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Dear Friends:

The necessity to stay apart over these long weeks and months has been difficult for each of us, in so many ways. Surely we are all anticipating the opportunity to come back to shul. As we wrote to you at the end of last week, we have begun planning the shul's reopening. When that will happen, and various aspects of what the conditions will be, are not yet clear. We would like to give you an update in how we envision a reopening taking place. There almost certainly will be significant details that we will miss in this presentation, and in our planning. As so many have said and written, these are uncharted waters, and we are all doing our best to adjust as efficiently and thoroughly as we can.

Gradual Return

It is imperative for all of us to remember that COVID-19 is still very much a health concern. We hope and pray to Hashem that the worst is behind us and the situation will continue to improve. However, it would be irresponsible for our community and its institutions to assume that will be the case. It is distinctly possible that reduced numbers of COVID have only occurred because of the stellar social distancing exhibited by our community and many others. As we begin to reopen, we must do so with great caution, so that if there are individuals carrying the virus the spread will be minimized. For that reason it is essential that we begin with very small numbers of people gathered for minyanim, with numerous health precautions in place, as will be delineated further in this letter. Hopefully, communal health will be strong after we and other institutions begin reopening, and we can then gradually increase the amounts of people in a given minyan. Though we hope the maximum number of people allowed in a minyan will gradually increase, **we expect the health precautions to be in place for a significant period of time.**

Timing of Reopening

As we referenced in last week's communication, the OU's guidelines, along with those of various other Jewish organizations, urge shuls to wait at least two weeks after their respective area has begun Phase One of reopening, specifically defined as allowing for gathering of more than ten people. Although Governor Hogan announced that counties in Maryland can begin Phase One effective Friday, 5/15/20, **Montgomery County has opted to not yet begin Phase One.** The importance of the delay is it gives each shul the opportunity, in consultation with local health professionals, to gauge the success of the reopening in that area. If, Heaven forbid, there would be a significant increase in spread of the virus over the two week period, allowing the members of our tight knit community to reconnect in shul could significantly hasten its spread. We will certainly plan to assess local medical opinion over that period. We hope we will be able to open promptly after the completion of two weeks, but **we recognize that we will not be able to decide when to reopen until the end of the two week period, at the very earliest.**

Minyanim Offerings

One of the most potent ways for us to limit potential spread of the virus after reopening is to limit both the number of people in a given minyan and the number of times that people shift between minyanim. We will plan to follow state and local government guidance regarding limits of how many people to have in a gathering. We are blessed to have a large facility, and therefore plan on holding small minyanim in various areas of our facility. We are also working on creating a system through which people will be assigned a specific minyan (based on preferences which they will indicate). We will be asking people to remain consistent in attending the specific minyan to which they are assigned, and not shift between different minyanim. Through creating a consistent pattern where people daven, and limiting the number of people in any given minyan, we hope to significantly limit potential spread of the virus. **We hope to be getting back to you during the 14 day wait period with more specific plans regarding the minyan arrangements.**

Health Precautions

We plan to implement a number of policies regarding conduct in shul when attending minyanim. These are all geared towards minimizing the potential spread of COVID through minyan attendance. **First and foremost, it is essential that anyone exhibiting COVID symptoms, has had recent significant direct exposure to someone who has COVID, or any other circumstance for which medical guidance would be to quarantine, not attend.** It can not be emphasized enough that this is not a matter of personal preference or religious stringency, rather communal health.

We will also insist that all who attend shul wear masks. **An individual who comes to shul without a mask will be asked to leave immediately.** Additionally, we will be implementing a social distancing standard at all the minyanim, allowing a space of 8 feet between attendees. We will create appropriate space between seats at each minyan and clearly mark the seats as spots in which one can daven. We will clearly indicate the doors for which entrance and exit should occur for each minyan. **Correct entry and exit is a significant component of our social distancing plan,** as we hope to have various small minyanim taking place around the building, some concurrently. We will have the areas designated for davening cleaned before the next minyan in that area. Additionally, in order to reduce spread of germs we do not plan on having shul siddurim or chumashim available. **We ask that each person bring his/her own siddur to shul.** Please do not leave your siddur at your davening area, as that might cause confusion regarding its use by another individual later in the day. Those who have tallis boxes should only use them if their minyan assignment is in the Belonofsky Sanctuary. We will plan to have printouts of the parsha to be available on Shabbos, each one to be used by one person only and then placed in a box to be disposed of after Shabbos.

Tefillah and Laining

In addition to social distancing and limiting the number at any one minyan, we also want to limit the time of the group interaction. For that reason, we will be implementing some changes in the davening experience. Firstly, all shacharis minyanim will begin with barchu. Pesukei dezimrah (through yishtabach) should be davened at home. We also will not have singing during minyanim, even on Shabbos. Shabbos morning minyanim will not have drashos, and weekday mincha/maariv minyanim will not have learning in between (there will be a brief pause after mincha is over to make sure maariv does not begin until after shkiah). All shul shiurim will continue to take place remotely, as the initial reopening of the shul will be for minyanim only. **Though we are curtailing much of the surrounding aspects of the tefillah experience common for many of our minyanim we do not intend for the actual davening to be rushed.** Our hope is that by limiting the time in the ways listed above we will be giving each minyan the ability to daven appropriately and meaningfully the tefillos for which they are together.

Regarding laining, the general pesak issued by numerous authorities is that the baal korei should stand alone at the bimah and receive all the aliyos of that laining, making brachos before and after each aliyah. This is to allow for appropriate social distancing.

Our plan is for the chazan and baal korei to lead their parts of the service without wearing a mask, so they may be heard. It will be essential for each individual to have his mask on until it is time for his role, and to put the mask back on immediately afterwards. We will also need to be especially diligent regarding appropriate spacing around the chazan and baal korei.

Personal Caution

In addition to all that is written above regarding shul policies, the importance of personal caution can not be overemphasized. Even if all of the policies above are implemented perfectly, there is no way we can assure anyone they won't become infected in shul. For that reason, people who are at greater risk because of health conditions or age are urged to not attend shul at this point. We would recommend discussing your specific circumstances with a medical health professional.

Communal Responsibility

It is likely that each and every one of us has had more than our desired share of social distancing over these weeks and months. Many might hear of reopening plans and breathe a sigh of relief, taking them as a sign that we can relax our personal practices. If anything, the reopening of our institutions obligates us to be as diligent, if not more so, regarding social distancing in other aspects of our lives. Please remember that this should not be viewed as a matter of personal decision, rather communal responsibility.

We expect that much of this letter was difficult, and maybe even disturbing, to read. Please know that we would have loved to send you a message indicating that everything at shul would be back to normal, starting immediately. Unfortunately, it is incumbent upon us to put forth great effort to sustain the health of our community while giving us all the opportunity to serve Hashem and connect with each other in the most ideal manner under the circumstances. We pray that Hashem should bless our efforts, and watch over each and every one of us, and our broader community, along with Klal Yisrael and the World. We plan to continue to send you updates, particularly about minyan arrangement and options, over the coming days and weeks. Please feel free to contact us with any questions or concerns. However limited it may be, particularly at the beginning, we anxiously await the opportunity to see many of you in person and daven with you yet again.

Sincerely,

Rabbi Dovid Rosenbaum

Sammy Franco, President