Dear Chai members;

On behalf of the Board of Directors of the Neve Shalom Synagogue and the Jewish community in Suriname, I wish you and your families a Happy and kosher Passover!!

With the coronavirus still negatively impacting the lives of so many people globally, we hope and pray for the well being of you and your loved ones. Stay safe!

Before we begin reporting on our holiday celebrations since our last newsletter, we would like to THANK YOU for your generous support with the unexpected challenges that we reported in our last edition.

Preparing for Passover

As you already know, Passover in Suriname is a big challenge as we have to import our matzot and kosher wine from the USA. In order to reduce the expense, we normally order the products well in advance and ship it by sea to save on the transportation costs. This year, because of the global disruption in the supply chains, we realized that shipping by sea is too high of a risk for not getting the products on time. As a result, we decided to bring the matzot via air and ship the wine by sea as we still have enough kosher wine bottles from our Friday nights kiddush stock.

We were so glad to successfully receive the matzot two weeks before the Seder!!

The Mazot boxes have arrived from the airport on time

Last year was the first time that the community Seder was cancelled because of the Government restrictions on social gathering. We supplied every family with the matzot and kosher wine so they could celebrate it at home. This year we plan to celebrate it together as a community. No guests will be allowed, to keep it smaller and safer, and we will start the Seder at 5pm as a night curfew is in effect, starting at 8pm.
The economic crisis in Suriname is in its fifth year, with annual inflation above 50% and the Suriname government’s restriction on the use of foreign currencies making the importing of products for the Passover Seder a bigger challenge than ever.

Many thanks for the financial support of our Chai members who already donated to help us pay for the higher costs. If you wish to help, please contact me at: surjewicom@gmail.com or dingoson3@gmail.com. Any and every amount is a great help. Thank you so much for your generosity!

And now to our Chai news:

**Rosh Hashanah (September 18 –20, 2020)**

This year celebrating the High Holidays in Suriname, as for all Jewish communities, was a challenge. The restrictions on public gathering were changing almost daily. It was hard to plan as we didn’t know if it would be allowed and if yes, how many people could attend the services. In addition, three of our regular Torah readers (Moriyah and Yehudah Webster from New York and Loekie Robles from Aruba) who come every year to help run the services, were not allowed to come to the country. The load fell on our Chazan (Cantor) Shul Donk and Jacques Reeder, who could lead the service in Hebrew. Our Vice President, Lilly Duym came with an idea to divide part of the readings among the members, in Dutch. It turned out to be a winning formula and again, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur turned out to be a very special experience.

**Yom Kippur (September 27 – 28, 2020)**

As always, before Yom Kippur, the members gathered in the cemeteries to clean the graves and say prayers at the graves of their loved ones. It is such a beautiful tradition and we are so happy about how beautiful, well maintained and clean our cemeteries are. This is the time to thank Lilly again for her never ending energy, dedication and love to ensure that they are in such a great shape!
A Special Mitzvah for Yom Kippur

Because of the COVID 19 restrictions on high risk individuals, one of our members, who is in her 90’s and never missed participation in the high holidays, felt very sad that she would be missing the services and especially, hearing the shofar blowing. Lilly and Benjamin (our Shofar blower) decided to do something special for her. They drove to her house before Yom Kippur started, then standing behind her fence in order to keep the social distancing rules, they read the prayers and Benjamin blew the shofar for her… what a wonderful gesture !!

Sukkot (October 2 – 9, 2020)

This year we built the community Sukkah in front of the synagogue. It was an “open concept” Sukkah in response to the COVID 19 restrictions.

Also, because of the night curfew imposed on Paramaribo between 8pm to 5 am, the seating in the Sukkah was during daytime in order to make sure members could drive back home on time.

It was very different but never the less, so much fun enjoying each other’s company in our beautifully decorated Sukkah.
Sukkah on our Synagogue grounds

Simchat Torah (October 10 - 11, 2020)

Simchat Torah was celebrated this year on a small scale as not too many members could come to attend the ceremony.

The joyous climax of Simchat Torah is the dancing of *hakafot* ("circles" or “going around”), during which we dance and sing with the Torah scrolls. The *hakafot* is a memorable event, certainly one of the highlights on the Jewish calendar.

The Hakafot ceremony starts with circling the synagogue from the outside

After circling the synagogue, we continued with the hakafot inside the synagogue building.

Sukkot gave the Community an opportunity to meet and socialize in the Sukkah after weeks of lockdown
Hanukkah (December 10 – 18, 2020)

Each family lit their own Menorah in the Mahamad (our community hall). The place was full of light during the dark days of shutdowns.

Lighting the Hanukah candles in the Mahamad (our small community hall on the synagogue grounds)

Purim (February 25 – 26, 2021)

Purim is always a fun time in the community. This year we had to limit our activities to a minimum and focused on a fun event for the children.

We had a small party where only 20 members attended because of the gathering restrictions, but happy Purim it was!!

The kids having fun with our small Purim party

And the members as well…. Kim Jungerman on her way to the party
Canada and Kulanu US Hosted a Zoom Presentation on the Suriname Jewish Community

On February 21, 2021, Kulanu US and Kulanu Canada organized a one hour long joint Zoom presentation about the history of our community and the challenges we are facing today. It was a well-organized event with over 150 participants. The speakers were myself and Lilly Duym (the Vice President of the Suriname Jewish community) who answered the audience’s questions. Thank you so much for the moderators, Andria Spindel (the President of Kulanu Canada) and Bonita Sussman (the Vice President of Kulanu USA). Also a big Thank You to Jo Ann Friedman and Molly Levine from Kulanu USA, David Stambler for the technical support and our sponsors:

The Canadian Institution for Jewish Research (CIJR) and the Lodger synagogue in Toronto.

A special Thank You to all those wonderful people who joined as new Chai members and their very generous donations!!

The Giyur (Conversion) Course is going Zoom

With the COVID 19 restrictions on international flights, Rabbi Meno Ten Brink was not able to come from Amsterdam to continue his scheduled classes.

The night curfews and the changing regulations on people gathering forced us to adjust and adapt to the new environment.

We decided to move to Zoom classes where Rabbi Ten Brink will continue his teaching. With the poor telecommunications infrastructure in Suriname and the very high cost of Zoom for a country like us, the priorities are set and the community is paying for the costs, so it will not prevent the students to drop because of the financial burden.

We are looking forward to the classes to continue in this new format.

The Community Projects

Termites

What an amazing response from our wonderful Chai members who helped us with their donations to immediately treat the synagogue, the office, our small community center (Mahamad) and all wooden structures
on the synagogue grounds. The treatment was completed and all the buildings were freshly painted. Thank You!

The Cemeteries project

We have identified almost 600 graves in our two active cemeteries in Paramaribo that are either not marked at all or the tombstones are unreadable (most are because of the decades of exposure to harsh weather or are broken by vandals in the time before we fenced the cemeteries).

The community and some donors have already raised about 40% of the money needed, so last month we started the markers project. New markers have already been posted in the Sephardic cemetery. Additional markers will be added on an ongoing basis as donations are received.

Thank you so much for your generosity! We are very pleased to see the new markers which have been installed and the people again recognized, whose names had been erased from history. What an amazing achievement!
The Mikvah Roof

The community raised the money and replaced the leaking roof of the almost 200 year old Mikvah. As a result, the Mikvah was already open before the High Holidays!!

The Netherlands New Ambassador to Suriname visited our Community

We were honoured to have the new Dutch ambassador, Mr. Henk van der Zwan, visit our community on January 7, 2021. The ambassador visited the synagogue and our small museum where old historical Judaic art effects are presented. After the successful visit, the ambassador made another visit to the Jodensavanne (the Jewish Savannah) on January 15. There he toured the remains of the Bracha ve Shalom (Blessing and Peace in Hebrew) synagogue, built in 1685 and in service until September 1865, and the remains of the Jewish cemetery where 462 stones can be seen spanning two centuries, from 1685 through 1873. All visible gravestones are horizontally situated, and many contain elaborate carving. The visit was concluded after a tour at the Saramacca district where the Freeland League attempted to settle 30,000 Jews, holocaust survivors who were sitting for years in Displaced Persons (DP) camps throughout Europe with no country willing to accept them.

It was an important visit for both the ambassador and the community and we are very pleased that it went extremely well.

Ambassador van der Zwan (center) with Lilly Duyn (right) reviewing historical pictures in our community hall
Archeological Digging in the Jewish Savannah

In November 2020, the Jodensavanne (the Jewish Savannah) Foundation started digging an area where the house of the Meza family used to be. It was a big house, one of the 150 wooden homes that were part of the Jewish Savannah village near the Bracha ve Shalom synagogue in the jungle.

The village was established in 1685 and destroyed during the big fire of September 1832 that reduced all the wooden building to ashes. Only the synagogue, which was partly built with bricks, survived.

Many broken items were collected including a remnant of a porcelain bowl or cup with the underside showing 3 hand embedded letters "HDM": Huize de Meza (House of Meza in Dutch)
The archaeologists are currently sorting and analysing the hundreds of artefacts from the House de Meza dig.

Final Comments

I’d like to thank Donna Eckie, Joan Duym, Marina da Costa, Benjamin Duym and other friends for their lovely photos;

To Lilly Duym for her on-going support, to the Chai members for their kind support and to Norma Hutchison-Steinberg for her editing of this newsletter. Chag Same’ach!!

Please feel free to contact me at: dingoson3@gmail.com

Jacob Steinberg

An 1850 painting of the Jewish Savannah village by Jacob Marius Adriaan Nartini van Geffen. Rijksmuseum collection.