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Friends,

We hope you are healthy and enjoying the summer. We are beginning to turn our attention to planning for the High Holy Days. Since the pandemic forced us to close the synagogue in March, we have looked forward longingly to the day when we will be able to worship and socialize in person. Unfortunately, that day is still a long way off. The High Holy Days this year will be completely virtual. There will be no in-person gatherings at Temple Emanu-El.

We understand the deep disappointment you may feel receiving this news, even if you thought it was coming. Please know that we made this decision carefully. In June, we assembled an ad-hoc Re-Entry Committee. The committee's purpose is to evaluate the timing and steps required to resume in-person activities at the temple. On the committee are physicians, Temple board members, Religious School directors, spiritual leaders, and laypersons. The committee has endeavored to use guidance from all available resources, including state and local government, the Reform movement, and public health guidance.

The Jewish value of *p'kuach nefesh*, preserving life, is Judaism's highest commandment. Health and safety must come first. We are very aware that businesses are reopening, and schools are evaluating and making plans for the fall. Even some churches are returning to in-person worship. However, our decision is specific to our situation and needs. We routinely have 250 - 300 people gathered in the sanctuary and social hall for the High Holy Days. Such large gatherings have the potential to become spreader events. Not only are many people gathered in a relatively small space, but we would also be doing precisely the necessary things to facilitate the spread of the virus. Recent research has confirmed that singing is one of the highest risk activities for spreading this virus. There is no practical way for us to conduct meaningful worship services and maintain sufficient social distance in our small synagogue.

Fortunately, Rabbi Ekstrand and Sherry Barnes have not missed a beat since closing the synagogue in March. If you have joined us for any of our online services, classes, or community events, you know that they have done an extraordinarily good job of transforming virtual space into sacred space. They have been in contact with the CCAR, the URJ, other organizations, and their colleagues to learn and share best practices. Jo-el Fernandez has been in conversation with other Reform congregational leadership across New England. Heading into this High Holy Days, Jo Michaelson, our VP of Religious Practices, and the Religious Practices Committee will be working with Rabbi Marc and Sherry to ensure that real meaning is created in virtual space. Also, we will be making our Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur prayerbooks available to borrow. In the coming weeks, we will communicate how to pick up your prayerbook at the synagogue safely. The CCAR has also discounted the price of new High Holy Day prayerbooks. Please see the attached flyer on how to order your copy if you wish to buy one.

Lastly, please know that we care deeply about every member of our community. As we look around the country today, we can see how many states are suffering during this pandemic. People are getting sick and dying at an alarming rate. We feel blessed to live in Connecticut, where all of the actions and sacrifices we have made since March have resulted in a low incidence of Covid-19. We must do our part to keep it this way. Wear a mask, wash your hands, and join us online for a High Holy Days to remember.

L'shalom,
Jo-el Fernandez, President
Rabbi Marc Ekstrand