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19 Adar 5780

An Important Message from our Community Physicians:

As physicians who care for patients on a daily basis and are in medical leadership positions, as well as members of our larger Orthodox community, the rapid spread of COVID-19 (novel coronavirus) throughout our local area and the nation compels us to send you this letter.

One week ago, there were 2 cases in Pennsylvania; as of this evening, there are 63, the majority in our own Montgomery County at 24 and rising. Nationally, cases have increased from 221 to over 3,000 over the past week with the rate of new cases rising exponentially. Deaths in the US have risen from a handful to 60, with new deaths in New York and New Jersey. In Italy, where there were no cases more than 3 weeks ago, there are now over 21,000, with more than 1400 deaths. Yet, in South Korea and China, the number of new cases and deaths have been dramatically reduced to a trickle.

We have been given the gift of time and, sadly, the suffering of Asia and now much of Western Europe, to implement measures immediately to avert the same fate. In addition to the meticulous handwashing and cleaning of surfaces, the single most crucial intervention that has made a difference in Asia, and which Italy and other countries are frantically implementing, has been the strictest of 'social distancing'. Beyond keeping a safe distance of 6 or more feet, avoiding all group activities has proven effective. What seemed to be draconian measures just a few days ago is now the minimum we can do.

It is imperative that all members of the Lower Merion community practice social distancing to the greatest degree possible. We are reiterating the need to adhere to the restrictions that have been implemented. The following is based upon the best information available right now, and these guidelines may need to be updated as the situation evolves.

Governor Wolf has closed all schools in Pennsylvania for the coming weeks. There is an increasingly likely possibility that (with the exception of grocery stores, pharmacies, and gasoline stations) all restaurants, retail establishments, and other places of congregating will be closed in Montgomery County, which is now 'ground zero' for Pennsylvania. Our Rabbanim have made the difficult decision to close our shuls at this time. As painful as it is to

relinquish the power of Tefilla b'Tzibbur, continued gathering for minyanim - whether official or ad hoc, and regardless of their size - render the school and other closures essentially meaningless in terms of limiting community transmission and spread of the disease.

We strongly discourage all adults and children from participating in joint meals, neighborly visits, trips to malls and coffee shops that remain open, organized games, and all unnecessary indoor or outdoor congregating. We recognize that social isolation can be extremely difficult and even harmful for our children in particular, and parents should consult with their own pediatricians for guidance.

We fully expect that new cases will continue to rise quickly over the coming days. The 1918 flu pandemic killed a half million Americans over 4 months. In Philadelphia, there was no effort made at social distancing until deaths mounted. In contrast, city leaders in St. Louis implemented early extreme measures, which kept the per capita flu-related deaths to less than one half of those in Philadelphia. Let's not make the same mistake. We are 10 days behind Italy and we believe that we have this rapidly closing window of opportunity to get it right by changing our behavior and practices. We are confident that we can do so with cooperation, compassion, and supreme effort.

It is our fervent wish that these draconian measures are effective in limiting the spread of this disease. May our adherence to the Mitzva of *ve'Nishmartem Me'od l'Nafshoseichem* - *And you shall very much guard your lives* (Devarim 4:15) lead to a fulfillment of God's promise of *Va'Hasirosi Machala m'Kirbecha* - *And I will remove illness from your midst.*

(Signatures are listed in the order received.)

Michael Braffman, MD
Infectious Diseases
Chair, Department of Medicine, Pennsylvania Hospital

Mark L. Tykocinski, MD
The Anthony F. and Gertrude M. DePalma Dean,
Sidney Kimmel Medical College at Thomas Jefferson University

Jeremy A. Mazurek, MD
Ari Weintraub, MD
Menachem Yondorf, MD

Jonathan Gomberg, MD
Robert B. Den, MD
Aaron M Rosenthal, DO

Yedidya Saiman, MD PhD
Joshua I.S. Bleier, MD
Melissa Bleicher (Malki Dvir), MD
Andrew Paris, MD
Alan S. Hilibrand, MD
Moshe Chasky, MD
David Kaye, MD
Ilana Baltuch, MD
David E. Stein, MD
Steven Stoll, MD
Eliot Friedman, MD, FCCP
Daniel Hirsch, MD
Hal Gordon, MD
Robert Mogyoros, DMD
Mendel Kupfer, MD, FAAPMR
Alexander A. Kleinmann, MD
Nadav Schwartz, MD
Mortimer Strong, DO
Amrom Obstfeld, MD PhD
Tamar Katz, MD
Shari Rudoler, MD
Jacob Finkle, DO
Rachel Niknam, MD
Tal Weinberger, MD
David Halpern, MD
Paul Ufberg, DO MBA
Michael Kornhauser, MD
Stephen Wallace, MD
Janet M. Michaelson, MD
Daniel Eisenberg, MD
David Miller, MD
Ian Gleaner MD
Ronald Werrin, MS (Hyg.), MD
Joel D. Pomerantz, MD
Yechezkel Schneider, MD
Nachum B Stollman, MD
Matthew Harris, MD
Zachary Daitch, MD
Dana Kupfer, DMD

Ari Gartenberg, MD
David H. Wiener, MD
Deborah L. Stein, MD
Adam Dicker, MD PhD
Netanel Berko, MD
Marlene R. Moster, MD
Esther Berko, MD PhD
Tomer Noff, MD
Jack Rychik, MD
Tami Danilewitz, MD
Elana Den Schwartz, MD
Mara Caroline, MD
Jay Rosenblum, MD
David Weiss, MD
Leslie Litzky, MD
Rachel K Hachen, MD
Carol Rivie Sirken, MD
Gail Greenspan, MD
Hillel S. Maresky, MD
Talia K. Ben-Jacob MD MSc
Oren Friedman, MD
Jack Ludmir, MD
Joseph Oved, MD
Douglas Jacoby, MD
Pia Pollack, MD
Yedida Goldman, MD
Herschel Kupfer, MD
Jonathan Gotfried, MD
Eli Miller, MD
Steven Raikin, MD
Zev Jacobson, MD
Irit Rasooly, MD MSCE
Mindy Rosenblum, MD
Leonard Silverstein, MD
Rene Rubin, MD
Chani Yondorf, MD
Adam Rosenbaum, MD
Melissa Schwartz, MD
{*additional signatures pending*}

