



GUIDANCE to Shuls and Communities ON REOPENING

Presented by
the Orthodox Union and the Rabbinical Council of America

May 8 2020 – 14 Iyar 5780

We continue to grapple with the profound impact of COVID-19 on our physical, emotional and financial health. We are heartened by the community's embrace of the required community mitigation strategies, and by the resultant impact on the flattening of the curve. And we are anxiously awaiting the day when we can return to our shuls, schools, and yeshivas and to the full range of communal life.

We must be clear: the COVID-19 crisis is far from over. While the CDC, federal, state and local governments and health departments are all discussing - and sometimes implementing - roadmaps for reopening, we must proceed with caution, recognizing the immense gravity of the decisions we are making and their impact on the lives of our community members and fellow citizens. We must sort through the many voices and the conflicting guidance and we must chart the course suited for local conditions, based on informed medical opinion and the values and Halachic approaches conveyed by our Poskim.

This document presents thirteen principles that should guide the decisions and planning of our shuls and communities throughout the country. They focus primarily on the eventual reopening of communal davening. Guidance on other matters will follow. **As made clear below, the issuance of this guidance does NOT imply that any reopening should be done at this point.** It is simply a framework to guide the choices that leadership will need to anticipate and plan for.

The drafting of this document was informed by our dedicated Medical Advisory Panel, with the guidance of our Poskim, Harav Hershel Schachter שליט"א and Harav Mordechai Willig שליט"א. It has been reviewed and supported by Harav Dovid Cohen שליט"א and Harav Asher Weiss שליט"א.

The situation continues to evolve and thus these recommendations and guidelines are formulated based solely on currently available information and advice. As always, shuls and communities must strictly follow the guidelines provided by local and national authorities, including the CDC and local health departments.

1. WE ARE NOT YET READY TO OPEN

Our Poskim and our medical advisors are urging continued caution, as we MUST maintain the priority of our mandate to preserve life (Pikuach Nefesh). In addition, given the unique social patterns of our communities – including daily shul and “shiur” attendance, myriad life-cycle events, and high levels of inter-communal travel – our community is at a higher risk for rapid disease transmission, and has already suffered terrible losses as a result. As such, we must not be in a rush to normalize, and must proceed with the greatest caution and care. **The resumption of communal prayer and other communal activities should not be considered until – at the very least – the successful and verified safe completion of the local government’s first stages of communal reopening, i.e. at least two weeks after the local governments have allowed public gatherings of more than ten persons, and have not seen upticks in disease.** For example, in New York, if the first phase of reopening would begin on May 15, the first stages of beginning public davening would wait until May 29.

2. EVERY COMMUNITY IS UNIQUE

There can be no global or national schedule for reopening. Some areas of the country have hardly been touched, while others have been devastated. The relaxation of restrictions in Israel has no bearing upon New Jersey, just as the decrease in new hospital admissions in New York can occur simultaneously with a rise in Maryland. Shuls and communities must be guided by local realities, and should coordinate their plans with local public health officials in order to ensure full compliance with all relevant laws and health guidance, and to get periodic updates regarding the status of COVID-19 in their area. This coordination will also be required in order to review steps that would be necessary should it be determined that a congregant was contagious during communal davening (see <https://www.naccho.org/membership/lhd-directory>).

3. REOPENING WILL BE A GRADUAL PROCESS, NOT A SINGLE EVENT

Sadly, we will not be able to just throw open the doors to our shuls and all come back together. We will return slowly, in smaller groups, for shorter times, perhaps less frequently, and certainly with social distancing and masks. For some time we will not be able to hold a public Kiddush or Shalosh Seudos, nor attend anything resembling a typical wedding, Bar Mitzvah or funeral. During the first stages of reopening, we will be able to restore some level of public davening, but we will continue to miss a great deal of communal life. And we need to anticipate stops and starts, as steps made towards reopening may need to be reversed if accompanied by a rise in cases.

4. MAINTAINING UNIFIED COMMUNAL STANDARDS

Due to the delicate staging of reopening, we must work hard to maintain communal discipline. This will only be accomplished if communal leadership continues to speak with one voice. Throughout this crisis, we have seen magnificent examples of cooperation and coordination amongst the rabbinic, medical and lay leadership of the shuls in a community. This unified approach – both in deciding and implementing policies – was not only inspiring, but critical to communal well-being. This must continue during the reopening process, as all shuls in a community should make their reopening decisions in a coordinated and consistent manner, and should maintain consistent standards for other social functions.

5. THE STRUGGLE FOR DISCIPLINED COMPLIANCE

Orthodox communities thrive on social interaction, and with the passage of months of social distancing, people are starved for human contact. We have already observed how compliance with ongoing standards of social distancing is very challenging, but it will make or break a successful normalization process. We MUST effectively uphold and encourage - in shuls and all settings - the physical distancing between individuals and the consistent wearing of masks, even when interacting with others from a distance. For the very same reason, communal leadership may need to create or continue applying uniform policies (“Lo Plug”) - such as the current prohibition of porch or backyard Minyanim - due to real concerns regarding poor compliance.

6. EMPATHETIC AND FIRM COMMUNICATION

This prolonged challenge has left many in the community anxious and tired. As such, policies need to be formulated and communicated with the proper blend of understanding and firmness. Effective communication by the rabbis and other leaders of the shul and community will therefore be crucial, along with the recruitment and training of suitable people to help appropriately encourage and enforce ongoing standards.

7. REOPENING IN CONTROLLED, PLANNED SETTINGS

In most scenarios, when reopening finally begins, the individual's participation in Minyan will need to be planned rather than spontaneous, participating in a specific Minyan at a specific location with a specific group and limited number of people. This will limit the level of exposures and possible transmissions, and facilitate a framework for contact tracing should infection appear. This will be a fundamental and difficult shift for many individuals and communities, requiring a literal "kovei'ah makom l'tfilato", designating a firmly fixed place and time for davening. Shuls may need to establish registration systems, where individuals are limited in the number of Minyanim they may attend altogether, or where they may sign up for a specific Minyan that they will attend regularly and exclusively. **Community leaders and members must recognize that spacing, masking and cohorting reduce risk but do not eliminate it, while frequency and quantity of attendance increase risk.**

8. SPECIFIC PLANNING FOR SHULS IN VARIED SETTINGS

Every shul will need to draft a specific plan, particular to its population and facility.

- A.** Seating should be eliminated or marked off, such that each "open" seat will have eight feet of space surrounding it.
- B.** Systems need to be put in place to manage entry and exit so as to avoid convergence of crowds at those times. This may be accomplished by ushers, by announced instructions, and by using and directing people towards all available exit doors.
- C.** If eliminating seating will result in the shul being unable to accommodate all who wish to attend, other spaces in the building could be designated for Minyanim, and Minyanim may be planned sequentially, with a cleaning in between. Care must be taken that responsible parties monitor compliance at all Minyanim, and that the multiple Minyanim are properly staggered to avoid congestion at entry and exit points.
- D.** As duration of contact is also a factor in transmission, shuls should make specific plans to make the public Davening as short as appropriate, curtailing singing and speeches, and perhaps donning Tallis and Tefillin and saying the first parts of Davening (Brachos and Pesukei d'Zimra) at home and gathering in shul before "Barchu". Our Poskim will provide more specific guidance when this becomes relevant.
- E.** Participants should ideally bring their own Siddurim etc from home, or - if necessary - choose one Siddur that consistently remains in their cubby or Tallis bag and is not used by anyone else.
- F.** Planning must be in place for consistent cleanings and disinfection, for limiting the need to touch common items by propping internal doors open, and for having a readily available supply of soap and hand sanitizer. Congregants may be encouraged to bring their own hand sanitizer, and to use the restroom at home before coming to shul.
- G.** The shul must ensure that all Davening spaces are well ventilated by windows or HVAC systems.

9. OUTDOOR MINYANIM

Outdoor Minyanim should also not be allowed until – at the very least – the successful and verified safe completion of the local government's first stages of communal reopening. Furthermore, we must distinguish between two kinds of outdoor Minyanim. The private outdoor Minyan elicits major communal concerns surrounding the fear and the actual experience of many that these can be unplanned and uncontrolled, with poor adherence to social distancing standards. On the other hand, a shul-based or organized outdoor Minyan where compliance is properly monitored and maintained has the advantage of providing superior ventilation as well as the potential to more easily create significant social distance during and after davening. As such, in small communities, the shul should consider holding the Minyan outside, in the shul parking lot, when weather permits. In shuls that have always held multiple, crowded Minyanim, it may be impossible to accommodate all the members in the shul building now that its capacity is dramatically reduced by the spatial requirements of social distancing. These shuls may choose to create a managed system where groups on a specific block are tasked to form a small outdoor Minyan that they exclusively attend. **Care must be taken to ensure that this not become a free-for-all. Every outdoor Minyan should be specifically authorized by the communal leadership and have assigned responsible leadership that ensures compliance - even outdoors - with standards of masking, social distancing, and with limiting the Minyan to a small and consistent cohort of attendees.** These outdoor block Minyanim should be immediately cancelled or stopped when it rains, rather than moving to an inadequate indoor space.

10. RESTRICTING ATTENDANCE:

It is of paramount importance that anyone diagnosed with COVID-19, quarantined due to exposure, or otherwise under suspicion for developing infection, NOT ATTEND Minyan, indoors or outdoors. This includes anyone exhibiting any symptoms of illness. Laxity in enforcement of this standard can have grave consequences for other congregants. Shuls should prominently post signs reminding people of this basic and Halachically mandated requirement, and may consider asking members to sign a commitment to that effect before returning to shul.

11. DISCOURAGING ATTENDANCE:

Those over 65, or those with chronic medical conditions - including the severely obese, as well as those with lung disease, diabetes, heart disease, hypertension, severe kidney or liver disease, neurological disorders, and the immunocompromised - who are at high risk of severe COVID-19, should be forbidden - or at the least highly discouraged - from attendance. Shuls should make extra efforts to take steps to consistently reach out to and include these congregants, as their isolation will last longer than others. Additionally, our Poskim have stated that even a young and healthy individual who is personally concerned about shul attendance due to COVID-19 is exempt from attending Minyan and is free from the obligation of reciting Kaddish.

12. SOCIAL DISTANCING, SECURITY AND LAINING:

While in shul, as well as while entering and exiting, congregants should maintain social distance. Where entry is monitored by security, systems must be established to avoid crowding as lines form. Masks must always be worn, and there should be no physical contact between people or kissing of ritual objects. The traditional format of Torah reading would not allow for social distancing, both in terms of physical space and shared contact with the Sefer Torah. Rabbanim should decide and plan how this will be handled. The person who reads from the Torah may remove and return the Torah to the Aron Kodesh. He may also perform on his own a modified, Sefardic-style Hagbah and Gelilah. Gabbaim may remain distant, and either the Reader may take all the Aliyot, or those called up to the Torah may stand at a significant distance during the reading.

13. ANTIBODIES:

Many members of our communities have already experienced COVID-19, and have had positive antibody testing. While there is reason to hope that this may confer some level of immunity for a period of time, there is simply insufficient data available at this time for this to dictate differences in policy, and all should consider themselves susceptible to infection with the COVID-19 virus (just as individuals can catch the common cold repeatedly). Over time, as more is learned about the protection that prior COVID-19 virus infection provides against renewed infections - including symptoms, severity, and contagiousness - and the durability of that protection over time, these assumptions will be revisited.

It is our sincere hope and prayer that our decisions going forward maximize both communal safety and our service of Hashem. יהי רצון שתשרה שכינה במעשה ידינו ויהי נועם ד' אלקינו עלינו.