

Shofar

In the weeks before Rosh Hashanah, the news that Seth Moskowitz would be blowing the shofar at our synagogue drifted through the suburban yente class like a coastal breeze floating through the thick August air. For as long as any of us could remember, Dr. Henry Teitelbaum had held this honor. But the rabbis had grown tired from their two-year-long effort to explain Zoom services to our gray-haired congregation, and were desperate to persuade the old guard to return to shul, ideally with kids and grandkids in tow. Perhaps hosting a local celebrity on the bimah would make this year's High Holiday programming a hot ticket; the learned rabbis, in consultation with the board's member engagement committee, decided it was worth a try.

The city of Miami had hired Seth, a bespectacled epidemiologist, as its public health director in January 2020, and he moved into a small apartment in the Coral Gables complex where Teitelbaum occupied a townhouse. For Seth's first two months in town, the Chicago-born 31-year-old on a public servant's salary couldn't quite edge into a social landscape dominated by a platinum card-flashing party crew of venture capitalists and real estate heirs. Probably for the best, really; during frat parties at Michigan, Seth could be found clinging to the wall in his Converse, sweatily watching beer pong matches unfold as he visualized ways to approach the ponytailed co-ed from his chem lab. LIV at the Fountainebleau? Please. He would've been eaten alive.

So, during the early days of 2020, when a second Trump term was the scariest thing we could imagine, Seth earnestly pursued the more modest pleasures of Florida living. He glided on

rollerblades along the paved and palm-lined South Beach boardwalk, an outdoor fitness routine being a basic element of a proper Miami lifestyle and good source material for chitchat with the tattooed barista who blended his post-workout smoothies. At a downtown sports bar known for its die-hard patrons, he cheered loudly for the crummy Hurricanes, hoping to score an invitation to some local fan's post-game house party. He learned to fish for marlin, making Dramamine-drowsy small talk with the charter captain and trying not to puke into the open sea.

Then: Pandemic! In mid-February, Seth gave his first local TV interview, nervously flickering his fingers across a map that reminded us natives of a hurricane chart, danger creeping westward across the ocean, threatening to crash onto U.S. shores. Two weeks later, the first cases of the novel coronavirus made landfall in Florida. By April, those of us just old enough to watch our grown children struggle through home-schooling hell and just young enough to keep ourselves busy with remote class reunions and public park pickleball games and gossip about who hid behind her mask as she rolled two cases of wine and a handle of Tito's through the Costco checkout line - well, we managed. We downloaded mahjong apps to replace weekly games and texted each other separately about who we suspected of cheating. We dragged our husbands to car parades where we celebrated friends' birthdays with front-yard cocktails. We learned that video calls from our grandchildren should be answered with our phones held in front of our faces, not up to our ears.

And of course, we watched the news. So much news. The upcoming election. The marches, the riots. Nearly thirty years before, when Hurricane Andrew abused Miami, angrily punching holes through roofs and snapping concrete utility poles in half, we had all heard rumors

of 18-wheelers carting dead bodies through the wreckage; now, there they were, refrigerated trucks parked outside hospitals in New York City, in the very neighborhoods where our parents had settled after making their own westward journeys from the shtetls to the tenements.

Seth Moskowitz's face became ubiquitous around South Florida. At first, it was just his city website headshot, printed in greyscale alongside his quotes in the Herald. Soon, the crisis demanded daily press conferences, replayed on the local news at noon, six and eleven. Seth's early delivery from behind the podium was reserved, monotone - the quintessential nebbish, thrown into the public eye without warning. He was stunned by the sudden spotlight, and, for once, he took his mother's advice. He found a newly unemployed hairstylist to give him regular cuts on the pool deck of his complex, shaping his disheveled-scientist shag into something more professional - at least until Teitelbaum grumbled to management about the clumps of hair left scuttling like fiddler crabs over the limestone pavers. Seth traded his glare-catching glasses for contacts, introducing the world to his bright hazel eyes. And the money he'd saved for a trip with his college roommates to see the now-canceled NCAA championship in Atlanta? He splurged on a well-tailored Canali suit, a handful of fitted polo shirts and designer jeans both straight-legged and skinny.

Like so many ingenues before him, Seth discovered that a well-timed makeover did wonders for his confidence, and he began to bring some showmanship to his daily updates. The state and city flags draped behind him gave him gravitas. His color-coded PowerPoint graphics demonstrated the urgency of our situation with sleek simplicity, easy enough for all but the most buffoonish anti-maskers to digest. And though his voice never lost its midwestern flatness, Seth's

wide hazel eyes, even mediated through the camera's lens, conveyed a mix of care, concern and intelligence traditionally seen in hazy close-ups of soap opera doctors doting on amnesiac patients.

The newspapers anointed him "Mosky," the shorter nickname a better fit for large-print headlines. Miami Living Magazine published a photo spread of Seth skating through Bayfront Park in just his lab coat and swimming trunks, while cruise ships - those petri dishes of viral material - hulked silent and empty at the port behind him. When Dr. Fauci cut the ribbon at Dadeland Mall's mass vaccination site, Seth kibbitzed with the national hero while wearing just his undershirt, the better to show off his post-vax Band-Aid to thousands of unconvinced Floridians.

The Jewish singles of greater Miami took notice. So did their mothers. Local news stations measured a rise in viewership on mornings when they scored one-on-one interviews with Mosky. His email inbox overflowed with wholesome offers from toned 20-somethings: Nikki Greenberg thought Seth might enjoy a bike tour of the city's famed art walls; Chelsea Katz knew of a yoga-with-your-dog class held at a waterfront park in Coconut Grove; even Aaron Stern took his shot with an invitation to a socially distant salsa lesson at the botanical garden. Such a mitzvah to welcome the stranger! Meddling great-aunts invited Mosky to backyard Shabbat dinners, unabashed in their intention to introduce him to nieces who had moved back home when their big-city jobs as marketing directors, literary editors, law firm associates - real go-getters, the nieces! - went remote. When Seth inevitably caught the virus, tupperware full of matzo ball

soup piled up at the complex's package office, with handwritten notes from the zaftig girls who'd spent their lockdown scrolling through cooking videos on YouTube.

Teitelbaum, in the package room to pick up a box of K95s he'd ordered online, found himself entangled in the ribbons of a Get Well Soon balloon bouquet addressed to Seth. He picked his way out of the mylar bounty, noted Ellie Abreu's name on the card, and pondered a fact that we all knew to be true: Ellie, Nikki, Chelsea, Aaron - and, frankly, most of the go-getter nieces - wouldn't have stood a chance with Mosky if not for the deft work of Dr. Henry Teitelbaum, DDS, who for decades had corrected the crooked smiles of teens from Pinecrest to Aventura before their bar and bat mitzvahs. But while Mosky's social options multiplied faster than a virus mutation, Teitelbaum, now 73, with an eroding hairline and the slightest hunch to his shoulders, felt his world tighten around him like the thin wire he'd threaded through so many metal brackets.

When Marian died seven years earlier, Teitelbaum's grief cocooned him from the overtures of book club divorcees and Hadassah widows. He poured himself into his orthodontics practice, imparting his wisdom - his advice on college selection, his theory about marrying your best friend, his firm conviction that a water pik was the key to good oral hygiene - to the young minds of Miami while they lay with their jaws propped open, unable to interrupt. Now, inspecting those unmasked, droplet-infested mouths seemed like a death wish. He sold the practice to his colleagues and hung up his placing pliers.

Sometime that first summer, as he set his groceries on the dining room table and prepared to spritz them with Clorox, he glanced at the mirrored console where Marian used to set up elaborate holiday buffets featuring her famed briskets, marinated in ketchup, soy sauce and Manishevitz, the holy trinity of Jewish-American cooking.

Now the console displayed remnants of their life together. A bridal photo of Marian, mantilla draped over her shoulders as she gazed off to her left. A ceramic bowl she had shaped during her weekly pottery classes, one of many hobbies that filled her time when the children they'd hoped for didn't come. An antique brass menorah they discovered at a Judaica shop in Le Marais; a vase from Murano, shades of sapphire, turquoise and aquamarine swimming through clear glass; and, gleaming in the center of it all, a glossy, looping shofar, purchased in Jerusalem's shuk on their first trip to the Holy Land. Each fall, when he lifted the shofar from its perch on his way to High Holiday services, he caught a whiff of za'atar, an echo of shopkeepers' shouts, the feel of Marian's lips on his sweaty and stubbled cheek - once-potent memories that were trickling slowly away.

As he wiped down his box of bran flakes, Teitelbaum recalled reading about New Yorkers clanging pots and pans at 7 pm, a sign of respect for the nurses and garbage men and grocery store cashiers and other essential workers unable to hunker down at home. He found the gesture touching. As caseloads rocketed and available hospital beds plummeted, as kids stayed home from school and elderly widowers cooked themselves thin omelets for dinner, it seemed fitting to sound an alarm.

That night, the solitary Teitelbaum stood on his driveway, ram's horn to his lips, and pressed out a single squawk that reverberated through the royal poincianas and hibiscus shading his neighbors' lawns.

Wake up! the shofar screeched. Pay attention! it cried. I am here!

Teitelbaum tried to stave off his isolation with routines meant to approximate real life. Every morning, he walked on his treadmill, drank two cups of coffee, read The New York Times, and called his brother in Boston. He made a point of getting dressed each day, typically buttoning into a collared shirt, khakis and loafers, though he allowed himself leeway to wear gym clothes on weekends. About once a month, he played golf with a few other altcockers, but it was hard for men in various stages of hearing loss to have meaningful conversations through their masks. He kept his brain limber by reading the dentistry journals and assembling 1,000-piece jigsaw puzzles; he kept up to date on culture by watching the prestige Netflix shows that popped into his recommendations feed. Still, the days dragged. Each night when the sun sank and his loneliness sharpened, he filled the air with the wail of his shofar: *Wake up! Pay attention! I am here!*

Eventually, the season came for us to return to our ancient traditions. The junior rabbi informed Teitelbaum that Mosky would be joining him in the shofar ceremony, a terse conversation that left her wondering whether she had bruised her congregant's feelings. Mosky gave a few practice toots on the horn his father had FedExed, a dust-coated relic left sitting in their attic for years since his grandfather died. Men rummaged through embroidered tallis bags, unpacking yarmulkes from decades-ago brides and weddings until finding a match for their ties.

Women of a certain generation rolled on our pantyhose and tested our balance in long-abandoned pumps; we walked into synagogue two years older, two years chubbier, with two years of fear and fatigue, quietude and chaos stuffed, alongside our lipsticks, into tiny Chanel purses.

For three and a half hours we rose and we sat, we chanted and we swayed, we prayed aloud and we meditated in silence. Who can say whether Mosky's cachet drew the crowds who squeezed into the upholstered pews? Perhaps the rabbis were right to predict that a minor star would pull us back into the synagogue's orbit - or maybe we all craved the musty smell and soft, worn pages of the prayerbooks, the rhythmic tapping of fists against chests as we expressed anguish over our painful missteps, our personal failings, our collective sins.

Finally, the service reached its climax. Moskowitz and Teitelbaum approached the bimah, the orthodontist shuffling up from his usual spot in the fourth row, the younger man bounding in from the back left. Mosky offered his arm to Teitelbaum to help him up the stairs; Teitelbaum brushed it away, straightened his shoulders and walked carefully to the center of the platform. The two men stood side by side, their physical contrast evoking and expanding our most solemn High Holiday recitation: Who shall live and who shall die? Who shall have rest and who shall wander? Who shall bask in the rays of friendship and love, and who shall wither from seclusion and sadness?

"Tekiah!" the rabbi called. The two men blasted in unison, a single howl.

"Shevarim!" Three short laments emerged from the horns.

“*Teruah!*” Moskowitz and Teitelbaum looked at each other and nodded, coordinating the nine abrupt notes, quick and piercing.

Then, “*Tekiah Gedolah!*” Both men inhaled, and lungs bursting with air, prepared to shriek the final, longest call, a lasting note awakening us to the possibilities coiled like a spring in the year ahead. They began in unison, but Mosky’s blast soon fizzled. Could it be that the vigorous Mosky was simply winded from the exertion? Or did he, like the rest of us, feel the vibrating intensity of Teitelbaum’s determination? We’ll never know. At any rate, the widower continued.

For a full minute, Teitelbaum held his note, his cheeks puffed, his face turning apple red. For a full minute, he trumpeted his sorrow and his solitude, his memories and his fears. For a full minute, we held our breaths as Dr. Henry Teitelbaum, forgotten and alone, sounded an urgent siren:

Wake up! Pay attention! I am here!

For a moment, the congregation remained silent. Mosky slipped off the bimah and back to his seat, greeted by a couple of distracted pats on the back. All our eyes remained fixed on Teitelbaum, who stood perfectly still, face raised toward the synagogue’s domed ceiling, clutching his shofar by his side. Scolded, staggered, stirred, we unleashed a storm of shouts and

stomps that washed over Teitelbaum, triumphant, the stained glass overhead illuminating his white linen prayer shawl in a golden-green glow.