



Pesach Guidance for Shuls and Communities

**Presented by the Orthodox Union and the
Rabbinical Council of America**

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As we look forward to the celebration of Pesach, we are profoundly grateful that many regions are beginning to see some lifting of the pandemic limitations, particularly due to the rollout of the COVID-19 vaccines. We hope and pray that the vaccination campaign will gather even more momentum, allowing all of us to soon be afforded its protection and ultimately defeating the virus. We salute our shuls and communities for their efforts in vaccine education and facilitation of appointments and vaccine access.

Though the ever-evolving situation varies significantly from region to region, Pesach will certainly be enhanced for many because of the CDC's recent announcement permitting the fully vaccinated to be unmasked in private settings with others who are vaccinated, or with a single unvaccinated family.

While it appears that, b'ezrat Hashem, the end of the pandemic is in sight, we are not quite there yet and thus the CDC and others direct that masking is still required in public gathering places such as shuls. In addition, as the disease remains a threat and is presenting in extremely contagious variants, for those who have not yet been vaccinated continued care and caution must be exercised even in private homes. Exercising caution will also help ensure a smooth school reopening following Pesach.

A Reinvigorated Community of Connection

The past year has left us craving a return to togetherness and to the social connections that allow us to experience and to extend friendship and community. The greater latitude already experienced by the vaccinated will make Yom Tov a wonderful opportunity for them to reconnect with both family and friends.

Yet, even as many of us find our way back together, many of our neighbors and acquaintances remain lonely, vulnerable, and overwhelmed. Especially around Pesach and the three-day Yom Tov, each of us must reach out to reconnect and to provide meaningful support and appropriate companionship.

Yom Tov is also an opportunity to once again express our appreciation to the medical and Chessed professionals and volunteers, shul rabbis and rebbetzins, school administrators, and the many other communal workers who have worked untiringly to address our personal and communal needs. And we encourage your support through Maos Chittim Pesach funds for our fellow communal members in need, especially this year when many of our community have been affected economically by the pandemic.

Looking Forward – Returning to Shul

We now must look to the future. The task before each of our shuls and communities is significant, as we must bring people back to a fulsome participation in shul and communal life. Halacha speaks clearly to the superior value of communal davening and of its location in a dedicated Beit Knesset. Yet as our nation and community begin to heal, we well understand that the process of return will require us to go beyond the language of obligation. We are compelled to strengthen the pull to return to the shul, whether from the backyard minyan or from our homes; whether from an alternative social structure or from the darkness of loneliness.

As communities this is a moment for us to think creatively and engage in meaningful discussion as to how we strengthen the draw to return to shul, identifying and incorporating the positive lessons to carry forward from this year's experience while also identifying what we must leave behind. We must explore fundamental questions, including:

How can our shuls be warmer and more welcoming and give everyone a true sense of belonging? How can we make the shul experience more positive and compelling? What lessons have we learned from alternative/backyard micro-minyanim and communities that we can bring back to the shul? How do we better engage men, women, and children? How do we ease the transition back to shul, both for those who have been in alternative minyanim and for those who have stayed away from any form of public prayer?

This year has been filled with limitations. We are exhausted from the pandemic and left depleted by the imposition of an endless flurry of rules. We must work within the safety guidelines to make our communal home reassuringly safe but more comfortable and less imposing, maintaining proper but not obsessive safety standards and restoring the music and connection of shul life as safely and as quickly as we can.

The dramatic growth and strength of the Orthodox community has been fueled by a strong communal experience. For months we prayed and studied at or near home, or in limited shul gatherings, 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.

We again urge one and all to look out for each other by reaching out to and providing for each other, especially those living alone. We join in prayer that our communities and our country be spared any further suffering, and that we merit to experience the upcoming festival as *zman cheiruteinu*, as a true season of liberation.

Chag Kasher v'Sameiach.

These recommendations and guidelines are formulated based solely on information and advice available as of March 15, 2021. As always, shuls and communities – with the guidance of local rabbinic and medical leadership – should follow, at a minimum, the guidelines provided by local and national health authorities.