

Dear Friends,

A little over one year ago, on Friday, March 6, 2020, the Jewish Community Center of Northwest Jersey came together to observe Purim during our Shabbat Service. During that service, we had loads of fun, first with some “creative” praying, and then when we sat back to marvel at the talents of our Purim Players as they brought the joy and passion of Freddy Mercury and his bandmates to our classic survival story by retelling the *Megillah* through the music of Queen. Two days later, at Hebrew School on Sunday, March 8, our kids (kids of *all* ages, that is, since some of them were parents and grandparents themselves!) gathered in the Elaine Hirsch Simcha Room downstairs to celebrate with hamantaschen and song and crafts and carnival games (I remember one granddaughter in particular who had a particularly contagious laugh when she succeeded in throwing more than one wet sponge right into the face of her adoring grandfather . . .) What a fabulous morning that was!

Unfortunately, after having continued our revelry somewhat later into the afternoon than originally planned, by the time we got around to clean-up, everyone already had other places to be, so we decided to clean up the food, sweep the floor, and put away all the smaller items. The large items, such as the Sponge Throw Booth, would have to wait another week to be put away until next Purim.

Perhaps you may remember, though, that the words “coronavirus” and “covid-19” were just at the beginning stages of being introduced into our vocabulary at the time. Not that any of us had even an inkling of how devastating the new virus would turn out to be, but we did know at least that special care should be taken with regular handwashing. We knew also that at least for the time being, our “very huggy” congregation would have to settle for socially distanced “air hugs.” As the situation grew more and more concerning over the coming days, however, by the end of the week we had made the decision, “out of an abundance of caution,” to cancel Hebrew School the following Sunday.

And then, five days after that, we decided to gather for Shabbat prayers over Zoom for the first time. What a learning curve that was! And then, two days after *that*, we moved to Zoom for Sunday School, too. And now, almost a year later, here we are. Zoom remains our principal mode of communication, and somehow we’ve managed not only to survive, but actually thrive. Yes, we all look forward to the day when we will come together once again in person at 115 Youman’s Avenue – even if the hugging may have to wait even a bit longer than that – but until then, we have plenty on which to look back since last Purim and feel proud.

We’ve doubled the number of our Shabbat services, added a weekly Havdalah gathering, and participated in communal Passover and Rosh HaShanah seders. We’ve continued with our Reel Theology film series and learned about the Armenian Genocide in light of the Holocaust with six other small congregations from around the country. We’ve prayed with our friends from Mt. Pisgah AME Church, we’ve studied Torah amongst ourselves, and we’ve studied Torah with

members of Temple Emanuel in NYC. Most importantly, though, we've been there, even if only remotely, to support our JCNWJ family in times of challenge and times of joy. We've helped one another through the isolation, through sickness, through death, and through new life, too. In short, we at the Jewish Center of Northwest Jersey have survived the pandemic thus far as a loving community because we really don't know any other way. And we have every reason to be both grateful and proud.

And so now, almost a year later, with the Sponge Throw booth still frozen in time from last year, we find ourselves once again in the planning stages for Purim. Like everything we've done over the past year, Purim will not be the exact same as it's been in the past, because it cannot. Howie's face won't serve as target practice for his granddaughter's sponge toss. We won't all huddle around a downstairs table noshing on hamantaschen. And we won't be able to sit together in the sanctuary together enjoying this year's spiel. At the same time, though, also like everything we've managed to do over the past year, I promise, we will do our very best to bring the proper levels of excitement and honor to our celebration, because we at the Jewish Center of Northwest Jersey are nothing if we're not survivors, no less so than were our ancestors of Esther's day. Small but mighty is who we are. So please, do plan to join us on Friday, February 26, at 7:30 in the evening, for our Shabbat Purim Zoom celebration. The evening will begin with a festive Purim-related Shabbat service and then, during the regular sermon time, we'll all sit back to enjoy the world premier screening of "*The Shushan Bunch: A Retrospective of Purim Spiels Past*," brought to us by our very own Purim Players, under the able leadership of Debbie Apsel. The festivities will then continue on Sunday morning, February 28, during Hebrew School, with a jointly sponsored hamantaschen baking lesson taught by Suzi and Shira, representing both Sisterhood and Hebrew School.

We look forward to seeing everyone for Purim (and before then and after then, too!). In the meantime, stay safe, and I continue to pray for enough supply and personnel so that every one of us can be vaccinated soon,

*Rabbi Dubin*