

Open-Letter from Boston-Area Orthodox Rabbis to Our Communities

17 Adar, 5780 - March 13, 2020

Dear friends,

We write to you this erev Shabbat with ahavat Yisrael (the love and concern for every individual Jew in our community), kavod haberiyot (the dignity of every human being), and an aspiration toward responsible leadership. Our incredibly interconnected world faces a serious threat of pandemic (novel coronavirus, COVID-19), and many of us may feel legitimately anxious. One of the most important principles of Jewish law and ethics is the mitzvah: “וְנִשְׁמַרְתֶּם מְאֹד לְנַפְשֵׁיכֶם” - And you shall very much guard your lives” (Devarim 4:15). We have a fundamental religious duty to protect our own health and safety, as well as that of others. This mandate overrides every other mitzvat aseh (affirmative Torah and Rabbinic obligations).

Keeping safe and not causing harm are Biblical Mitzvot of the highest proportions, while praying with the congregation and hearing the leining is a Rabbinic Mitzvah and of lesser significance. Our Sages say (TB Yoma 85b) that it is better to minimize one Shabbos in order to have the health to celebrate future Shabbatot; “וְחַי בָהֶם” - and you shall live by them (Vayikra 18:5),” and not imperil yourselves through the mitzvot. We have continued to be in contact with medical and public health professionals, as well as poskim and Jewish leaders nationwide, to develop guidelines for Shabbat, and ongoing during this public health crisis, that honor this call to action.

Based on a best-practice approach (notably the Rabbinical Council of Bergen County), effective Friday, March 13th at 3 pm, we are taking the below precautionary steps to mitigate health risks in our congregation and in the larger community. We will review and update this policy on a regular basis, as the situation continues to evolve:

We are suspending all in-person Shul activities and closing our buildings to the public - including all minyanim, educational classes, meetings & youth groups - until further notice. People who need to pick up personal effects and religious items should do so this Friday, if possible. To continue to daven as a “Tzibbur” we recommend davening in your homes at standard Shul davening times, so we know that our tefilot will take place at the same time as the rest of our community, even if not in the same place. Read the parasha in keeping with our keriyat haTorah cycle. We will explore using technology to connect us during weekday davening times, even if a virtual minyan is not halakhically possible.

We ask that our members NOT attend other minyanim in Shuls to which they do not belong, and NOT form private minyanim in households. This will undermine our communal effort to stop the spread of coronavirus. All of the Rabbis will be davening alone at their homes. Life-cycle Events: We will not host public celebrations for the time being, but will work with families to find creative, safe ways to celebrate their simchas.

In the event of a funeral, God forbid, we may ask, depending on the circumstances at the time, that attendance be restricted to a small group of family members and a minyan. We will employ technology to share hespedim and honor the deceased and comfort the mourners. As such, shivah visits should be conducted by telephone or video calls.

While our local Mikvaot remain open, women under quarantine or who are experiencing symptoms of acute infectious illness (e.g., cold, flu, stomach bug) may not use the mikvah. Please direct any questions to your rabbi, and/or Yoetzet Halakhah Sarah Cheses (NE.yoetzet@gmail.com; (339) 364-2848) and/or call your mikvah.

Positive Opportunities for Building and Sustaining Community

The halakhic and human dimensions of this present hour require us to separate physically, but also challenge us to bridge the "social distance" in other ways. We are called upon by our mesorah (Jewish tradition) to create social connections through small and large acts of chesed (caring and kindness). Each sub-community should make lists of people to call and check-in on, especially people who live alone or are at risk. Every physical step away from another human being must be replaced by a virtual step forward in terms of friendly connection and emotional support via the blessings of technology. Creativity is our bridge over "social distancing" and bring us together in our avodas Hashem, and keep people in the mode of soulful tefillah, shoring up their emunah, and feeling that they are not only protecting themselves and their families, and contributing to a local, regional, national and global response to pandemic, but that they are fulfilling the Torah's charge of "vaChai Bahem -- And you shall live by them!"

This unprecedented health crisis presents us as a larger Jewish community, as particular Shuls, and as individuals with the challenge of growing religiously and spiritually through virtual limmud Torah, synchronized and/or livecast davening, Tehillim recitation, and singing, and acts of chesed. Our path ahead is not known at present, but are confident that with Hashem's help, with our devotion, dedication and commitment to Torah, Mitzvot, Klal Yisrael, and human solidarity, we will overcome, persevere, and emerge stronger!

We wish everyone a Shabbat of spirit and strength. With tefillot to Hashem for health and hatzalah,

Rabbi Joseph Polak, Av Beit Din of the Boston Beit Din (Vaad HaRabbonim)

Rabbi Moshe M. Liberow, Menahel of the Boston Beit Din

Rabbi Noah Cheses, Young Israel of Sharon, Sharon, MA

Rabbi Mark Glass, Adams Street Synagogue, Newton, MA

Rabbi Yonatan Gorin, Congregation Etz Chaim, Sharon, MA

Rabbi David Hellman, Young Israel of Brookline, MA

Rabbi Yaakov Jaffe, Maimonides Kehillah, Brookline, MA

Rabbi Moshe Lieberman, Chabad of Newton Centre, MA

Rabbi Benjamin J. Samuels, Cong. Shaarei Tefillah, Newton, MA

Rabbi Gershon Segal, Cong. Beth El-Atereth Israel, Newton, MA

Rabbi Jason Strauss, Cong. Kadimah-Toras Moshe, Brighton, MA

Signatories as of Erev Shabbat, Friday, March 13, 10 AM