

Dear Friends –

While we just spent the weekend celebrating a different kind of July 4th holiday, it might seem much too early to be thinking about Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. This year presents many unique challenges and opportunities for observing the High Holidays in the time of Covid-19. The pandemic and accompanying uncertainty have necessitated extensive discussion and planning across the spectrum of American Jewry involving lay leadership, professional staff, clergy and many others including medical professionals, lawyers, and financial experts.

For more than a month now, AJ leadership has received expert guidance in emerging synagogue best practices to fully understand that which is at stake and options available to provide a safe, meaningful, spiritually enriching and appropriate High Holiday season for our congregation. We have worked extensively with the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism (USCJ) and other Jewish leaders who have been remarkably pro-active in providing an in-depth understanding of evolving CDC guidelines, legal liability issues, *halakhah* and values for Jewish religious observance.

To address this technically complex and highly emotional challenge, AJ has organized a task force of about twenty members to consider a vast range of ritual, programming, education, operations and building issues, as well as financial, fundraising, membership and communications matters. After considerable and thoughtful discussion, debate and analysis, the group reluctantly but responsibly recommended that we will not host in-person High Holiday services in any of our sacred spaces this year. While a deep disappointment for all of us, we believe wholeheartedly that it is also the right decision and one fully consistent with the most fundamental Jewish teachings and Jewish values that we all hold so dear. Overseeing life takes precedence even over the sanctity Shabbat—*pikuach nefesh docheh Shabbat*. The Hebrew phrase does not translate as “saving” a life, but “overseeing.” The Rabbis commanded us to violate Shabbat without any certainty that the violation would save a life. If such is the *halakhah* about how to react to a potentially dangerous situation, all the more so we should not unnecessarily place ourselves in a potentially dangerous situation.

Rav Shai, Hazzan Glantz and the Task Force are deeply committed to designing a High Holiday experience to honor our rich AJ traditions and to engage our community. We will offer High Holiday programming that uniquely reflects the character and “personality” of the AJ community. While the details are in the early stages of development, we expect our observance to focus on online (virtual) services and may include selected outdoor events, weather permitting. We will keep you informed of Task Force progress so you and your families can plan your High Holiday observance in a way that is respectful, appropriately solemn as well as creative, energetic and uniquely AJ.

Warm regards,

Judy Stutman Izes

Howard Levin

