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THE RABBINICAL COUNCIL
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Steps We Can Take During These Trying Times

Rabbi Moshe Walter

אָבִינוּ מֶלְכֵנוּ מִנַּע מַגְפָּה מִנְחֻלְתֵּךְ.

Our Father, our King, withhold the plague from your heritage.

Whenever we recite the *tefillah* of *Avinu Malkeinu*, it is likely that we gloss over the request above and pay little attention to it. We often think of “plagues” as something from Biblical times. They belong at our Seder table and in *Mitzrayim*. Scarlet fever, the bubonic plague, typhus, cholera and other diseases are for history books and medical journals: they all belong to the world of the past. But all that changed this past week, when a coronavirus entered our community.

Who would have imagined when we were reciting the plea, “withhold the plague from your heritage,” this past Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur that, within six months, Covid-19 would essentially shut down nations, including Israel, the United States and large parts of Europe and the Far East. Would you have believed me if I had told you only two weeks ago that professional sports, the world of entertainment, businesses, the stock market and now our most sacred treasures — our shuls and *batei midrash* — would be locked down, shut, dimmed and darkened? As I continue to catch my breath and hope that I will wake up from a bad nightmare, I recognize that this is not to be. People are now confronted with how to deal with matters we once considered straightforward. A wedding is planned for next week: should it be cancelled, rescheduled or conducted in a backyard? How will a person’s restaurant or catering business — built with sweat and blood — survive? If things continue as predicted, will I be left without anything? How will *tzedakah* and *chesed* organizations manage the rapidly increasing communal needs? Some people have compromised family members or dangerous family situations: how can they stay at home under such conditions for weeks or months? Can we perform a *taharah* on a deceased person who died of Covid-19? How do we handle the burial of one who may have died of this coronavirus? And, of course, one of the most difficult decisions that a Rabbi must make: should the shul be closed? A shul is the place where we congregate in times of challenge and distress; should that now also be taken away? The challenging questions go on and on and on — and yet it has been such a short time since the coronavirus made its appearance locally. Oy, the pain and agony of our people is great!

In the first days of the coronavirus’ onset, I regularly asked myself: what does Hashem want from His people? What is He telling us? What did we do wrong? As days passed, I realized that I would never know the answer to these questions; we no longer are privy to prophecy. I recognized that our job is not to figure out *why* this has occurred. Our job is to determine *how best to respond* to the challenge that we all now face.

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In this vein, I present my thoughts, suggestions, recommendations and lessons learned from these early days of the coronavirus outbreak. It is my hope that this may serve as a path forward to help our community cope with and grow from this experience.

There are two ways to face a challenge that inflicts pain or suffering. We can shrink and retreat from the test — or we can face it and stand tall. I am certain of one thing: the coronavirus will pass; it may be 2 weeks, 4 weeks, 6 weeks, 8 weeks or more, but it will pass.

The question is how we will emerge from it. Will we become stronger in our faith and more resolved about who we are and about the community and nation of which we are privileged to be a part? Will we become givers or takers? Proactive or lazy? Determined or without direction? Hashem only sends us tests that we can confront. Thus, even in the face of this crisis, HKB”H believes that each of us — and our community at large — can withstand this challenge and become even greater, more unified, more creative and ultimately closer than ever to our Father in Heaven.

Here are seven strategies to enable us to come closer to Hashem:

DAVENING

It's true that *tefillah b'tzibbur* — communal prayer, our most powerful tool to beseech Hashem — has been taken away, but the Gates of Prayer are always open. We must continue to *daven* three times a day: with greater intent and with a deeper understanding of and insight into the words we recite. If you are not accustomed to davening three times a day, donning *tallis* and *tefillin* daily, **now is the time, more than ever.** Daven for others, for their safety and recovery; daven for the continued good health of all those around us and ask Hashem to bring an end to the global challenge which we all face.

TORAH STUDY

Talmud Torah is what makes us Jews; it is the foundation of our identity. During this crisis, the need to make time for Torah study is more important than ever before. Individually or in groups, we can and must take part in regular Torah study. If you have not been able to participate in regular Torah study before, this is your opportunity to make that change in your daily life.

Shuls and Torah organizations throughout our community have established regular and accessible lectures, *shiurim* and inspirational thoughts via Whatsapp, teleconferencing, WebEx and online links. Daf Yomi continues across the community in the same manner. Search out those opportunities and use this time to increase and deepen your Torah study.

CHESED

Yad Yehuda of Greater Washington and Bikur Cholim of Greater Washington are inundated with requests. As such, we must do what we can to care for our neighbors. Please make every effort to call people who are alone or have difficulty getting out of their homes. Look out for others; try to

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reach out to people so that they feel less isolated and alone. This is a scary and anxiety provoking situation for many people.

TZEDAKAH

Hundreds of community members are going to be experiencing financial hardship due to business closures, economic slowdown, client cancellations or inability to go to work and/or work remotely. If you can, contribute funds to local *tzedakah* organizations or to your shul's *tzedakah* fund. Maos Chittim donations will also be crucial at this time of year.

EMUNAH AND BITACHON

One of the greatest lessons of the coronavirus outbreak is that we now truly understand that we are not in control. We often believe that we “run the show,” that we are in control of our destiny. Today — more than ever — the famous saying, “Man acts and G-d laughs,” is very relevant. Let us all work on strengthening our faith in Hashem. Let us recognize that He loves us, has prepared the healing before the disease, will protect and guide us and will remove this virus from one and all speedily. Let us work on strengthening our belief that we are in the hands of Hashem — who is guiding, directing and shepherding us through life.

KEDUSHAH V'TAHARAH

We have learned that something that we cannot see, feel or touch can nevertheless impact us and endanger us physically, emotionally and spiritually. Let us use this as an opportunity to recognize that decisions we make and things we look at, read, watch and do also impact each of us spiritually in a positive or negative way. We can create angels or, G-d forbid, build spiritual enemies within us, within our homes and in the world. We don't see it or feel it, but it's true. Let us tap into the world of *ruchniyus* (spirituality) and use this virus to help us understand the power of *mitzvos* and *maasim tovim* (good deeds) that we perform — and their hidden spiritual energy — now more than ever.

ACHDUS

COVID-19 has imposed isolation, self-quarantine and an inability to meet or congregate. It has temporarily eliminated the communal structure that is so very near and dear to us.

Community defines us. We must respond in turn by being together and looking out for one another. We must bridge gaps and learn that there is more that unites us than what divides us. Let us work together to help others; let us combat cynicism and baseless hatred. Let us remove foul language and *lashon hara* from our tongues. Let us unite with our families, with whom we will be spending more time; let us appreciate and devote more attention and focus to them now that we may have

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more opportunity to do so. Finally, let us unite our community — with whom we will be spending less time —and realize how much we appreciate and need one another.

Please consider these thoughts and suggestions. I hope that they serve to make us stronger, greater and better people. I pray that we will emerge from this episode with a greater sense of mission and passion as Jews. I hope that we will all look back on these weeks and say that we indeed did climb a tall mountain that we never thought we could conquer and that we reached the apex. Finally, I pray that Hashem will see the personal efforts we make, and the care for others which we exhibit, and exclaim that the time has come to finally redeem His people, once and for all, and unite us this Pesach with all Jewry in Yerushalayim HaBenuyah!

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