

Presidential Message

July 2020

Shalom chaverim,

As I write this, the state of Connecticut is entering “Phase 2” of reopening. This means that indoor dining, movie theaters, and nail salons will be open for business, just to name a few. What about Temple Emanu-El, you may ask? Does this mean that we go back to “business as usual?”

The answer to that is unequivocally, no. We need a new normal, characterized first and foremost by a willingness to put the safety of others ahead of our personal preferences and a willingness to hold ourselves and others accountable to new safety protocols. Returning to the way that we were would fly in the face of our Reform Jewish values, which assert that Judaism must change and adapt to the needs of the day if it is to survive. We embrace the concept of “audacious hospitality,” which is a focused effort to embrace diversity and to welcome full participation by LGBTQ+ Jews, Jews with mental, physical, or intellectual disabilities, and interfaith families. Included in this are our oldest and most medically fragile members. How do we relaunch an improved Temple Emanu-El that meets the needs of all of our members? And how can we be a leader in developing a reimagined Jewish community in southeastern Connecticut?

By the time that you read this, you will have received a survey from the Union for Reform Judaism via e-mail, which will be available to you until July 6. PLEASE complete this survey, which will allow Temple Emanu-El and the URJ as a whole to reimagine Jewish life in a post-COVID world. This is your chance to share your thoughts on the future of our congregational life.

In the meantime, the Temple Emanu-El COVID-19 ad-hoc committee will be meeting, and will utilize data from this survey as well as science and safety considerations to determine when and in what manner we may be able to re-enter the building and resume some of our pre-COVID operations, including religious services, social activities, school operations, and renting space to tenants. We will be discussing whether activities such as a summer outdoor physically distanced service, or an in-person Tashlich observance on Rosh Hashanah afternoon may be able to occur. What I am certain of is that when we are able to meet again, things such as the blessings over wine and challah, greeting other congregants and our clergy before and after services, and congregational singing will look very different. Just yesterday, I read an unfortunate news article about a church in Oregon that had a significant COVID-19 outbreak due to members gathering and singing together in defiance of their state’s mandates, and disregarding the science that has demonstrated that this is one of the highest risk activities. There is a strong consensus among numerous epidemiologists and infectious disease specialists that in-person religious services are among the most risky of activities that we can do, akin to being in a crowded bar!

While I am dismayed about COVID-19 and its impact on our synagogue and on my own life, I am also excited about the opportunities that this presents to us for increased engagement of our own members as well as increased community collaboration. The combined Tikkun Leil Shavuot evening study session and morning service was a truly remarkable effort by Rabbi Ekstrand and the other four “liberal” congregations of eastern Connecticut. It was a huge success, with a great turnout and very positive feedback afterwards. This is just the beginning! Let’s build on this momentum and continue to collaborate with our community partners while maintaining our strong Reform Jewish identity. I would love to hear your ideas!

B’shalom,

Jo-el Fernandez