Dear Board, Staff & Friends,

We are in very challenging times. As you know, Chesed Shel Emet, the truest acts of kindness, is the motivating principle of our Chevra Kadisha. Kvod Hamet, honoring the deceased, is our guide, first and foremost. The strength of Sinai Memorial Chapel, our community’s Chevra Kadisha and non-profit funeral home, is that each officiating rabbi is the mara de-atra, in terms of interpretation of Halacha and related minhagim.

Today our operating priority has become the health and well-being of our staff. Our chapels and the community’s cemeteries are a fragile human ecosystem. If a staff member becomes exposed to the virus, our staff must self-quarantine for a minimum of 14 days and Sinai Memorial Chapel’s ability to serve the community becomes significantly diminished, if not entirely disabled. As you well know, Jewish law says the ultimate concern is to take care of the living, and this will guide us.

To that end, we are modifying our religious preparation, funerals and burials in the spirit of pikuach nefesh. Our mission remains “care for the deceased; comfort the mourners.” We will do our very best not to sacrifice that. However, we must adjust the way we’re doing it.

What does this mean in practice?

We are limiting access to all Sinai facilities to staff and essential personnel. Arrangements are only being made over the phone and using e-mail. There will be no viewing of the deceased. Religious ritual preparation will be an abbreviated taharah, and not include washing. No congregational or communal Chevra Kadishas can enter Sinai facilities for religious preparation.

All funerals are being held at graveside. There will be no chapel or synagogue services. Attendance at a funeral is limited to clergy, funeral director, and cemetery groundskeepers. No unveilings are being scheduled. Once the pandemic is behind us, we will continue to be available to families to assist in commemoration.
There are well thought through rationales for each one of these new protocols. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact us. We will of course keep you up-to-date as our new reality evolves.

Rabbi Elchanon Zohn, who we often look to for religious guidance, stated in another context, that in many ways the new rules “contradict what I have taught for many years.” Yet, “Torah requires that we react to special times with special rules.”

We anticipate that you may have congregants for whom our new guidelines are difficult emotionally and religiously. They are difficult emotionally for us both as Jews and as funeral professionals. We share your pain, but we ask for your active support in gaining their understanding and acceptance. Please feel free to share this as appropriate with synagogue staff, Chevra Kadisha and lay leadership. It’s important that we be on the same page, speaking with a consistent voice.

As we approach Pesach, it seems like the malakh ha-mavet is all too present. Please know that we are here for you as we navigate these deep and dark waters together.

Shabbat Shalom!

Most sincerely,
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Executive Director
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