

August 2020

Dear Yeshiva Community,

I am using this opportunity to reach out and discuss our current situation, a bit more in depth and breadth; our challenges, and what is expected of us. B”H we will be opening up with in-person learning, with very careful safeguards, as prescribed by our medical committee. At this time it is important that we understand what our guiding principles are, what goals are we striving for, and on what basis are we making our decisions.

Education, as used in the context of general studies, versus as used in Torah education, has two quite different meanings. Education, as is generally understood, is a way of conveying skills and information. Torah education, besides the skills and information, is meant also- and maybe above all- to convey the spirit of Torah. The Gemara [Sotah 22a] states that someone who has studied all of Torah, but has not had personal contact with teachers, is considered an ignoramus. In other words, he may know the information, and he may even have a reasonable skill level; but that is not yet Torah. The written Torah was given as a book, but the oral Torah was given as a communication between a teacher and a student. Even after being printed, the oral Torah remains at its heart a connection between a Rebbe and a Talmid.

We have personally witnessed this phenomenon in the last few months. While the dissemination of information has been attained to some satisfactory degree through the Zoom platform, the other elements of Talmud Torah have been woefully lacking. We were filled with dread thinking that the coming year would be once again Rebbe-less. It goes to the heart of who we are and what we stand for, to create an environment that is not merely knowledge about Torah, but is genuine Torah learning.

How does this interplay with the *pikuach nefesh* nature of this pandemic? Certainly, something which is a clear threat to life cannot be done under any circumstances. But there is a grey area, where certain activities have more of a potential to create the spread of the pandemic, while other situations are not as threatening. It is not a clear specific threat, as much as a general need to rein in communal activities. We engage in many activities in life that would be safer if we wouldn't do them and yet we do. For instance, if we never flew off on a vacation, we would have a slightly smaller chance of being involved in a plane crash. But no one would feel that the Torah mandates or even encourages that. The same way if we wouldn't use a car we would also be safer. Yet, nobody would entertain the thought that we would go on living without a car. There is actually a clear halachic mandate that covers this.

Therefore, if there is a clear medical reason why a particular activity of the school poses a specific danger, we are not allowed to do it. Similarly, if the government would prohibit schools from opening, we would not be allowed under halacha to open. Rather, when we have a situation where the medical dangers are slim and the law does not prohibit us from opening that is when we need to reach a decision.

This is not only us; society in general makes the same type of decisions, for instance, in allowing pre-schooling and childcare services to operate. It is not because it is safer than the schools, but because it's felt to be an important priority for having the economy run. Many other activities are allowed based on an evaluation of the risk versus their importance.

I would like to quote a New York Times article of August 10:

LONDON — Britain, having moved aggressively to reopen its economy after three months of coronavirus lockdown, now faces what some experts cast as a binary trade-off for a land that loves a good book as much as a cold pint: **schools or pubs?**

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On Monday, Prime Minister Boris Johnson came down on the side of schools. Visiting an empty classroom in East London, Mr. Johnson declared that fully opening Britain's schools next month was a "moral duty," and that in event of a resurgence of the virus, "the last thing we want to do is to close schools."

To avoid that scenario, medical experts said, the government **will have to be ready to sacrifice another hallowed British institution — pubs, as well as restaurants**, which reopened a few weeks ago under social distancing guidelines but are increasingly viewed as among the greatest risks for spreading the virus.

It is about choices; and thank G-d that our community will always choose school as our priority!

Another distinction between us and the general school system is that a public-school system cannot possibly control their student population, because of the sheer numbers and heterogeneity that exists in that system. Our school is small and very homogeneous. Everyone knows everyone else, and knows if there is an issue.

Besides the distinction in terms of health issues, there is also a difference in the ability to achieve their respective goals, as we explained before. Skills and information, which is the core goal of the public-school system can, to some satisfactory degree, be given over on a Zoom platform. Torah education the way it's meant to be, simply cannot be transmitted without a Rebbe-Talmid/ Morah-Talmida relationship.

Therefore, **a]** if there is no government injunction against it, and **b]** our medical team tells us that the danger to life from running an in-person school under strict guidelines, is slim, we are mandated to do it for our children.

Certainly, parents have the right to decide that for their child, it is not safe enough. It is their sacred duty, that if they feel uncomfortable, they need to protect their child in the way they understand. The school will allow any parents to make use of the Zoom platform and do whatever it takes, so that their child may at least partake of the information and skills instruction.

We often hear about how difficult Jewish life used to be. The battles to introduce Torah *chinuch*, and frustrations of keeping a Jewish school going, and the heroes who made it happen. We are here today because people made brave decisions despite hardships. Baruch Hashem, our hardships pale in comparison with what used to be. It is because of the efforts and sacrifices of those great people, that we are where we are today. Iy"H, if we do the right thing, Hashem will bless our children with great success in their Torah education, and we will have much *nachas* from them. Meeting challenges and braving them, has always brought out the best in Klal Yisroel!

A special *yaasher koach* to the medical committee, that has given an incredible amount of time and effort to work through the issues. *Yaasher koach* to the staff, for their incredible efforts in working out the different contingency plans.

And above all, thank you very much for being such wonderful and exceptional partners in the education of your children, and may HKB"H grant us all the wisdom and strength to make the right decisions.

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