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President

VAAD HARABANIM  
THE RABBINICAL COUNCIL  
of GREATER WASHINGTON

Rabbi Moshe Walter  
Woodside Synagogue Ahavas Torah  
Executive Director

3 Sivan 5780  
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Dearest Congregants:

Due to the many inquiries we have received recently regarding the timetable for re-opening our Shuls, the Vaad Harabanim of Greater Washington (the "Vaad") wishes to clarify its position on this issue. In addition, we wish to provide the clear and compelling rationale that motivates our policies. Please know that we fully understand the severe emotional and spiritual hardship associated with being disconnected from tefillah b'tzibur. This frustration is undoubtedly exacerbated by the awareness that other communities, like Baltimore and New York City for example, have relaxed some restrictions and, as a result, appear to be returning to a semblance of normalcy. With Shavuot around the corner, the spiritual and social isolation becomes even more of a hardship.

The Vaad has been closely consulting with medical experts from the National Institutes of Health who are briefed on a regular basis by leading epidemiologists, infectious disease specialists, immunologists, pharmacologists, and on several occasions by Dr. Fauci himself. They are in close communication with other government organizations as well and are privy to the most recent pandemic data on both the national and local levels. This includes the testing protocols being adopted by different localities. At least one of our experts is actively involved with the care of COVID 19 patients.

Their conclusions, as regards Montgomery County, are particularly sobering. Because of the current prevalence of cases and limited testing here, the risk of infection is greater than that of Baltimore and New York City, for example. As a result, when Montgomery County moves to Phase 1 and relaxes some of its social distancing protocols, a significant "second wave" of infection is expected to occur. This is largely due to the attendant increase in comingling of uninfected people with individuals who are, unbeknownst to themselves, infectious. At that point, infectious hot spots will be identified and isolated. The bottom line is that if we wait two weeks, we will be able to ride out the second wave and be much safer. To paraphrase one of the aforementioned physicians, "I would be comfortable davening in a backyard minyan in Baltimore or New York, but not here". Additionally, davening involves standing in relatively close quarters for extended periods of time while talking all the while, which exposes greater risk of infection, even outdoors, than shopping indoors.

As a result of this medical input and our commitment to follow the teaching of Chazal to err

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on the side of caution in a situation of Pikuach Nefesh, the Vaad has determined to adhere to the policies it put forth in its May 14 communication. Those policies are restated below for your convenience:

- a. Our Shuls will not reopen until at least two weeks after state and local governments (e.g. Montgomery County, Washington DC) have permitted the transition to Phase 1 of the reopening process. At that point, each shul will decide its own reopening protocols.
- b. It is the strongly held opinion of the Vaad that the social distancing standards and precautions applied to mitzvah type gatherings, for example, weddings, brisim, and shivas should be more stringent than those recommended by local government
- c. It is the advice of the Vaad that no minyanim, including the formation of private minyanim be held at this time. In light of the previous discussion, these minyanim pose a health risk not only to their participants but to the entire Jewish community as well. In this context, the most meaningful and sincere expression of connecting to Hashem is to continue to daven byechidus until further notice. It is the opinion of the Vaad that to do otherwise is both irresponsible and inconsiderate.

Please know that if you or someone you know of is in need of assistance, do not hesitate to contact us. As we prepare for Matan Torah, especially in these difficult times, we are fully committed to the paradigm of "k'ish echad b'lev echad" (as one person with one heart).

The Vaad thanks you for your patience, sacrifice, ahavas Torah, and ahavas Yisrael.

May our tefillos be answered l'tova and may Hashem allow us to return safely to our Shuls in short order. In the meantime, we should merit celebrating Shavuos with Kabalas Hatorah happily and joyously.

With much love and respect and wishing you a Good Yom Tov.

The Vaad Harabanim of Greater Washington

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