



June 12, 2020

Honorable Andrew M. Cuomo
NYS State Capitol Building
Albany, NY 12224

Dear Governor Cuomo:

We, along with other representatives of the New York State Orthodox Jewish camping community, have had the privilege of participating in no fewer than three telephone conferences with your senior staff over the past few weeks regarding the issue of sleepaway camps. We have also had the opportunity to furnish your office with a detailed formal written proposal, supported by an array of infectious disease specialists, pediatricians and other medical professionals, setting forth the concrete steps we plan to take to minimize any risk of COVID-19 infection among campers and staff. We have deeply appreciated these opportunities to engage members of your inner circle in meaningful dialogue about this issue.

Now, though, as you are poised to make a decision whether to allow sleepaway camps to open this summer, we beg your indulgence in allowing us one more chance to plead our case – on a personal level, directly to you.

Like your father Governor Mario Cuomo before you, you have shown great friendship toward our community, and we know that you will appreciate the depth of our concern about the potential shutdown this summer of all sleepaway camps in New York. Indeed, the closure of such camps would be felt more strongly in the Orthodox Jewish community than it is in the broader camping community. Orthodox camps have traditionally enrolled a disproportionately high percentage of overnight campers across the state. There are good reasons for that every year – and especially good reasons for that this year.



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Parents in the Orthodox community choose to send their children to sleepaway camps because they perceive the camping experience as an essential component of their children's growth: physical growth, emotional growth, religious growth. This latter point is the key to understanding why the sleepaway camping experience is so central to so many Orthodox Jewish parents. They know that the camps will provide their children with an immersive, seamless experience that fosters a sense of religious identity and instills traditional Jewish values.

Children in these sleepaway camps have an opportunity to live Judaism 24/7. They devote parts of every day toward religious study. They jointly recite prayers three times a day. They recite blessings over the food they eat over the course of the day. They observe the weekly Shabbat. They engage in activities and projects designed to help the less fortunate, in accordance with the Torah's mandate of tzedakah v'chesed. They learn about Jewish history, Jewish customs and Jewish heroes.

For parents who want their children to have such an immersive Jewish experience, enrolling them in an Orthodox sleepaway camp is an essential component of how they choose to raise their children, and a core expression of free religious exercise guaranteed in our nation's Bill of Rights. Little wonder, therefore, that sleepaway camps have traditionally attracted such a disproportionately high percentage of our community's children.

Foreclosing the Orthodox sleepaway camp experience would be an especially devastating blow this year. Schools have been shuttered the past three months. This has taken a tremendous toll on children and their families – not only academically and socially, but also religiously. In a community like ours, where so much of a child's religious development is tied to the classroom, the prolonged absence of structured school-based learning has had a severely negative impact on such development. This is what we are hearing from parents, educators and rabbis in our community. With schools across the state closed through at least the summer, the prospect of yet another two months with no structured educational or religious programming for our community's children – months spent, in many cases, in the hot summer city streets – is frightening.

This is why so many parents in our community are urgently clamoring – pleading! – for the ability to provide their children with an immersive summer sleepaway camping experience, this summer more so than ever before.

To be sure, in this era of COVID-19, we all recognize that nothing is as important as the health and safety of our children. Toward that end, on May 10, 2020, the Association of Jewish Camp Operators (AJCO, an organization that represents some 75 Orthodox Jewish sleepaway camps in New York, serving some 41,000 campers) submitted a detailed plan to significantly minimize any risk of COVID-19 infection. The plan, attached to this letter, was reviewed and approved by a broad array of esteemed medical professionals, all listed on page 2 of the AJCO proposal.

We also attach to this letter a more recent, and more detailed, analysis of the AJCO proposal, submitted by Dr. Daniel S. Berman, an infectious disease specialist at Montefiore Medical Center. (We have shown Dr. Berman's analysis to one of the most prestigious specialists in the field, Dr. Audrey R. Odom John, Chief of the Division of Pediatric Infectious Diseases at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. Dr. Odom John offered her enthusiastic endorsement of the key points of Dr. Berman's analysis.)

We quote the two concluding paragraphs of Dr. Berman's analysis:

"In summary, when we consider the extremely low prevalence of Covid 19 throughout New York State and nearby areas, together with tight screening to prevent infected individuals from coming in, and the infection control practices which will be in play in the sleep away camps, the chances of an individual coming in infected and spreading it are extremely low. In addition, those with underlying conditions will be excluded from the camp.

"When we combine this with what is known from the literature that incidents of Covid 19 in children is very low to begin with; the severity of illness is dramatically less in children, severe consequences may be limited to only those with underlying conditions (who will be excluded from camp) and transmission from children is known to be infrequent, the chances of a serious outbreak in camp are quite remote. Obviously, there is always some risk in sleep away camp related to infectious diseases, in both gastrointestinal and respiratory infections, as well as the risk of accidents, However, we accept such risks, as they are small. The risk of the Covid 19 outbreak and potential complications based on this analysis is comparable to other risks that we accept."

Thus, the medical risks of infection under the AJCO plan are minimal. They become even less of a source of concern when one considers the alternative for most of the children who would want to attend sleepaway camp but will be unable to if the state bans such camps. They will likely be spending their summer in an unsupervised social environment, exposed to countless anonymous others, with what surely must be considered a higher level of risk of infection. When one considers the non-camp alternative, the AJCO plan for sleepaway camps surely seems a safer, less risky approach.

Further, the risks of not allowing the sleepaway camps to open extend beyond the risks of infection. They also include the social and mental health risks of adding two summer months to what has already been an almost unbearable hiatus from regularly structured programming. Especially in communities like ours, where large families are the norm, many of them living in extremely cramped quarters, the prospect of spending the summer at home with no respite from the intense pressures children and their families face on a daily basis must be factored in as part of the overall risk assessment equation.

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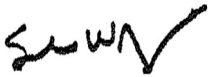
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One day, when the book is written of the remarkable renaissance of the Orthodox Jewish community in the United States after the destruction of European Jewry, much of the volume will tell the story of the Empire State's incredible contribution to that renaissance. And a very significant chapter of the book will speak about the indispensable role New York's many sleepaway camps played in shaping new generations of proud Jews who have contributed so much to the kaleidoscopic diversity that makes New York great.

Governor, now it's your turn to be a hero of that chapter.

We and the medical experts who have advised us will of course make ourselves available to discuss any additional ideas or concerns. Thank you for your kind consideration, and for your ongoing friendship.

Respectfully,



Sol Werdiger
Chairman of the Board



Rabbi David Zwiebel
Executive Vice President

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