

Dear Skokie Valley Family,

With Pesach behind us and an uncertain future ahead, we wanted to take a moment and reflect on where we have been, where we hope to go, and how you can shape the future of our community.

Where we have been

On March 13th, with great sadness, we closed our physical building. That day however we opened new frontiers of community connection, support, prayer, study, mourning and celebration.

We, collectively, have not let our pillars of Torah (study), Avodah (prayer) and Gemilut Chasadim (acts of lovingkindness), cease for a moment.

Together, we have been:

- **Praying daily**, with community members joining together for shacharit, mincha and maariv. We have held uplifting Kabbalat Shabbat, Havdalah, Tot Shabbat and Sefirat HaOmer gatherings. Though it is not the same as being together in person, for many of us praying together has provided comfort and strength.
- **Learning daily**, with mishna or parsha for those whom we would normally say kaddish, holding regular weekly torah classes, special series, drashot, and holiday learning.
- **Connecting to one another** through hundreds of phone calls, texts, and whatsapp messages, including over a dozen volunteers leading critical efforts to check in and help provide food, medicine deliveries and more to a list of over 60 potentially vulnerable community members.
- **Distributing 50 Open Seders-to-Go** at no cost to community members who were alone and might not have been able to have a Pesach seder, along with dozens of pounds of healthy kosher for Pesach food at very low cost. This was made possible by the generous funds donated to Maot Chitim, a team of volunteers, and the tireless work of our member, Chef Bryan Gryka.
- **Donating hundreds of meals to first responders** to support those on the front lines of the crisis and local kosher restaurants.
- **Making masks with our member** Manya Treece, who is leading an initiative with sewers from our community to make and donate over 770 hand-sewn medical grade masks for medical professionals (www.maskmath.com)
- **Supporting community members financially** who are being negatively impacted by the financial crisis.
- **Staying healthy** with community members stepping up to lead Zoom programming designed to keep people connected and healthy in body and mind.

- **Sustaining all of our Skokie Valley employees** who depend on our community by keeping them fully employed.
- **Preparing our building** as our maintenance staff have cleaned and sterilized the building, kashered the kitchen for Pesach, and worked on projects that could not normally be done when we are gathering.

Each of these initiatives was the product of our community members giving their time, creativity, and resources. Together, we brought comfort, support and likely saved lives through these efforts. We can step back and wish each other a *yasher koach* on these efforts.

The Future

We are moving forward together on this unprecedented journey. While we are one community, we also recognize that we are having many different experiences. Some of us have lost loved ones. Others have been sick. Some of us have been unscathed physically but are suffering emotionally or financially. Some of us feel lost with little to do. Some of us are overwhelmed with the demands of parenting and schools being closed for the rest of the year. And more.

As we plan how to respond in the coming months, we want our future to be shaped by the collective and individual experiences you are having. To that end, we hope you will tell us what you need. We have put together a simple, two question reflection survey - your input will help guide our response in the coming weeks and months. [You can share your perspective here.](#)

We also anticipate that things will continue to be fluid. Our support systems remain in place: 1:1 time with Rav Ari, chessed groups, errands, financial resources, What'sApp communities and more. You can find all the information on these support systems in your daily email.

Returning to shul

We all yearn to go back to the way things were just six weeks ago. Handshakes and hugs, singing together, answering amen to a kaddish: the simple things about communal, spiritual life that we took for granted are now the stuff of dreams!

We also recognize that the threat of COVID has not lessened, nor will it likely abate in the near future. We will continue to follow the guidance of the Centers for Disease Control and the Illinois Department of Public Health, and we strongly insist all our members do the same. Our intergenerational, close community is particularly vulnerable to COVID-19. The Skokie Valley Medical Committee, which helped guide us through the shutdown process, is now beginning to work on the questions we need to be asking for synagogue operations in the future. As the situation evolves and we get more clarity, we are committed to sharing developments in a timely and transparent way.

Institutional Health

We are working hard to ensure that the synagogue is strong programmatically and fiscally so we can continue to carry out our mission. Rav Ari, the board and lay committees are busy planning for the different contingencies which may lay ahead. We will continue to adapt, be creative, and do all we can to meet the very real needs around us. We are also in contact with our fellow community synagogues, institutions, schools, and the government to respond together.

Growth

Through it all, our community is growing. Over the last few weeks, babies were born, new members joined, new leaders emerged. We believe that with God's help we will continue to grow. In these difficult economic times, we will make it possible for anyone who wishes to be a member to do so. We believe that the community support, pastoral care, Torah learning, and programming that we offer is needed now more than ever.

Action

If you are able, we ask you to consider acting to help us rise to meet those needs together. Here are some concrete things you can do:

- Reach out and deepen your connections to our community. Join a class together, have coffee over zoom, start a new chevruta, and support one another. Continue to stick together and to our Jewish tradition, and offer and ask for help when needed.
- [Support the shul financially](#). Your contributions make it possible for us to continue to offer critical community support, pastoral care, and spiritual inspiration to our growing community. The leadership of the shul is leaving no stone unturned in securing our fiscal future, including submitting an application within the first hours for government funding. We recognize this is a difficult time financially for many, but for those of us who are still working and in good shape we need you to ensure we can continue to provide critical services to our membership and beyond.
- Contact our Senators and Representatives to thank them for their efforts and encourage them to help keep the funds flowing for small businesses and nonprofits. See this link for more information. <https://www.svaj.org/advocate-for-our-shul>
- If you have talents and time you want to share over a zoom class, a committee, or more, let us know. This has been a remarkable time of people utilizing their skills and talents in new and creative ways to help.

A final thought.

This crisis has shown us that Skokie Valley Agudath Jacob is not a building, a minyan, a rabbi, a group of friends, or a collection of individuals. Skokie Valley is the tapestry of the connections woven between us, our Torah and our God. Skokie Valley is the weaving together of our legacy, our mission, and our future.

May that tapestry continue to grow and strengthen, in good health, with your support and God's blessing,

Debbie Eisenstein
Rav Ari