Dear Friends,

As our lives, personally and professionally, slowly return to a new normal, I wanted to write to you again and update you on our work and plans for the future.

While we are one Institute, with a One Mahon Ehad ethos, it is important that we all recognize that our experiences in Israel and North America over the last 2 months have been very different. All of us - together with all most of humanity - initially experienced significant fear; fear of danger, fear of death, fear of the unknown, fear of loss of control. In Israel, however, for most of us, this fear was by and large replaced with anxiety and concern, and the ongoing struggle to handle the significant challenges of quarantine. That was not the case in North America. In particular in New York, our colleagues shared all of the same sentiments and difficulties experienced in Israel, but with the added and continued dimension of fear. Their ability to continue to work and function under these conditions is worthy of tremendous admiration and respect.

In Israel, and hopefully soon in North America, many of the work-related restrictions are gradually being lifted, and our children are also beginning to go to school – at least some of time. While we have successfully moved most of our work on-line, and will continue to function extensively in this way, we have decided to begin to require a partial return to work in person here in Jerusalem. Exact instructions as to who and how, were forwarded to you last week.

In general, we will begin to expect workers and fellows who are not in a high risk category, and or do not have special circumstances, to return to working on the campus in a managed and staggered manner, so that we can exercise safe social distancing and comply with the all the necessary precautions as dictated by reason and law. Our high schools will function in accordance with the mandates of the Ministry of Education.

We have learned many things about ourselves and our work over these last few months. Many of these lessons will continue to accompany us and shape our individual, communal and work environment and culture. There is no doubt that digital platforms will have an increasingly significant role in our work from now on. They will open up new opportunities, methodologies and audiences.

We are beginning to think extensively about this and plan for our future. That said, interpersonal relationships both with colleagues and students will remain core to our work. I look forward to seeing many of you in person over the coming weeks and to have you see each other in new and old ways.

In the meantime, I don’t know when our students, outside of the High Schools, will be able to join us here in Jerusalem. As we are rapidly approaching the end of the academic year, it probably will have to wait until after the summer. Unfortunately, we have cancelled all our Israeli based North American summer programs and are now in the process of planning special and rich on-line alternatives, especially for lay leaders and rabbis.

On the programmatic front, one new aspect is worthy of mention. While the immediate dangers of Corona may be passing, its effect on our lives - physically, psychologically, spiritually, morally and politically – will be with us for a long time. As the Rambam has taught us, it is forbidden to waste any calamity or tragedy. Each offers and opens up opportunities to grow and learn. Our world will be in need of Torah, new ways of thinking about humanity, Judaism, Israel and North American Jewish life. It is our role as an Institute to provide some of that Torah. To that end, all fellows, faculty and teachers are beings asked to help articulate questions and issues, and the Institute as a whole will be marshalling its resources to develop ideas, curriculum, classes and writing that will be relevant for this time.

I know many of you have questions and concerns about the future – the wellbeing of the Institute as well as your jobs, salaries, grants and compensation - and I would like to spend some time laying out where we are and what we know.

These are difficult and very challenging times. Our first decision, at the beginning of the crisis, was to remove any and all immediate job and salary uncertainty, allowing us all to spend whatever limited resources we had on coping, adjusting and functioning within the crisis environment. At the same time, over the last two months, we have been working extensively to assess the risks and financial consequences that COVID - 19 will have on our financial capabilities, and to developing strategies on how best to respond and plan for the future.

I want to share with you both where we are, and what we are planning. Before getting into specifics, in order to lower the anxiety level, while we, like most other non-profits, have been adversely affected, we have the ability to implement measures that will ensure the wellbeing of the Institute, morally, financially and culturally, while avoiding extreme hardship to our community as a whole. There will be hardship, but we believe it will be generally manageable both institutionally and personally.

The situation as we know it now, is as follows.

The overall budget of the Institute in 2020 is approximately $33,000,000. Of that sum, we had a fundraising objective of $2,300,000 in order to balance our budget. We were well on our way to meet this objective, however, the COVID 19 crisis both caused a reduction in certain expected donations, and effectively removed our ability to raise new monies in 2020. In addition, after going over every line of pledged contributions, there is a degree of exposure in an additional $800,000, which we might, but we cannot be certain that we will receive. In order to balance our budget, we have to make up the shortfall of $2,300,000 and develop contingency plans for covering the $800,000 in the event that they do not arrive.

A word on balanced budgets. The Institute has no endowment from which to draw for our ongoing operations, and with the exception of High School tuition, we need to raise our total budget every year from donations and government allocations. During the 2008 financial crisis, we instituted a critical policy decision, whereby we determined that the Institute would not carry debt. We would spend only that which we had raised. At the time. This led to an immediate decrease in the Institute’s budget from $9,00,000 to $6,000,000. This decision not only enabled us to weather the financial crisis, but served as the basis for our remarkable growth of over 500% in the subsequent 12 years, a growth that enabled us to expand our work, to hire many of you, and provide respectable wages and fellowships.

Balanced budgets are not only strategically necessary for the wellbeing of every non-profit, it has become an integral part of our institutional culture and identity. One cannot aspire for excellence and leadership in one area, while functioning in a mediocre and irresponsible manner in another. As was the case in 2008, so too in 2020, our responsibility and mandate are to function responsibility and within our means.

That said, the level of financial and psychological uncertainties, coupled with the dramatic increase in unemployment, requires of us to be extra careful in protected you, our workers. We cannot teach values and ethics, and not function internally by these same teachings. Both responsibilities have guided us on our thoughts and decisions.

Let me return now to some of the numbers and financial realities within which we need to function..