

Presidential Message

December 2020

Shalom Chaverim,

By the time you read this, Thanksgiving will be over and Chanukah will be upon us. As I reflect upon these two holidays-----one secular and the other a minor, but popular, holiday on the Jewish calendar---we cannot help but think about how differently these holidays will be observed this year. As I am writing this in mid-November, the pandemic has escalated dramatically throughout the country, and celebrations for Diwali, Thanksgiving, Chanukah, Christmas, Kwanzaa, and other winter festivals are expected to further propel our nation into crisis. Some of you are tired of hearing about the pandemic. I, too, am tired of reading about it, writing about it, having meetings about it, and worrying about the safety of loved ones. I am tired of having to remember to bring a mask everywhere I go. And we miss traveling the world and seeing friends and loved ones most of all!

However, during this season of giving thanks, there is much to be grateful for. We can be grateful that so many lives have been saved by wearing masks, staying home, and avoiding gatherings. We can be thankful that our state government officials are making data and science-driven decisions, and that mask compliance in our area of the country is high. And so many times since March, I have been grateful that, if we had to live through a pandemic, that at least we have technology like Zoom and YouTube to keep us connected and engaged. Can you imagine living through the 1918 flu pandemic? We would have been completely cut off, without the spirituality of virtual religious services, the social connection of seeing one another's smiling faces and interacting together and without entertainment at our fingertips from cable television and Netflix. We can be thankful for added time with our immediate families, and the ability to strengthen relationships with children or partners. We can be thankful for our front line physicians, nurses, and other healthcare workers, social workers, grocery store employees, public transportation employees, and all those who put their lives on the line for the rest of us every day. And, we can be thankful for scientists and modern medicine, since as I write this both Pfizer's and Moderna's COVID-19 vaccines are demonstrating 90-95% efficacy in large-scale clinical trials. Finally---hope on the horizon!

Which brings me to Chanukah, the festival of lights, of miracles, and of hope. Chanukah has always been one of my favorite holidays for the light that it brings to short, cold, dark winter days. I am always sad after the 8th night, when we once again revert to darkness. However, this year, Chanukah ends just a few days before the winter solstice, after which the days begin to get lighter for longer periods of time, imperceptibly at first, but noticeable within a few weeks. There is hope of longer days, of warmer weather, of a vaccine that is safe and effective and will allow for us to gather in person again, and most importantly, the hope that we all get through the next very difficult months of the pandemic safely.

As I write this, Connecticut's COVID-19 positivity rate is between 5-6%, hospitalizations are increasing dramatically every day and are now at the levels that they were during the early days of the pandemic in late March and will likely exceed that number within days, and deaths from COVID-19 across all age groups continue to increase. While New London County is no longer the state "hot spot", we are currently up to a 7-day moving average of 24.1 cases per 100,000 residents (compared to 51.6 cases in Fairfield County), with 64 additional New London County residents being diagnosed every day as of this writing. These numbers will undoubtedly increase after each of the winter holidays. Our government officials are hesitant to recommend that people refrain from holding gatherings inside their own homes to celebrate the winter holidays--so I will do it. Please. Celebrate the holidays within your own household or your previously established "quaranteam" bubble. Have dinner outdoors if you absolutely feel that you need to gather in person. I want for all of us to be here to celebrate together once the pandemic has ended, whenever that may be. We all have COVID-19 fatigue. But if this virus has taught us anything at all, it is that our lives are intertwined, and Jewish values dictate that we are all responsible for one another, not just ourselves. Our local rabbis and other eastern Connecticut Jewish organizations have teamed up to make Chanukah special this year, and every night of the holiday at 6:00pm a different local congregation or organization will be sponsoring a group Zoom candle lighting, so that we can all observe the holiday by performing the mitzvah of lighting the Chanukiah together from the safety of our own homes. I can't wait to see you there!

Jo-el Fernandez