

Presidential Matters

by Mitchell Stein

Unlocking Our Front Doors



On Saturday morning, May 29th, we unlocked our front doors and welcomed our congregants (with prior registration and following all established protocols) into our sanctuary to participate in Shabbat services in person.

About 15 months ago, I was seated in the social hall along with Co-President Steve Aronowitz, Rabbi Yaffe and Ritual Chairs Chuck Wayne and Mark Hoffer. We made a decision that day to lock our front doors (prior to the state mandated lockdown shortly thereafter). We had only one goal in mind in making that decision. The goal was to keep all members of our community safe as this pandemic started to threaten all of us.

It is now 15 months later and I can proudly state MISSION ACCOMPLISHED. I am aware that several members of our congregational family contracted this dreaded disease. However, I can say with 100% certainty, that they did not catch the disease because of actions taken by the shul. I am much happier to report (to the best of my knowledge) that each of these members are alive and doing well. That is truly a blessing.

We, as a community accomplished so much during this period of time. The list of “thank you notes” is so great that I will probably leave someone out. Trust me, it is not intentional. First and foremost I want to thank Rabbi Yaffe and Cantor Shron. During these months, our clergy led Shabbat services every Friday night and Saturday morning. They also led a daily minyan service. We celebrated every holiday together via Zoom. Rabbi and Cantor ensured that we did not miss a beat during this time frame.

Next, I want to thank all of the members who wrote columns for Temple Talk, led discussions, brought speakers and programs to our attention and made sure that we were connected to each other seven days a week. We continued with our community events with other synagogues, we continued interfaith services with our greater community and we never lost sight of helping those in much worse condition than us. In addition, Membership, Sisterhood, Men’s Club and others provided wonderful programs as well. I must also thank Audi for not missing a step. Every function she performs from our office was performed as timely and precisely as always. Our custodians kept the building humming by running our HVAC system, our water system and continuously cleaning the building while our doors were locked.

The largest group of people I need to thank is each and every member of our community. As the famous line from the movie Field of Dreams states.....if you build it they will come. There would be no reason to hold nightly minyan services if only 2 members attended. There would be no reason to ask speakers to present to us if they are talking to a blank Zoom screen, etc. We built opportunities to communicate, to learn, to share and to continue the sense of family and community that we started over 70 years ago.

In my opinion, there are 3 people who I believe deserve an individual thank you. This congregation is very lucky to have Dr. Alan Fein as a member. During this time, we contacted Dr. Fein numerous times. Dr. Fein was instrumental in interpreting the most recent CDC guidelines and kept providing us with risks and rewards of taking certain actions.

This congregation is very lucky to have Steve Aronowitz as its co-president. This has been a very difficult time for many individuals and for many houses of worship. Steve’s leadership was exactly what this shul needed during these trying times. Steve was often the point of contact for members to comment on how fast or slow we are moving, how strict or lenient with are with our protocols and receiving notes from congregational family members with specific issues and concerns. Working closely with Steve and jointly making these decisions it was apparent that we could not make every person happy. Steve’s goal was, as I stated before, whether or not you agreed with our judgement, nobody will catch this disease based upon decisions we made.

The last person I want to thank is Marc Figelman, the Chair of our COVID Committee. Marc put tons of time into researching CDC, federal, state and city news to present facts and to interpret these statements for us. Marc closely worked with Audi and the custodians to ensure that our first day back in the building was successful as it was. Without Marc’s hard work and dedication, we would not have returned as quickly as we did. By the way, Marc too was insistent on keeping our entire congregational family safe during this period of time.

My decision to attend in-person services on May 29th was not an easy decision. I thought about it for many hours. I discussed it with my wife and children. I solicited additional opinions from extended family and friends. I am very happy I attended services that morning. I felt an aura, an enlightenment, a feeling that cannot be described while I prayed in person. More importantly, I felt safe! The protocols that we are following made me feel that there was close to a zero percent chance I could catch this disease from another attendee.

My advice is don’t do what I did. Each person must weigh the pros and cons, positives and negatives and the risks and rewards before making this decision to return. Contact family, friends and doctors to ensure the right decision and the right timing for you to re-enter the building. Please keep in mind that we will be continuing Zoom services for the long-term. Should you decide to return in the next week or so, we will gladly greet you with a big smile behind our mask and greet you with a friendly wave from 6+ feet away. Should you return somewhat down the road, and the chances of catching the disease have diminished even more, we will greet you with a big smile and possibly a hand shake or embrace. Whenever you choose to return please remember (unless things take a turn for the worse), our doors are unlocked and we look forward to seeing you again in person.