



## Letter on Reopening and High Holidays

June 10, 2020

Dear Rabbinic *Chevra* of Greater Philadelphia,

Shalom. We hope that this letter finds you healthy, and strengthened in your critical holy work of sustaining communities, individuals, and institutions through these challenging times.

Even with the anticipated re-opening of businesses over the next weeks and months, many of our institutions are contemplating how to adapt our services, educational activities, and High Holiday celebrations for the reality of COVID-19 and for the social distancing norms that will likely still be in place for the foreseeable future. During the High Holidays, a moment when, perhaps more than most times of year, we affirm the togetherness of community, how can we find ways to feel together, when we are expecting to be physically apart? To that end, the Board of Rabbis of Greater Philadelphia offers the following guidance to rabbis, which we invite our colleagues to use as a BOR position in guiding our communities' leadership:

- ***Pikuach nefesh* is paramount. We implore all synagogues and Jewish institutions to adhere assiduously to all public-health guidelines for your local area. We implore these institutions to have a plan for safety *before* re-opening – for any functions or religious services, and especially for the grander gatherings of the High Holidays.** Many of our constituents, eager to observe the holidays and gather as they have found meaningful over the years, may not fully appreciate that a region “opening for business” is not the same as the large-group congregating, public singing, and ritual that the traditional holidays feature. Indeed, we advise leaders to be *lifnei meshurat hadin*, taking an abundance of caution, before allowing gatherings, even if technically they are permitted by local authorities.
- **To our rabbis: Within your communities' *halachic* standards and aesthetic norms, let us stretch to be creative and collaborative in seeking alternative means of experiencing prayer, reflection, and community in this time.** We do not presume to know what feels “right” for each of us – but **work together** with colleagues (including

rabbinic colleagues, educators, cantors, executive directors, lay leaders, and others) to provide a meaningful experience for our *kehillot*. While we know movement organizations may be workshopping ideas, the Board of Rabbis intends to provide opportunities for Philadelphia-area rabbis to meet to discuss High Holiday plans.

- **To our institutional leaders: We call on Jewish organizations to collaborate across professional and lay-leader roles in making decisions.** The challenge of re-opening, particularly for the High Holidays, requires a wide variety of perspectives, including a rabbinic *mara d'atra* (*halachic* decisor), and spiritual, programmatic, public-health, administrative, financial, and logistical considerations. All of these stakeholders must work together to provide communal leadership as our organizations envision the High Holidays for this year. Accordingly, the Board of Rabbis is consulting with other Jewish professional organizations and leaders locally and nationally for guidance surrounding these challenging circumstances.

As a Board of Rabbis, we support leadership in many of the Jewish institutions around Greater Philadelphia. We recognize the anxiety caused by the uncertainty, emotional pain, financial implications, and existential challenges that this continued closure causes – especially as we look ahead to the High Holidays. We hope to support you and all of our local rabbinic colleagues as we work together to navigate these difficult times into a brighter, healthy year ahead.

With prayers for *chizuk and bryut*,

The Executive Committee of the Board of Rabbis of Greater Philadelphia

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