

Covid-19: Letter to the Mekor Habracha Community

3/13/20

To the Mekor Community,

Due to the spreading threat of Covid-19, I'm writing to let you know that beginning today and for this coming week, Mekor will suspend all activities at our shul, including religious services. We will reassess the situation weekly to decide whether to continue this suspension. In addition, all currently scheduled special events (public and private) such as the dinner and cholent cookoff planned for March 20, will be cancelled until further notice.

This was not an easy decision, but after evaluating all the information, we determined it was the best way to proceed, because this threat to our health is very serious and must not be taken lightly. Covid-19 is much more contagious and deadly than the flu. Public health professionals are very concerned about the rate at which it is spreading, a rate which is currently only changing for the worse. There is additional concern that this outbreak is straining our healthcare system to capacity in certain regions.

Moreover, it is vital to acknowledge that the nature of the Covid-19 outbreak is uniquely challenging for our community. In Montgomery County, it has become so widespread that Governor Wolfe has ordered the schools and multiple other public places closed. There are also significant concentrations of the virus in certain areas of New York and New Jersey. We cannot ignore the fact that by virtue of our demographic, with members and visitors who live, work, attend school, or visit with family in those high-risk locations, we are also at risk. Based on similar reasoning, the School District of Philadelphia, in consultation with the Philadelphia Department of Health, decided to close 63 schools today, because those schools have teaching staff who reside in Montgomery County. It's also important to recognize that since we are a Jewish community, we have a higher than average intersection with the high-risk communities, not just locally, but across the United States and the world.

Another significant risk factor is personal proximity. The Philadelphia Department of Health, following the CDC guidelines, has strongly advised everyone to maintain social distancing – avoiding proximity and physical contact with other people. Unfortunately, this recommendation is well-nigh impossible to implement reliably at Mekor, due to our physical space and the nature of our activities. We must remember that our congregation includes people who are most vulnerable to Covid-19, yet we cannot ensure their safety. If just one person in our midst unknowingly carries the virus, it could spread rapidly within our community.

We are aware that some shuls have decided to remain open for now. However, communities like those in Bergen County, parts of Manhattan and other regions in New York, as well as many other communities will close indefinitely. We have decided to err on the side of caution, because if we save one life, it will be worth the temporary sacrifice. In other words, it is better to be safe than sorry.

As we mentioned above, we will reassess this decision on a weekly basis and provide prompt updates. We very much appreciate the importance of our shul to the lives of our members. As I have emphasized in many of my sermons, Mekor Habracha is much more than a physical space. We are a community with a rich tradition of caring for one another in a multitude of ways, and that will not change. We welcome emails and calls, and we will all be available to one another in ways that each of us can pursue while feeling safe. If we all pull together, we can emerge from this challenge knowing we did the right thing and feeling a renewed sense of cohesion in our community.

May Hashem help us through this difficult time, and bring a speedy recovery to all those who are ill.

Wishing everyone a Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Eliezer Hirsch and the Mekor Board of Directors