



July 2, 2020/ 5781

Dear Judea Reform Congregation,

We are writing with a major update to decisions about our worship and our building re-opening. We announced at the Annual Meeting that our building would remain closed through July. Sadly, we now know we will *not* be physically gathering face-to-face, to worship in our beautiful building, for the High Holy Days *and* for the foreseeable future.

The underlying value informing our decision-making and planning processes, in all areas of Jewish life, is the ultimate mitzvah of *Pikuach Nefesh*, “saving lives.” Our Executive Committee has approved the following plan for August through December--informed by our Health Advisory Team and expertise across many fields directed toward Houses of Worship (Jewish and interfaith):

Our worship through December will be virtual and our building will remain closed. We make these decisions to protect the health and well-being of our Clergy, leaders, staff, and congregants.

We appreciate that our community comprises individuals with varying levels of comfort and risk, and we have spent many hours in deliberation about these decisions and have entertained many scenarios. In the end, Houses of Worship remain one of the highest sources of risk for virus transmission and we return to a decision of institutional caution that protects the greatest number of people and the greater good.

As we have seen these last few months (since mid-March) Judea Reform is very much open. We have come together for worship and community in a virtual space, and our staff has pivoted at every turn to meet the demanding work required to produce online experiences. While being together in person will always be our first choice, we continue to aspire to create and reform our rituals in a virtual environment to reach toward holiness, meaningfully and authentically. Rabbi Soffer has successfully led online Shabbat Services, shivas, funerals, B’nei Mitzvah, Torah study, baby namings, and even a wedding—all during this pandemic. In every instance, our community members have found tremendous meaning.

By leaning in and making realistic longer-term decisions now, it will allow our leadership and staff to be focused on the engagement and work we need to do to move forward. Of course, we will be continually monitoring conditions around COVID-19 and public health guidelines for the state of North Carolina and the country, and if we believe the conditions are right for phasing a re-opening of our building before the end of December, we will do so.

What this means for worship over the next 6 months:

High Holy Days

We have started our planning for a transformative High Holy Days, and in mid-August we will

share Judea Reform's roadmap for the Days of Awe. As Ziva said at the Annual Meeting, "this will not look like any High Holy Days previously." But we are confident it will be authentic, rich, creative, spiritual, and music-filled.

Shabbat Services

During this pandemic, our virtual *Beit K'nesset*/Sanctuary "lives" interactively on Facebook Live and our website. By centralizing our Shabbat worship experience on Friday evenings our community has discovered and felt the power of being all together, as one praying community, countering the reality of physical distancing. We are continually expanding our capabilities, intentionally leveraging technology to celebrate more and more blessings in our congregation (and reaching many, many more people).

B'nei Mitzvah

From August through December, our 15 B'nei Mitzvah students will bless, teach, and chant Torah and Haftorah during *T'filah* on Friday evenings (Erev Shabbat). In this way, we affirm the essence of being B'nei Mitzvah--to be in community. From each of our homes, yet together online, we will honor and celebrate our students and their families, as they bring honor to our tradition, in powerful and unprecedented ways. Every student and family will continue having the full guidance and support from our clergy and staff (including their tutor).

Religious School

Our Religious School will be virtual this Fall, with exciting and intentional synchronous learning on Sunday mornings, tailored to each grade level. We will create and foster a strong and enduring connection to Judaism, in ways both impactful and relevant to our times. We will enliven what it means to "live Judaism" with a transformative Racial Justice curriculum, through a Jewish lens. Planning is underway, with a strong team of our leaders, and our Director of Congregational Learning Rena Fraade will share more details later in the summer about Religious School and registration.

As we move through summer and prepare for the Fall, we have a great deal of work ahead of us. Thank you, in advance, for your patience as we support our staff and leadership in taking vacations and time off during these summer months. Rabbi Soffer started a well-deserved vacation on June 28th and will return for Erev Shabbat, July 10th; this has been an unusually intense period since the pandemic started, and Rabbi Soffer has led us every step of the way—from reinventing all of our rituals to being present at too many graveside burials and virtual memorial services to speaking out for Racial Justice. May he have all the rest and renewal possible.

We understand this is a lot of information to take in and for many (as it is for us) these may be hard decisions to hear. Thank you, in advance, for your trust in our leadership as we traverse these very challenging and uncertain times.

Chazak, Chazek, V'nitchazek ("Be strong, be strong, and we will strengthen each other."),

Emily Young, Executive Director
Ziva Raney, President