

COVID-19 Update September 3, 2020

Rabbi Aaron E. Glatt, MD

As we approach the *Yom Hadin*, I am being asked many questions regarding the *Yomim Noraim*, so I thought I would devote this note exclusively to this subject, and update other issues *motzei* Shabbos on our Zoom talk, which *iy"H* we will move up to **9:00 PM this week**. You can join the session via:

Zoom at Meeting ID 980 3243 6809; Password: SUMMER2020;

or by phone: 929 205 6099

or via YouTube link obtainable from yiwoodmerecovidupdate@gmail.com.

General Guidelines for the Yomim Noraim

There are **continued** increases in cases in the Far Rockaway and 5 Towns area (and elsewhere), almost all related to *semachot* and subsequent screening and testing of exposed persons. Some weddings have become mini super-spreader events with over 10-15 secondary cases, and that is only the tip of the iceberg as many are not getting tested. While the increase ***Boruch Hashem*** has not led to hospitalizations, this is again a perilous reminder that COVID-19 could still radically alter our upcoming Yeshiva and *Yomim Noraim* expectations.

Universal agreement was expressed by 140 of our community 5 Towns physicians in a strong published letter this week. (Many more were upset that they did not know about the letter and would have signed). Plus despite the fact that there is rare unanimity from all public health authorities bar none - **regarding the importance of proper masking, distancing and hand hygiene** - there is an inexplicable reluctance to do this by some in our community.

Not to be prejudicial, but from the volume of calls and emails I am getting, the "older" population is generally very concerned and adherent with the public health recommendations, while there is a laxity in observance of the rules by some in the "younger" age groups. Many exceptions to this and I apologize if I offended anyone. Certainly not my intention. But bear with me for a second.

Let's assume for a moment that all of the public health professionals, epidemiologists and infectious diseases experts are totally wrong.

Nonetheless, the perception of many is that they are not wrong. Therefore, a significant percentage of our community is very concerned about a potential resurgence of cases; that their children may be sent home from a newly closed school; and / or that they cannot hug their grandchildren at this time without a mask. I never had the *zechus* to meet any of my grandparents, *Hy"d*, but I would like to think I would gladly have worn a mask if they had asked me to do so.

The community's grandparents *and many others* are collectively asking you to **please wear a mask** and follow the public health guidelines. **Please listen to them.** If indeed you were right that a mask was not necessary – big deal, you wore a mask for no reason. But if they are right and you are wrong and you did not wear a mask, you may have harmed someone irreversibly.

.....

In the rest of this note, I will comment on various *Yomim Noraim* topics, some of which I discussed previously, but am consolidating here for easy reference. ***I am NOT paskening for anyone*** – I am simply providing my best medical advice that you and your Rav can choose to listen to (or not) and hopefully utilize to provide the safest environment for all.

Who cannot come to shul?

I reiterate that both indoor and outdoor minyanim at our shul and elsewhere can be made very safe for all people of all ages during the *Yomim Noraim* if the following rules are followed. This applies to all members, guests and relatives wishing to join in the davening.

- No one should come to shul if they or any family member living with them, have been sick with any potential COVID-19 symptoms in the prior two weeks.
- No one should come to shul if they have been exposed to a known COVID-19 patient.
- No one should come to shul if they are in quarantine from a travel advisory *or* exposure – even if they have no symptoms.
- No one should come to shul if they are totally disregarding masking and social distancing advice.

Who can come to shul?

If the above are followed, then I believe every person in *Klal Yisroel*, even those with significant COVID-19 risk factors, can feel assured that the shul will be a ***safe makom kedusha*** for their *tefillot* to be heard among their brethren. Again, the *poskim* have clearly said that if you still remain personally alarmed, you are *patur* – exempt – from *tefillah betzibbur* and you should continue to daven at home.

For those nervous and “wavering” about going to shul, attending a safe outdoor minyan that requires masks and social distancing is essentially not a risk. Nevertheless, if you are still unsure what to do or uncomfortable staying for a long time, attend only for selected parts of the davening that require a minyan.

Yizkor is one of the most emotional parts of our davening, but actually, a minyan is not required to recite it. No one should feel they are demonstrating a lack of *kavod* for their departed parents if they feel insecure and are afraid for their health to attend shul. Say *yizkor* at home if you are afraid.

If you are “going out of shul” because BH both your parents are alive (for many years to come!), please do not congregate in the lobby. In fact, there is nothing *halachically* wrong with even staying inside and saying *tehillim* or learning, although I know that many will feel uncomfortable being inside for *Yizkor*.

For those who “need a break” during davening for whatever the reason, take a walk ***outside*** and please do not congregate in the shul.

A delicate problem to discuss publicly is lavatory necessities. Bathrooms in shul still pose an unknown potential problem, even with proper handwashing (of course) upon exit. Not so much for contagion from urination or touching surfaces, but there is an unclear potential concern from virus in stool and aerosolization. Obviously, the longer davening makes this more of a substantial concern. Best practice is to please use the facilities immediately before going to shul and as possible, not again till you return home. Alternatively, if you live near the shul, use the facilities in your house.

What about Youth Programs?

This is a major question for which clearly there is **NOT** a *one size fits all* answer. Depending greatly on numerous factors, including but not limited to space constraints, age and number of children together, are they from the same class / school, are there children joining from out of the area, etc., youth groups and *chol hamoed* events pose difficulties, but they can be constructed safely. It requires planning and attention to detail, and will look quite different from other years in terms of the schedule and events.

What about visitors travelling from other places?

Assuming all of the above rules are followed, visitors from other areas present an unknown risk. Obviously, they cannot come from a quarantined location, and obviously, they must follow all the above shul rules.

The trip / travel itself is a risk that it is not able to be quantified. Evidence published just this week in prestigious journals documented both air and bus travel COVID-19 exposures and illness. I tell people that if they were always masked, and distanced as possible during the entire travel when they were with other individuals, it is a low albeit unknown risk. I would allow such a person to daven in a minyan masked and distanced.

A negative COVID-19 test is unfortunately not reliable enough to obviate the risk, but such testing might have a role under a physician's guidance. Same is true for testing *chazzanim*, *ba'alei tekiah*, and *lainers*. Again, a person recovered from COVID-19 is at a much lower risk of transmitting it when he performs any of these activities.

Davening and Selichot

An overriding principle this year is that davening should not be stretched out longer than *halachically* necessary, as determined by that shul's Rav. Drawn out "*chazzan singing alone*" parts in the opinion of some poskim should be curtailed. Appropriate knowledgeable staff at each shul should make sure the ventilation system is up to date with appropriate filters and utilizing as much outside air as possible.

Some minyanim will shorten the *tefillot* by skipping certain *piyutim* or starting at *Nishmas*, as deemed appropriate by poskim, based upon limitations in ability to maintain a safe space for a longer period of time (e.g. small area, large number of *mispallelim*, poor ventilation, need to make minyanim one after the other; etc.) or other reasons.

There should be no kvetching. *Mispallelim* can sing along with the chazzan softly, and people should not pace around the shul but should stay in their assigned distanced place.

No loud davening or screaming. **Hashem** hears us no matter how softly we whisper.

I do not think that *selichot* pose a significant risk if all of the above shul rules are maintained. Some shuls may have to make special accommodations for the longer *erev* Rosh Hashanah *selichot* because of space constraints.

In accordance with your Rav, wash hands using alcohol based solutions upon entry and exit from shul as appropriate. If your shul is allowing *kibudim* to be given, wash hands before and after opening *Aron Kodesh* or touching *sefer Torah*. I strongly suggest that **no** prolonged *mi sheberachs* should be said.

Shofar Blowing

I previously outlined my thoughts on this subject. Needless to say, each Rav determines what is *halachically* acceptable for his shul.

HaRav Willig *shlita paskened* you do not blow from the normal place, the bima where we lain, if that space is not considered safe to blow. And no should blow who does not meet the shul entry criteria above.

To reiterate briefly, any / all of the following are useful to decrease any potential risk of spread:

- Can blow all 100 sounds if there are no time concerns;
- You can blow in another room; by an open window; as far away from anyone else as possible; inside or near a partition; from outdoors as long as clearly heard indoors;
- Consider placing a mask loosely over the end of shofar - if the Rav allows and if it doesn't change the sound;
- Gather after davening or later in the afternoon in outdoor locations to blow 30 sounds for individuals who were unable to attend shul;
- No sharing of shofars;
- Have a recovered previously positive COVID-19 patient blow if possible.

Men's mikva'os erev Rosh Hashana / Yom Kippur

Discussed previously as well. ONLY applies to men's, **NOT** women's, mikva'os.

- Use ocean or natural body of water; *or*
- Use men's *mikva'os* that are able to open safely and handle the volume.
- Each *mikvah* and each *Rav* will have to decide if the latter is doable.
- Rely upon the principle of "*tisha kavim*" (a certain measure of water) in a shower.
- Don't go this year to mikvah.

Tashlich

Discussed previously as well. Should not be a large social gathering.

This beautiful minhag can be fulfilled 100% correctly *by yourself* near any body of water (or even without water) utilizing *tefillah* and introspection as a way to symbolically release our sins through expressions of teshuva, repentance and atonement. Can be done anytime between Rosh Hashana and Hoshanah Rabbah, does not require a minyan or others present. As an aside, it can be a very great and enjoyable *chinuch* opportunity for a family to do this together.

Succos

I am being asked many questions regarding purchasing and sharing the *daled minim* (lulav and esrog), building *sukkot* with other people, sharing meals in the *sukkah* with non-bubbled friends or family, *sukkah* hops, *hoshanos*, *hakafos*, *Simchas Torah* aliyot, singing and dancing, and other inquiries. Iy"Y will discuss these as we get closer to the Chag.

Kesiva vachatima tova and good Shabbos.