

Presidential Message

September 2020

Shalom chaverim,

As I type this, we may be in what is my most melancholy time of the year. As a true “summer girl”, I always dread mid-August, as I know that the summer is winding down. My flowers are beginning to die. The sun sets noticeably earlier. The water in Long Island Sound starts to get cooler. And, soon enough, a short autumn and then a long winter will arrive. This year, my melancholy is compounded by fear. During the summer, I can almost forget that the pandemic is occurring, as most of the activities that I love are outdoors anyway. But what will I do to differentiate the long, dark, cold days from one another, when the things that usually make winter tolerable, such as traveling, dinner with friends, plays, concerts, etc. can no longer occur as usual? This is where our Temple community can make such a difference. I know that one of my Temple friends is always a phone call or a Zoom meeting away with a smiling face and a listening ear. And keep an eye on our Temple website and your weekly e-mails for exciting fall and winter offerings that will keep us engaged as an active and vibrant community!

During the earlier part of the summer, you were asked to participate in a Union for Reform Judaism (URJ) COVID-19 Impact Survey, and I would like to share the results with you here. First, I am pleased to report that 115 congregants responded to the survey! That is a very impressive response rate for a survey, and contains a good representation of our entire congregation. Almost half of the respondents (47%) were longtime members of 22 years or more! And over half (55%) of the respondents were over 65 years old. To me, the most important question in the survey was “Would you recommend this synagogue to a friend”? This is the cornerstone question that generally gauges member satisfaction. I am thrilled to report that **96%** of respondents would recommend Temple Emanu-El to a friend (defined as a response of “agree” or “strongly agree” to this question). The 2nd most important question to me was “My likelihood to recommend this synagogue has _____ since the COVID-19 pandemic impacted my area”. I am pleased to report that **97%** of congregants have either stayed the same or increased in their likelihood to recommend Temple Emanu-El since the pandemic! What this says to me is that we are doing something right regarding our efforts to engage congregants and provide meaningful virtual programming. One question covered areas of synagogue life in which congregants participated pre and post pandemic. The responses to those questions told me that the largest drop-offs in participation since the pandemic started have been in the areas of family experiences, followed by social programming. Clearly, these are 2 areas that we should focus more attention on in the months to come. The next part of the survey covered when congregants would feel comfortable returning to in-person programming, including services and social activities. What we learned was that one-third (**32%**) of our congregants **will not return to in-person services and programming until there is a vaccine, in addition to government approval, social distancing measures, and regular deep cleaning of the synagogue.** A nearly equal number (35%) are willing to return with all of the above measures minus a vaccine.

A solid majority (85%) of our congregants would require a minimum of enforced social distancing measures before they are willing to return to in-person programming. Only 7% of our congregants are willing to return to the way things were prior to the pandemic. What this says to me is that our congregants are taking scientific evidence seriously and learning from the lessons of other states and other religious denominations who opened houses of worship, only to have large COVID-19 outbreaks, including fatalities, tied to in-person worship. Interestingly, it is not our oldest and most vulnerable congregants, but rather the age groups from 45-64 (42% of those ages 55-64 and 33% of those ages 45-54) who were most likely to respond to this question by stating that they would not return to in-person programming without a vaccine in place. My hypothesis, based on some conversations with congregants, is that this age group may include several physicians and scientists who are on the frontlines of cutting-edge information on transmission rates, vaccine development, etc., and also includes congregants who may be in a caregiving role for older relatives or loved ones. With regard to whether their ability to contribute financially to the synagogue has been negatively impacted by COVID-19, 56% of congregants answered “no” and 19% answered “yes”. However, a full 25 % of congregants preferred not to answer this question. The next question, which also made me happy, was “I plan to be a member at this synagogue for the foreseeable future”, to which 97% responded in the affirmative!

As in most surveys, there was the ability to write in comments, and I was pleasantly surprised by how many congregants chose to write a few sentences expressing their thoughts about Temple Emanu-El and the COVID-19 crisis. I am including a number of quotes here that are representative of the vast majority of survey respondents. Any potentially identifying information has been removed:

“I think they’ve done a great job communicating with the congregation and giving opportunities to connect with the Temple..... It’s important to me that the only Reform synagogue in the area remains viable. The leaders do a great job of that”.

“Our synagogue leadership has done a remarkable job of connecting with the congregation via Zoom services, online education, and social events. The atmospheres created in-person and online are remarkably similar”.

“It is the most socially and educationally active synagogue in the area.....we find it the best fit. Have always recommended it!”

“I would not return until there is a vaccine. I am not comfortable meeting in groups, as I have seen when this happens, masks and social distancing go away and people are very relaxed about things”.

“My enthusiasm to give is sometimes blunted by lack of giving from other congregants”.

“I will not attend an indoor gathering of any kind until there is a therapeutic or a vaccine”.

“I like the ability to still participate in Friday night services via my computer, which protects our congregants from the COVID-19 threat. This allows us to still feel a part of our Jewish community even though we have quarantined ourselves.....”

“Appropriate COVID-19 safeguards have been implemented”

“I admire the spiritual support, have enjoyed the services, and made great friends along the way”.

“Everyone is welcome at this synagogue.....”

“A congregation is reflected in its congregants and in its lay and religious leadership. That is still as good....”

“Cannot improve on strongly agree!”

“I feel connected to the Temple at this time. I have not attended many services, but I am pleased with the level of communication via e-mail, Facebook, and the bulletin. I know just as much now as I did before COVID-19 about what’s happening at Emanu-El.”

“This synagogue will always be a part of my life.....”

“I like the way the Temple leaders responded so quickly to the needs of the congregation by setting up YouTube and Zoom worship, meetings, and services. I feel proud and fortunate to be a member of this group of intelligent, motivated, and involved congregants”.

“It is easier to attend an online service”.

“I believe that the rabbi and cantorial soloist are among the best I have experienced and the congregation is dedicated to a mission I believe in. During the COVID-19 pandemic, they have kept their focus”.

“They will be very careful with everyone’s health and listen to the medical community to open safely”.

“Rabbi Marc has reached out and increased his e-mail contact and even phoned to check on us. He has offered many opportunities to engage with others in book discussion, Torah study, and other services. I’m impressed with his efforts”.

“The congregation and its representatives have taken a strong interest in the community by providing continuity as well as focusing strongly on the safety and well-being of its members and the community at large”.

“Active, engaged rabbi and cantorial soloist”

“Our Temple has been a lifeline for my family with or without the quarantine. Its leadership has been concerned for its members’ well-being. I look forward to reconnecting with fellow members even in our current limited capacity”

There were many other comments, the vast majority of which were in the vein of those above.

I look forward to seeing you all during our High Holy Day services. While I will miss having the opportunity and the privilege to stand before you holding a Torah during the Kol Nidre service, and to deliver my Rosh Hashanah address while standing before you, I know that we will be just as connected this year as we have throughout our history. Thank you for allowing me to be your president.

Shana Tova,

Jo-el Fernandez