like brutes than people knowing the true God, would make a man

forswear ever seeing them more and indeed I never did see so much, or could have imagined there had been any religion in the whole world so absurdly performed as this.”

What Pepys had unwittingly walked in on was a celebration of the oldest love affair in history – the infatuation of the Jewish people with the Torah. In Judaism, there are no saints to adore or icons to venerate. Rather, there is a book to study and teach: the scroll of the law, the Torah given by God to Moses and the Israelites at Mount Sinai, the essential text with which Jews have engaged intellectually and been sustained emotionally for more than three millennia.

That book is “our most cherished possession,” writes Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the noted British theologian and member of the House of Lords. “We stand in its presence as if it were a king. We dance with it as if it were a bride. We kiss it as if it were a friend. If, God forbid, one is damaged beyond repair, we mourn it as if it were a member of the family.” If a Torah scroll is accidentally dropped, everyone who witnesses it is expected to fast in penance. When a synagogue is burned, whether by accident or by arson, there is an immediate, palpable anxiety to know whether the Torah scrolls were saved or lost.

Simchat Torah occurs on the last day of a three-week sequence of fall holidays. It follows Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Sukkot. Unlike those holidays, however, Simchat Torah is not biblically

ordained. It was not imposed by religious authorities from the top down, but grew organically from the bottom up. Its roots reach back 15 centuries to the ancient Jewish community of Babylonia, which formalized the practice of publicly reading the entire Torah – from the beginning of Genesis to the end of Deuteronomy – over the course of a year. The completion of the annual cycle became an occasion of joy, marked by singing and dancing around the synagogue with the Torah scrolls. Adults and children alike take part in the festivities. And as soon as the final verses of Deuteronomy are chanted from the end of one scroll, another is opened and the first chapter of Genesis is chanted: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” The Jewish engagement with the Torah never ends; as soon as we finish, we start again.

The “people of the book,” Jews are called. The phrase comes from the Koran, where it appears 31 times – an apt emphasis, for no nation has ever been as closely identified with a book as have Jews with the Torah. Sacks notes that by the time Simchat Torah had spread throughout the Jewish world, Jews had lost everything that would seem indispensable to national survival: land, sovereignty, political freedom, a military. Yet they still had their book to study and teach and rejoice with. Somehow, that was enough to keep Jewish peoplehood alive.

Three centuries after Pepys made his diary entry, another renowned writer encountered Jews celebrating Simchat

Torah. In 1965, Elie Wiesel traveled to the Soviet Union, where Jews lived in fear and religion was repressed. And yet, he discovered, on one day of the year – Simchat Torah – throngs of young Jews streamed to the remaining synagogue in Moscow, bravely defying the KGB to openly celebrate their Jewishness.

Wiesel was astonished.

“Where did they all come from?” he marveled. “Who told them that tens of thousands of boys and girls would gather here to sing and dance and rejoice in the joy of the Torah? They who barely know each other and know even less of Judaism – how did they know that? I spent hours among them, dazed and excited, agitated by an ancient dream.” It was a harbinger of the coming struggle to save Soviet Jewry, which would eventually crack open the Iron Curtain and change the trajectory of the Cold War.

Simchat Torah returns this week amid a rising global tide of anti-Semitism. One year after the Tree of Life massacre in Pittsburgh, and just days after the Yom Kippur shooting in Halle, Germany, Jews increasingly require police protection when they gather in prayer.

Nevertheless, synagogues the world over will be filled anew with the same euphoria that so startled Pepys and amazed Wiesel. The People of the Book will once again rejoice with the Law, dancing with the scrolls that have been, for 33 centuries, the ultimate source of their identity and strength..

MAZALTOV

We wish a hearty Mazal Tov to:

BIRTHS

- Annette Wolk on the birth of a great granddaughter in Sydney.
- Danny & Rolene Lamm and to Annette Wolk on the birth of twin grandsons and great grandsons in Melbourne.
- Phillip & Aileen Shifren on the birth of a granddaughter in California.
- Solly Burgin on the birth of a great granddaughter in Johannesburg.

ENGAGEMENTS

- Shmuelly & Lisa Nudelman and to Blima Nudelman on the engagement of their son and grandson Elchanan to Tali Nathan.

MARRIAGES

- Philip & Rilla Jacobson and to Marke & Jeanette Markovitz on the marriage of their grandson Dovi Markovitz to Gabi Bondi In Johannesburg on Wednesday 30th September.

BIRTHDAYS

- Phillip Altbeker on the occasion of his 85th birthday on the 6th October.

- Sam Benard on the occasion of his 86th birthday on the 27th October.

REFUAH SHLEIMA

We wish a Speedy recovery to:

- Ann Benard

**BEREAVEMENTS**

We wish long life to

- The family of the late Sylvia Magid on her death on the first day of Rosh Hashanah.
- Della Berkowitz on the death of her brother Alex Maraney.

May Hashem comfort them and their families among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem and grant them long life.

