



Guidance for Shuls for Succot and Simchat Torah

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

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The following is being presented to assist local synagogue and communal leadership in their planning for Succot and Simchat Torah.

The Yamim Noraim season posed unique challenges to all of us, as individuals and as communities. The limitations imposed by the pandemic have been a source of discomfort and stress, and we are all working to strike the right balance between establishing proper safety and responsibly restoring some feeling of normalcy.

It was truly a *kiddush Hashem* to observe the commitment of our shuls, rabbis, and lay leadership to provide a safe and compliant environment for so many of their members to be able to experience a meaningful Yamim Noraim in and around their shuls. It was equally inspiring to note their similarly outstanding efforts to serve those members who could not join for in-person services. We hope and pray that HKBH will see this as a profound merit for our community, and that He will see fit to bring a safe conclusion to the pandemic and its challenges.

For now, however, we must plan and prepare for Succot and Simchat Torah, being especially mindful of the recent rise in positive tests in many communities. This uptick is a source of genuine concern, and we must be committed to make every effort to reverse it by proceeding with appropriate caution.

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 September 30, 2020. 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 authorities, including the CDC and local health departments.

Celebration of Succot may continue while conscientiously applying the principles that have governed our behavior thus far. Within the parameters provided by local health departments, shuls may continue to conduct services with masking and social distancing. The communal Succah should be used with similar caution, and the use of shared communal *arba minim* – which should be held without wearing gloves – should be preceded and followed by hand sanitizing. To conduct the *hoshanot* with proper social distance, rather than having everyone present join the *hakafa* at once, it may be most practical to divide into smaller groups that take turns making the circuit around the *bimah*.

Simchat Torah will present the greater challenge to celebration of the *chag* as we know it. This special day is typically celebrated by spirited dancing with the Torah, which is something that seems impossible to replicate this year while maintaining proper safeguards. Even without holding hands, and even outdoors, when dancing in circles we are continuously walking into the clouds of droplets generated by the vigorous singing and dancing of others. Sadly, there seems to be no way in which this can be safely accomplished. Similarly, the special moment of *Kol HaNearim*, when the young children crowd together around the Torah, cannot be safely accomplished in the conventional manner. These are certainly meaningful disappointments.

Nevertheless, while we may be unable to have a typical Simchat Torah, we will be able BEZ"ח to celebrate the day. Traditionally, Simchat Torah is not celebrated through Torah study, but rather by demonstrating our *ahavat Torah* and our *kavod haTorah*, our feelings of love and admiration for the Torah. Those feelings of love for the Torah and its values are expressed on Simchat Torah by old and young, and by those more and less learned. This remains an attainable goal for this year.

For starters, a basic *Hoshanot*-like series of *Hakafot* without vigorous singing and dancing may be conducted, with one group of people designated to hold the *Sifrei Torah*. This basic ritual may be supplemented as each of us thinks creatively of alternative methods to express our love and admiration of the Torah. What follows are a few such suggestions that are not meant to limit, but rather to encourage, your own creativity.

Please note that in certain locales it may be advised to make the service as brief as possible and to avoid adding the activities below.

1. Shuls that have secure outdoor spaces available, such as a parking lot, may consider assembling outdoors with masking and social distance and conducting a *kumzitz*-type gathering there. In line with earlier guidance, it would be prudent to avoid any such extended indoor activity. Note that this format may also be an option to replace the usual *Simchat Beit HaShoeiva*.
2. In place of the seven circuits of singing and dancing, consider assigning seven individuals to “sing the praises” of the Torah by sharing a few words expressing how Torah learning or living positively impacts their life. Presenters should not be chosen based on level of scholarship, and could include those who found Torah at some point in their lives, those who have recently adopted a regular Torah learning schedule, or those who can share an inspiring personal story.
3. Consider what you can plan specifically for the children, including possibly an outdoor *Kol Hanearim* without the crowding. Simchat Torah treat packages should be prepared and shared with the children either on Yom Tov or at a pre-Yom Tov drive-by.

In addition to the above celebratory activities, communities may choose a modest Torah study initiative that can be inclusive of all members of the community.

1. Consider assigning 54 members to each take a one-minute slot to share something from each of the 54 *parshiyot* of the Torah. Alternatively, assign 5 members to share something from each of the 5 *chumashim*.
2. Consider dividing up an area of Torah learning to be undertaken by members of the community over Yom Tov, celebrating the *siyum* together on Simchat Torah.
3. Consider a special emphasis on honoring or completing the *parshiyot* that we missed when shuls were closed. This can be accomplished through a sharing of Torah from those *parshiyot*, or through using the extra readings and *aliyot* traditional on Simchat Torah – instead of repeated readings of *V'Zot Habracha* – to make up the missed *parshiyot*. This alternative has been approved by our Poskim, Harav Hershel Schachter and Harav Mordechai Willig שליט"א.

Communities and individuals should make meaningful efforts to include singles of all ages who live without family, making special efforts to welcome them to their homes and *succot* in a safe and responsible manner.

We all 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 simchateinu*, a true season of joy.