



Guidance for Shuls for Yamim Noraim (High Holidays)

**Presented by
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As we approach and plan for the upcoming *Yamim Noraim*, we do so with the recognition that this season provides us all with a critical anchor for the rest of the year, in several ways.

First, during this time G-d decides our fate, as individuals, as communities, and as a world. We therefore flock to the synagogue during this season, knowing the critical importance of our approaching G-d with prayer and *teshuva*.

Second, the season's focus on prayer and *teshuva* renews and recharges our connection to G-d and Torah, and provides us with the framework to define our most meaningful ambitions for the coming year.

And third, it is during this period that the synagogue truly serves as the rallying point for the community, bringing us all together more than at any other time in the year. Men and women, young and old, come together in the synagogue for prayer and inspiration, to cry and to sing.

Due to the pandemic, this year we must plan for a *Yamim Noraim* that will be very different than usual. The requirements of social distancing will limit the capacity of our shul facilities and – in many cases – require us to subdivide into smaller groups. Distancing and masking will challenge the feeling of community among the assembled. Time limitations and other constraints may force the elimination of inspiring parts of the service. And – most difficult of all – many members of our communities may not be able to come to the synagogue at all.

But while the *Yamim Noraim* will be different, they can be profoundly meaningful. Challenges should drive us to work creatively to overcome. Each of us – as rabbis, communal leaders, and community members – can and must work resourcefully to make this season memorable for its opportunities and not only for its limitations. The myriad technical details involved in pandemic shul planning must not distract us from the true focus of coming to shul, and our material efforts to accomplish things safely must not divert us from putting our hearts and souls into the spiritual efforts of prayer and growth, and from extending ourselves to others with genuine warmth.

This year, more than ever, we need our prayers to be meaningful.

This year, more than ever, we need the spiritual renewal that this season provides.

This year, more than ever, we need to strengthen the bonds and the embrace of community.

What follows are principles to guide the decisions and planning of our shuls and communities throughout the country. This guidance is predicated on the principles shared in our earlier guidance on reopening, issued on May 8, 2020 (https://www.ou.org/assets/OU-Guidance-To-Shuls-And-Communities-5-8-2020_F-1.pdf).

The situation continues to evolve and varies significantly from region to region. As such, these recommendations and guidelines are formulated based solely on information and advice available as of August 2020. As always, shuls and communities should follow, at a minimum, the guidelines provided by local and national authorities, including the CDC and local health departments.

- 1. Compliance:** By-and-large, our shuls have been models of compliance with public health recommendations during this crisis. This is profoundly inspiring and represents a true kiddush Hashem and affirmation of our choosing life, a value cherished by the *Melech Chafetz BaChayim*, the King Who desires life.
- 2. Seating Plans:** In addition to masking, we continue to urge social distancing, leaving six feet between seats occupied by non-family members. As such, the *Yamim Noraim* assigned seating model will be very helpful for maximizing usage of space by seating family members together.
- 3. Outreach to Members:** Shuls should reach out as soon as possible to each of their members to ascertain their plans for the *Yamim Noraim*. While surveys may be effective in getting a general view of what to expect, proper planning for this season will require advance knowledge of every person's plans. Wherever possible there should be personal and individual outreach to all members and past seat-holders.

This outreach should not be simply formal and technical, but inviting and caring. All men and women who are coming to shul will need to be accommodated, and those who are unable to come should be addressed and cared for.

- 4. Adding Minyanim:** Shuls may consider providing additional *minyanim* for several reasons. Buildings will have capacity issues due to distancing requirements. Many people will require or prefer an outdoor option and/or a briefer service for health reasons. And as many shuls will be unable to provide childcare services, parents of young children may require different *minyan* times to allow each parent to daven in shul while the other watches the children.

Proper shul planning will weigh using multiple spaces versus reusing the same space with early and late *minyanim*. The latter option allows more of the community to daven in the *beit kneset* (sanctuary) space and will address the needs of parents of young children to alternate their davening times, but it will also necessitate a significantly shorter service and a sanitizing between services.

- 5. Difficult Choices:** There is significant Halachic and tangible value to davening in a *beit kneset*, a facility designated and maintained as a House of G-d; to davening “*b’rov am*,” within a large group; and to following the prescribed and customary order of prayers. In addition, communal singing and words of Torah enhance our shul experience immensely. The unfortunate realities of the pandemic may require communities to make difficult choices, foregoing some of these valuable components for the coming *Yamim Noraim*.

- 6. Ventilation & Duration:** Efforts, including consultation with HVAC experts, should be made to ensure proper ventilation of the space. As noted in our earlier guidance, masking, distancing, and ventilation reduce risk but do not eliminate it, and duration of exposure may increase risk. That said, there is no meaningful universal recommendation we can provide regarding a proper length of the service, given regional variations in disease and the quality of ventilation in the particular davening space.

- 7. Shortening the Davening:** Halachic guidance regarding whether and how to shorten the time together in shul has been provided by many *poskim*, and local rabbis should decide the Halachic solution that is most fitting for their community. Options may include eliminating *Mi Shebeirachs*; saying the first sections of davening at home and beginning the public minyan at *Nishmat Kol Chai*; reducing the amount of singing and length of speeches; and possibly eliminating certain customary *piyyutim*.

Care should be taken to ensure that these changes not be so extreme as to empty the shul experience of its soul. A shul should be a *makom rinah*, a place of song, and a *makom Torah*, a place of learning. Communal singing, words of Torah inspiration, and familiar *piyyutim* are very valuable components of the *Yamim Noraim* experience. If deemed safe and practical, they may be reduced but not eliminated.

- 8. Planning & Preparation:** Planning for multiple *minyanim* needs to begin early. Considerations may include identifying additional neighborhood facilities, indoor or outdoor; ordering tents; and critically, preparing to staff these *minyanim* with adequately prepared *baalei tefillah*, *keriah*, and *tekiyah*. To assist shuls in meeting the increased need for *Baalei Tefillah*, we have developed - with the support of the New York Jewish Federation - a *Yamim Noraim Baal Tefillah* training program, which can be found at <https://www.ou.org/Chazzan/>.

- 9. Shofar:** An appropriate precaution during shofar blowing would be to place a surgical mask over the wider end of the shofar, as this does not appear to alter the sound of the shofar blast. Some may point the shofar out an open window or door, or near and towards the front wall or aron kodesh, facing away from the congregation. A single shofar should not be used by multiple people, and no barrier should be placed between the shofar and the mouth of the one blowing the shofar. *Poskim* have addressed when and how much to sound the shofar where the time in shul is seriously limited.

- 10. Torah Reading:** In order to maintain safety during the Torah reading, options include having the *baal koreh* take all the *aliyot*, having those called up standing at a significant distance during the reading, or using a plexiglass shield separating the *baal koreh* from the one called up to the Torah.

- 11. Avoiding Crowding:** 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.

12. Mikvah: While it is customary for men to use the *mikvah* during this season, this cannot be done without the implementation of a proper and safe men's *mikvah* protocol.

13. Caring for Those at Home: A critical concern is providing for those who will be unable to attend shul. As noted above, shuls are encouraged to reach out personally and individually to all members and past seat-holders. Those who will be unable to come to shul must be supported, addressing both their social and practical needs. Community members should ensure that they have Yom Tov food (including *simanim*), a Machzor, guidance for davening at home, and additional helpful reading material. Most important, where possible they can have someone regularly checking in with them, safely distanced visitors, as well as someone to blow the shofar outside their home.

14. Including Singles: Communities and individuals should make meaningful efforts to include singles of all ages who live without family. These months of isolation have been especially trying for this population, and efforts should be made to safely welcome them to the homes of others in a responsible manner.

15. Children's Programming: Shuls will have to consider if there is a safe way – consistent with local regulations and guidance – to provide childcare and programming during the davening on *Yamim Noraim*. Where this cannot be done, shuls should nevertheless design some form of age-appropriate outdoor programming during the afternoon to ensure that they too have a *Yamim Noraim* shul experience.

16. Divrei Torah: As noted above, words of Torah inspiration and guidance are an essential part of the *Yamim Noraim* experience. While there is an outstanding array of quality Torah content that is available online and in print, there is no substitute to the messages of Torah that are communicated by our personal, local mentors. Every effort should be made to provide opportunities for sharing those messages directly. While speeches during morning davening may be limited, other times – both during the *Yomim Tovim* and preceding it – should also be utilized, as well as the written word. Shuls will do well to provide nationally produced and shared learning materials for individuals and families to use at home to enhance their *Yamim Noraim*, but they would do better to include and highlight the local rabbi's voice, where he shares the personal and direct messages tailored to his community.

A closing thought. During the month of Elul and the *Yamim Noraim* we recite the 27th Psalm twice daily, where we express the following: "There is one thing that I ask of G-d, it is that which I seek: that I dwell in the house of God all the days of my life..."

Jewish communities are built around the house of G-d, the synagogue. Yes, much of Orthodox Jewish life can be conducted without a synagogue, and all the technical elements of a service can be accomplished in a backyard *minyan*. For months we prayed and studied at home, supported by outstanding online content. But there is no substitute for physical community, for the relationships that are nurtured by the social framework of that community, for a room full of voices raised together in prayer and song, for being in a House of G-d, and for a nurturing personal connection to religious mentors. Yes, we as individuals have made it without some of these for months, but we would be mistaken to dismiss their value for the long term.

Your shul needs you. It needs your presence and it needs your support. Our rabbis have been working incredibly hard during this pandemic, tending to issues of health and safety, finances, pastoral counseling, planning for a radically different *Yamim Noraim*, and multiple other areas of unprecedented communal challenge – all while tending to their usual and expected responsibilities. They have acted heroically to benefit us all. Please support them during this important season so that they will be there for us now and for the long term.

We need each other. We have all been through a challenging year. As a result of COVID, many of us have suffered the loss of loved ones and have experienced serious illness, financial difficulty, isolation, and profound uncertainty and stress. Let us all look out for each other and reach out to each other with understanding and support.

We look forward to getting past the many technical and practical issues addressed here so that we may arrive at the *Yamim Noraim* prepared to pour out our hearts to G-d in genuine and sincere prayer, beseeching Him to bring an end to this pandemic and its many challenges, and that He help us to emerge from it with health, strength and renewed commitment.