Dear Friends:

During past weeks, much of our conversation as a congregation has been about safety and security, in the wake of the terrible shooting at Chabad House in Poway, California - the second direct attack on a synagogue in seven months -- and following attacks on houses of worship in Sri Lanka and New Zealand. I don't have to tell that we're already well into changes in how we operate here at HEA, that we've initiated following the Tree of Life shooting in Pittsburgh. As a congregation, we have an unusually welcoming reputation; and we're intent on preserving that quality. But today we also field a very visible Greeter/Safety volunteer team at both of our Shabbat services. We're keeping our doors locked at all times, including throughout services, and we're well into making modifications to our buildings that give better protection to our kids in classrooms and to our members during events.

Within the tragedies in Poway and in Pittsburgh we see examples of heroism, as well; and facts that corroborate our planning for such an event here at HEA, however unlikely that may be. Our first line of defense for a shooter emergency is centered on keeping threats out of our buildings -- denying entry to a potential intruder. You can see that priority in the
way we monitor visitors arriving, and how we focus concern on individuals who may be unfamiliar to us. Particularly in light of what happened at Chabad, we're also working on plans for how we react if a threat ever gets through, and we're required to defend against an attacker inside our building.

We're now testing a system that will keep one of our greeters inside the Sanctuary during services, in radio contact with other team members, able to provide an early warning in the event an attacker could gain entrance to one of our buildings. You may be called on to participate with us in a drill during services, to familiarize each of us with how we should respond in that kind of emergency. In the meantime, there are other things we can all be doing in this new environment to assure our common safety. We each need to adopt the same attitude that our Greeters are being trained for, watching for anything, anyone, that might suggest a threat to our shul. We're telling our greeter volunteers to err on the side of caution; that if it doesn't look right, to tell somebody else right away - and we need for all of us to be similarly watchful. At Poway and in similar attacks, we see how much the course of events can be changed by one or two individuals who take the initiative to fight back against an attacker. Preparation, it turns out, can take what might have been a cataclysm and reduce a tragedy tenfold.

We hope and pray that such a thing never occurs here; but we know that it's not impossible; and that it's important for us to prepare mentally for such an event; to think about where we
are, and what we would do if that happened here, today. We're all much better off if we think ahead to that possibility. And, if you're inclined, please know that we do need additional volunteers on our Greeter/Safety Team; particularly those who are regulars at the Shir Hadash service. Please let any volunteer know if we can involve you in that.

Neal