

FROM THE PRESIDENT

Chaverim (Friends),

Good news! I am delighted to announce that Ohavi Zedek Synagogue will return to our sanctuary, social hall, and classrooms before long. Of course, we must put the health of our most vulnerable members above all other considerations and heed the regulations coming from Montpelier. The clergy, staff, and other leadership are scrutinizing the state government's Vermont Forward Plan to translate it into a detailed process that will work for us.

Our reopening will be gradual, not sudden, and guided by several teams. Foremost is our COVID Task Force, a group of public-health professionals that has been meeting for a year to make determinations about pandemic rules. In addition, a larger group, with representation from all the projects that use our building, is addressing logistical challenges. Then there is a subgroup of our strategic planning initiative, *Imagine 2025*, which is examining the overarching issues that our pandemic closure raised, and looking out on a scale of years rather than weeks and months. Finally, a few excited members are envisioning how to celebrate with joy, singing, dancing, and, of course, food.

In comparison with other organizations and houses of worship we face certain unique challenges. These include our older demographic and the fact that our sanctuaries have poor air circulation with no windows to open. Additionally, conservators are restoring the Lost Shul Mural this year, and this work will restrict access to the lobby. Therefore, we will emphasize outdoor get-togethers at first and be cautious about indoor events.

Still, at some point in May, we will begin experimenting with indoor services and gatherings for small numbers of fully vaccinated congregants. At first, we will ask participants to sign up online and confirm their vaccination status. In accordance with state guidelines, participants will have to wear masks and maintain distance between family pods. Because physical distancing makes it impossible to stand around a Torah scroll, and masks preclude eating, we will begin with services such as Friday night Kabbalat Shabbat and indoor social events and meetings without food. If the state meets its vaccination rate and case number goals, indoor Torah reading and noshing could resume after July 4.

In connecting remotely for a year, we have learned much and changed as a community. Even as we return to on-site meetings, we want to preserve the relationships that our virtual gatherings have nurtured. For this reason, we will continue certain online activities and we will live-stream the services from our sanctuary for members who cannot attend in person.

Many details remain to be worked out, and at any moment the rules could change. Please read the weekly events emails thoroughly and check the website and online calendar regularly.

Some of our biggest questions regard the High Holidays. While we can assume that a substantial portion of our services will be in person in September as usual, it is too soon to say

what precisely those services will look like. It is possible that restrictions could still be in place. More importantly, since the remote access, shorter length, and modified structure of last year's services were popular and enhanced participation for many congregants, we will retain some of those elements. The clergy need time to consider what we learned, and to devise the optimal experience.

At this moment, I want to encourage all of you to sign up for the vaccine as soon as possible. By doing so, you protect not only yourselves but also the members of our community who cannot receive the vaccine due to their age or medical condition.

As always, if you have any questions or suggestions as we embark on this next chapter of our journey, please reach out to me or a member of our clergy or staff. And if you would like to join one of our committees, we welcome your enthusiasm and insight!

L'shalom (In peace),

~ *Nathaniel G. Lew*
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