



High Holidays 2021/5782

Jeff Jacob – Kol Nidre Appeal: SURVIVE AND ADVANCE

April 4th, 1983. Albuquerque, New Mexico. A basketball arena affectionately known as The Pit. The NCAA college basketball tournament we know today as March Madness has reached the championship game. The consensus top-ranked team in the country, the Houston Cougars led by two future NBA Hall of Fame players in Hakeem Olajuwon and Clyde Drexler, have a date with a North Carolina State Wolfpack team that finished the regular season unranked, starred no future Hall of Famers, and sported a 17-10 record--good, but hardly the record of a championship team. In fact, the Wolfpack, to have any chance of emerging as the last team standing at the end of the year, would have to win nine straight games against powerhouse competition. When asked at the start of the postseason how he thought his team COULD do it, Wolfpack coach Jimmy Valvano smiled with his famous toothy grin and said, "Survive and Advance". When a Dereck Whittenburg airball was caught by Lorenzo Charles and slammed into the basket just as time expired, NC State had pulled off the 54-52 upset of Houston, won its ninth straight game, five of them against top 10 ranked opponents, and was able to call itself champions. "Survive and Advance" had gone from a coach's soundbite to manifest in a team that had reached the pinnacle of the college basketball world.

As I look back on where we, Sutton Place Synagogue as a congregation and each of us as individuals, have been for the past eighteen months, the mantra "Survive and Advance" that drove that team entered my mind as pointedly relevant.

In my Appeal last year, I talked about SPS' successful pivot to a virtual world with daily minyanim, successful Shabbat services, religious and educational programming, and the delivery of a first-class High Holiday virtual experience where our sanctuary had more computers than people. I am grateful that people outnumber computers by a wide margin this year! I know that as I think about helping to lead this congregation during and through this pandemic, I have been forced to balance looking at the long term with making sure we get through each day. Striking that balance has, on a number of occasions, reminded me of Coach Valvano's response to a reporter: "Survive today so there is a tomorrow and advance that tomorrow more so than we did today". That's how I think to keep moving this congregation forward.

To paraphrase former Mayor Koch: "How we doin'?" Well, let's start with the basics. The fact that I am here delivering this Appeal this year and the fact that you are listening to me, either here in the sanctuary or virtually, points to a simple and obvious conclusion: We have survived! SPS is still here, and we are not going away! Does this mean we have not suffered losses, both personal and institutional? Of course, we all have in some way suffered losses. We have lost congregants and family members to COVID and other illnesses, membership initially decreased as families fled the City, our young ones had to modify what celebrating becoming a bar or bat mitzvah looked like, and we have all lost the ability to handshake or hug someone outside our regular pod. While those ARE losses, the fact that we are still here is something of which we should never lose sight. The very first prayer we say to start our day is Modeh Ani where we say to God "I am grateful to You, living, enduring King, for restoring my soul to me in compassion". In the times in which we have been living, this prayer carries more weight perhaps than ever before. This prayer coupled with the Shecheyanu we said together last night at Kol Nidre give thanks for and celebrate the gift of life for which we are all still blessed.

So, we have survived and progressively moved from "todays" to "tomorrows". What about the "advance" part? I am certain that on different levels we have advanced as individuals. Perhaps you have taken up a new hobby, read more than you used to, or learned a new skill. That constitutes "advancing" on the



individual level. However, I would like to take some time now to talk about how SPS as an institution has advanced over the past year.

- Let's start with you, the membership. I am often asked by those outside of SPS how our membership is holding up in the current environment. Well, I am happy to report that over fifty new member units have been added to our membership ranks since the early depths of the pandemic. This is a testament to many factors such as our incredible clergy, excellent education programming, and SPS' ability to face the challenges presented with a fortitude to meet people where they are and where they are comfortable meeting us.
- Speaking of our schools, our Kaplan Nursery School under the leadership of Lindsay Bennett and her dedicated staff and the guidance of the KNS Healthy Opening Committee comprised of Drs. Shari Pochapin, Arielle Kurzweil, Heather Curtis, and Sarah Barenbaum was able to remain open with in-person learning the entire school year. In part because of its demonstrated ability to navigate the environment in which we are living, KNS enrollment is up nearly fifty percent from last year. We have a way to go to get back to pre-pandemic levels, but we are advancing in that direction.
- Though our Jackson Religious School was not able to meet in person given the multiple pods of people involved, our school director, Alyssa Schwager, reimaged the curriculum and reached a new and higher level of engagement with our religious school population. Our teen Shabbat continued to involve more people, we saw more students participating and benefitting from our Summer Scholarship fund, and there were more people involved in our madrichim or advisory program and our Israel with Alyssa class.
- After 36 years with Cantor Emeritus Dov Keren as the religious and spiritual voice of SPS, we celebrated the installation of Cantor Kanfer with over 250 member families joining our virtual celebration. Cantor Kanfer has both embraced this community and been embraced by this community, quickly building a following among the entire spectrum of congregants from our very youngest to our most senior. He led an equally diverse adult b'nai mitzvah class this past spring as we had ten women become bat mitzvah in a beautiful and moving service.
- SPS advanced the important and sensitive discussion around racial equity and social justice in this country on the heels of the relevant current events of the past year. There was a 21-week communal learning series in which lively, diverse, and insightful perspectives were shared by and among our congregant participants.
- SPS launched strategic planning 2.0 this past year. The first effort over seven years ago, among other things:
 - led to changes in our governance structure and how SPS thinks about organizing around pillars the multitude of activities that happen under our roof,
 - generated the renovation effort of our sanctuary, an effort the planning and capital raising for which I expect to resume this year, and
 - provided the groundwork for innovative and new programming.
- This second and current planning effort led by Barbara Zinn Moore and Josh Liederman is centered around: Leadership Development, Membership Growth and Cultivation, Marketing & Branding, Facilities and Operations, and "Big Ideas". We have task forces set up for each area and welcome your participation in this effort as we move forward this year with the development of a formal, actionable plan that will advance SPS for the next years to come.



As I have remained since the start of the pandemic, I am optimistic and confident that SPS is on the right trajectory and that it is prepared to emerge as THE destination for Jewish life in the growing and revitalized Midtown East neighborhood.

While SPS remains strong and is headed in the right direction on many fronts, there is still plenty of work to do to get there and there is plenty of support that is needed from each of us.

Let's start with these High Holidays. As I mentioned earlier, SPS is committed to meeting people where they are and where they are comfortable meeting us. The Board and the leadership of SPS could have taken a very conservative, "one size fits all" approach to bringing the holiday experience to you and gone all virtual like we did last year. Doing so would have been easier to plan and saved the synagogue money but would have deprived those for whom the in-person observance was an important exercise that they felt was possible this year. So, we have delivered a hybrid experience as some of you are in the sanctuary and some of you are in the comfort of your own home. There were unexpected costs for doing this as circumstances evolved over the summer that changed our plans from the budget contemplated and approved in June--costs for security AND the cost of a high-quality virtual production. Speaking of the high-quality production, I would like to take this opportunity to thank our fellow congregant, David Nussbaum, who once again this year lent his expertise and worked with our production vendor to modify the delivery of an all-virtual experience from last year to the hybrid experience of this year. Thank you, David! In addition, to the increased costs of delivering a full-service high holiday experience, we budgeted a full sanctuary and the corresponding revenue from seat ticket purchases that accompanies a full sanctuary. This did not materialize. And upon the recommendation of the SPS Healthy Opening Committee, led by Drs. Shari Pochapin, Ross Levine, and Michael Satlin, we added the requirement for rapid testing for COVID for attendees in the sanctuary, an additional cost the synagogue had to bear. Circumstances changed and we adapted and did what was right but doing so has had an adverse impact on the synagogue's finances.

So where do we turn to help support the synagogue? As you know, membership dues make up only a small fraction of the annual budget for SPS. While membership continues to grow, it is not yet back at the level it was before the pandemic. For those who have joined as members, we thank you and look forward to your active participation in our community. For those who may be with us today and are looking for a religious and spiritual home, we welcome you with open arms. While SPS has done what it can to reduce expenses and to manage its staffing structure, there is a limit to what expenses can be cut while still providing the programming and services necessary to operate a synagogue and to provide the level of programming to which we are accustomed. This leaves it to the generosity of you, our congregants, to help bridge the deficits that operating in the current environment have generated.

First, if you have already given to this year's Yom Kippur Appeal, on behalf of the Board and the congregation, I say "Thank You"--for your gift, for your generosity, for your demonstrated commitment to SPS, and for your willingness to set an example for those among us who have not yet made such a gift.

To those who have not yet given, I have outlined some of the many services and programs that SPS has delivered to you and for you over the past year and plans to in the coming year and into the future. Perhaps that is enough to induce you to give. If so, great and I say thank you to you as well. If not, let me make this appeal more directly to you.

Less than ten years after that magical night in Albuquerque, Coach Valvano was the recipient of the Arthur Ashe Foundation Courage Award at the ESPN Espy awards. Dying from cancer which would take his life less than two months later, Valvano delivered one of the most poignant speeches I have ever heard. I want to share one excerpt from his speech. He said there are three things you should try to do every day to live a full life. One is laugh. Two is think. And three is have your emotions moved to tears. He said, "You do that seven days a week, that's something special, that's a full life."



There are many outlets in our lives that can make us laugh, OR think, OR move us to tears. However, I will submit that the outlets that can do all three are much more limited and that SPS is one such place. Whether it is the programming or personal connections and friendships we each have made and can still make at SPS, SPS is a fun place to be—you can laugh. Attend a service, listen to a sermon, hear a speaker, participate in a program of Torah or other textual study—you can think. Celebrate a life cycle event, hear a moving prayer from the cantor, share in the ups and downs of the lives of people you meet at SPS—you can be moved to tears of both sorrow and joy. In short, SPS need not be a destination for just a few days throughout the year. It can be a part of your life and in the words of Coach Valvano is a place that can help YOU live a full life.

Everyone in this room and everyone at home wants to root for a winning team. We naturally embrace the thrill of a championship and seeing our teams win. I stand before you today confident in declaring that in the world of New York City synagogues, Sutton Place Synagogue has a championship team. We are blessed, and I do not use that term lightly, with a clergy team second to none. Rabbi Ain, besides delivering pastoral care to us with a deep sense of both interest and compassion, has done so much to raise the profile of SPS with her public appearances, engagement with the interfaith community, and her emergence as one of, if not THE, “go to” conservative rabbis for conversion in New York. Since her arrival ten years ago, she has made building community the core of what she does and while she is, in a good way, never satisfied, she has succeeded in shaping our community in ways that it had not been shaped before her arrival. Cantor Kanfer, about whom I spoke briefly earlier, has integrated himself into the very fabric of the SPS community and, with Rabbi Ain, is fully committed to continuing to build that community and to be there both as the voice of song and spirituality and as a true clergy partner to help meet the needs of the SPS family for years to come.

Our education programs from the nursery school through religious school and teen programming through adult and continuing education are also abundant and of the highest caliber. More importantly, these programs are reaching more people, particularly among our younger populations which will serve as the pipeline for future leadership and engagement at SPS and in the larger Jewish community.

Your professional staff works tirelessly behind the scenes to bring all of our programs to life for us with a level of effort and dedication that I have not often seen anywhere in my professional life. And supporting all of the above is your Board of Trustees. I have never worked with a more diverse, more dedicated, more involved group of leaders to help set the agenda with the professional staff of an organization. We experienced an influx of new members to the Board on July 1st and I could not be more excited to work with this group to help drive this congregation to heights never before seen.

When each of us determines where to give our precious financial resources, we look for winning organizations with winning teams and the makeup of champions in the area in which we are giving. Just as the NC State Wolfpack had a path of nine games it needed to follow to emerge as champions, I assure you that SPS has a path and all of the players necessary to follow its path to remain a championship caliber synagogue of choice. When you are giving to the religious component of your giving, please join the winning team and give to SPS. I am pleased to announce that 100% of the active membership of the Board of Trustees has already made a pledge to this year’s Yom Kippur Appeal. Think of it as insiders of a public company buying stock—it is a vote of confidence in the future of that company. Similarly, the confidence that this Board has shown in the future of SPS should give you the confidence to make your own pledge. I know the past year has been challenging for some on the professional or financial front. Trust me, I personally understand and I sympathize. But also keep in mind that many of us are still more fortunate than others and if there is anything that you can give, we appreciate every ounce of your generosity. Please give to the best of your abilities and then perhaps a little more. If you are part of the fortunate number who have benefitted financially, perhaps you are in a position to help SPS even more so than in years past. One of the few good things that has happened over the course of the last 18 months has been the return on the stock



market. If you are a beneficiary of that upswing, perhaps you are in a position to share in those gains. We can accept gifts in cash or securities.

It has been eighteen months, almost to the day, since we went into lockdown and started living our lives through this pandemic. Those have been a hard 18 months in so many ways. But as I stand before you talking about the number 18, I cannot but be reminded that 18 is the corresponding numeric value to the word "Chai" which ironically but at the same time given the state in which we are living, poetically, means life. In the summer correspondence sent to the membership about these High Holidays, I mentioned that we are starting the Chai Challenge where we are asking congregants who are willing and able to increase their High Holiday giving by 18%. That may seem ambitious but so too are our plans. We have already had dozens of donors across the spectrum of giving levels meet this Challenge and I invite you to do so as well. SPS has been there for you always but especially throughout the past 18 months to support your religious, spiritual, cultural, educational, and personal needs. All I am asking from you is for you to give back to the institution that has been there to help you, whether you realize it or not, to live as full a life as possible.

If you are seated in the sanctuary, there should be a donation card with your name on it. Please fold down the tab that corresponds to your pledge to this year's Appeal, put the card in the envelope provided and send it to the center aisle where it will be collected. If you are joining us virtually, there is a "Support SPS" button on the upper corner of the portal. Feel free to click that icon and follow the prompts to make your online donation. And, of course, mailing an old fashioned check to the office or calling the office and speaking with one of the staff will work as well. We are here to make your giving as easy as possible in a way that works for you.

As I conclude my remarks, I look forward to this year, 5782, as the year SPS makes tremendous strides towards a full recovery to where it was pre-pandemic in terms of membership, school enrollment, in-person activity, and full engagement of our congregation. We have been through a lot together as a community and I firmly believe it has strengthened us in ways that will help us in the future. May we advance from strength to strength! We conclude the service tonight with the invocation L'Shanah Ha'ba ah B'Yerushalyim- Next year in Jerusalem! I don't minimize what that prayer means but if I have one wish for us as a synagogue it is L'Shanah Ha'Ba ah B'225 East 51st Street where we are all together under one roof where we belong as that active, engaged, and thriving congregation that we are and continue to grow to be.

On behalf of my wife Andrea and daughter Rachel, I wish each of you and your families a Shana Tovah U'Metukah and K'tivah v'hatimah tovah - a Happy and Sweet Year filled with health, peace, good fortune, and true happiness. May you be inscribed and sealed in the Book of Life. And may we continue to survive and advance together as a community and live our lives as fully as possible. Shanah Tovah.