

VA'AD HARABANIM RABBINICAL COUNCIL OF BERGEN COUNTY, INC

PO BOX 1233 Teaneck, NJ 07666 • (844) 895-RCBC • <https://www.rcbcvaad.org>



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March 6, 2020

Dear Friend,

We ask you to please read this message carefully. All of the contents below are in full compliance with guidelines set forth by the Center for Disease Controls (CDC) and the New Jersey Department of Health (NJDOH), with whom we have been in contact throughout the week.

It is extremely important to bear in mind, as you read this message, that each locality has distinct guidelines, based on the specific fact pattern that relates to that particular township. Correct and responsible halakhic policies can only be based on the specific information and underlying facts in the location in question. You will surely note that our guidelines differ from those in other places, be they near or far. This is precisely as it should be. Your own particular Rav will communicate the guidelines which are applicable in each township included in our Va'ad.

First and foremost, even as we are mindful and vigilant concerning the ongoing situation, it is critical that we all continue to function on the basis of established facts and medical guidance. While it is perfectly appropriate to be concerned regarding the developments, we must all strive to remain calm. Social media is often a source of unsubstantiated information and can lead to unnecessary alarm.

It is critical that individuals who do not feel well, or exhibit symptoms of cough, fever, or shortness of breath, refrain from attending any shul, in compliance with CDC guidelines and those of the NJDOH. There is no halakhic imperative more important than ensuring the welfare of the community. In addition, we ask parents to please keep children who exhibit any symptoms home as well.

We fully endorse the guidelines concerning frequent hand washing, use of Purell (including on Shabbat), and avoiding contact with one's face. Moreover, it is our collective recommendation that individuals with underlying respiratory conditions or who are otherwise immunocompromised please consult directly with their healthcare provider before coming to shul, for your own safety. It is equally our collective recommendation that people should avoid kissing Sifrei Torah or Mezuzot at present.

Any individual currently under quarantine **may under no circumstances break that quarantine for any purpose**, and should contact their Rav directly for halakhic guidance regarding any and all observances of the holiday, including the reading of Zachor tomorrow.

May He who is the *Rofeh Ne'eman V'Rachaman*, the true and merciful healer, bring a complete and speedy recovery to all those afflicted with COVID-19. May He continue to shield and protect our community, and help us maintain the appropriate balance between vigilance and calm necessary at present.

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March 12, 2020

ט"ז אדר תש"פ

Dear Friends,

We are writing with an important update regarding COVID-19 and the ongoing health situation in our community.

Last night, the rabbis of the Rabbinical Council of Bergen County (RCBC), the presidents of our shuls, and the heads of our local schools gathered to meet with representatives of local government, including the Teaneck Department of Health and expert physicians from our three local hospitals: Englewood Health, Hackensack University Medical Center, and Holy Name Medical Center.

The message from the healthcare providers was clear. They need our help to slow the spread of the disease before their resources are overwhelmed. The doctors expressed significant concern regarding the capacity of our local hospitals to meet the growing needs of their patients in the event of a (expected) large surge in cases of COVID-19. They reported that while the amount of cases is still low, it seems to be increasing rapidly. Even if patients of COVID-19 will be treatable, we may deplete our resources and other patients who suffer from ordinary, serious illnesses will not be able to get the necessary care, putting their lives in danger.

Slowing the spread of the disease will allow our hospitals to best manage this situation. The only way to do this is for us to socially distance ourselves from one another. Moreover, the doctors emphasized that the most significant community closure possible will make the greatest impact in potentially saving lives in our area.

We have therefore made the very difficult decision to adopt the following policies of social distancing in our community. We intend to re-evaluate our policies next week on the basis of the expert guidance provided by the medical leadership of the three local hospitals. This panel will guide us as we continually monitor the ongoing situation as it evolves. We collectively agree to abide by the decisions reached by our lay, educational and rabbinic leadership on the basis of expert medical advice, to uniformly adhere to these standards, and to communicate collectively.

We must all try our best to stay home with only our immediate family for now and to avoid unnecessary contact with others, and particularly with substantial groups. We should only leave when it is truly necessary. Thus:

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1. All community members are strongly encouraged to work from home, if possible, and to stay home whenever possible. It is critical for adults to set the right example.
2. As the schools are currently closed, there should not be playdates between children of different families. This would undermine the entire purpose of the school closing.
3. Shuls will be closed for all minyanim and shiurim effective Friday morning, March 13. There should be no house minyanim. All of the rabbis will be davening alone in their own homes. Please daven at home, individually.
4. There should be no public celebrations for smachot.
5. People should not have gatherings for Shabbat meals.
6. Shiva visits should be replaced by phone/video calls.
7. Levayot should be restricted to a small group of family members and a minyan.
8. Refrain from contact sports.
9. Restaurants should not seat customers. People should order for pick-up and delivery only.
10. The Mikvaot will remain open, at the guidance of CDC and local health authorities. Women under mandatory quarantine or who are experiencing symptoms of illness may not use the mikvah. Please consult your rav for further clarification or for specific questions.

As you can see, these represent significant changes to our lives and many detailed questions will certainly emerge. This brief outline cannot guide every particular situation. We will all have to address each circumstance as it comes up based on professional expertise and religious guidance.

It is with a very heavy heart that we are suspending so many of the most crucial routines of our daily lives and lifecycle moments. We do this only because of the compelling nature of our circumstance and the decisive medical testimonies that are consistent with CDC recommendations. These measures are adopted as a reflection of our overarching commitment to the sanctity of all human life, and we pray that these will be very temporary measures. Please take these days as a critical opportunity to intensify our *tefilot* to the *Rofeh Ne'eman* that all those ill will be healed and that our community will be shielded from any further harm.

Sincerely,
The Rabbinical Council of Bergen County

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March 19, 2020

כ"ג אדר תש"פ

Dear Friends,

We are writing with an update regarding COVID-19 and the ongoing health situation in our community. We have all been following the news of the spread of this virus with great concern. Based on our consultation with medical experts from the local area hospitals, we know that the spread of the virus is on the rise and our hospitals are nearly at capacity.

Therefore, we urge the entire community to uphold the social distances measures we adopted last week with ever greater vigilance. No one should be within six feet of anyone else, aside from the family with whom one lives. The guidelines that were set last week are reprinted below as a reminder. In addition, we would like to add a number of updates:

A. There should be no stigma attached to this disease. It is no one's fault and we are all trying our best. In addition, please realize that many, many of us might have it with mild symptoms or even no symptoms. We should not be frightened because the vast majority of people who contract this virus will be completely fine and will recover after a few days of mild symptoms. Our communal efforts are for the sake of the small minority that are having significant symptoms and who can overload our healthcare system, which in turn may imperil the health of the entire population. Thank you to everyone who is helping make our community part of the solution to this challenge.

B. If you feel mild symptoms, call your doctor. The hospital is requesting that you treat mild symptoms at home and if you go to the emergency room with symptoms that may be COVID-19, please call them ahead so that they can prepare.

C. All RCBC updates are posted on our website: www.rcbcvaad.org, including online community events and sales at our local stores.

D. As we look towards Pesach, we acknowledge that while we cannot predict precisely what the situation will be in three weeks, we must plan based on the current fact pattern, and the expected course of the spread of COVID-19. On this basis, we urge everyone to stay home with immediate family, even separated from parents and grandparents. This is a painful but necessary precaution. Similarly, we should not travel to other areas of the country, even by car, especially not to Florida where we have a very large vulnerable population.

E. We anticipate that we may have to execute both the sale of chametz as well as the siyum on Erev Pesach online. Please stay tuned to your shul's announcements for details on that as we get closer. Alternatively, for first-borns who are able, there is still time to learn a small masechet and to make a siyum at home.

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F. We have been working with the local stores and groceries in order to arrange for the sale of fully prepared boxed Pesach meals that will be able to be purchased. Please look out for more information about that if you are interested.

G. We are all inspired by the way that the community is making this challenge into an opportunity for solidarity, for mutual concern and for personal growth. It is hard to keep track of all of the amazing creative virtual programming that is taking place. We are trying to post as many of them as we can on our website. We would also like to invite the entire community to sing Yedid Nefesh from your front doors or porches, starting at exactly 7 PM on Friday night.

Guidelines of Social Distancing: Always keep six feet away from other people-try to avoid sharing an elevator with someone else, if possible. Only do essential errands and try to do them at off times.

1. All community members are strongly encouraged to work from home, if possible, and to stay home whenever possible. It is critical for adults to set the right example. If you have to go to work, minimize interactions in transit and while there.
2. As the schools are currently closed, there should not be playdates between children of different families. This would undermine the entire purpose of the school closing.
3. Shuls are closed for all minyanim and shiurim until further notice. There should be no house minyanim.
4. There should be no public celebrations for smachot.
5. People should not invite guests for Shabbat meals.
6. Shiva visits should be replaced by phone/video calls.
7. Levayot should be restricted to a small group of family members and a minyan.
8. Refrain from contact sports.
9. Restaurants should not seat customers. People should order for pick-up and delivery only.
10. The Mikvaot will remain open, at the guidance of CDC and local health authorities. Women under mandatory quarantine or who are experiencing symptoms of illness may not use the mikvah. Please consult your rav for further clarification or for specific questions.

Please take these days as a critical opportunity to intensify our prayers and concern for each other and our communities. May we join together in health and happiness in the near future.

Sincerely,
The Rabbinical Council of Bergen County

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Thursday, March 26, 2020
ראש חודש ניסן, תש"פ

Dear Friends,

We are writing to share a number of updates regarding Pesach preparations and religious life during this unusual time:

1. Social Distancing: We urge everyone to continue to follow the guidance of the CDC and the medical community and to continue to be vigilant about social distancing, including during Pesach. Everyone should stay home with immediate family and should not travel to other homes or invite others into our homes. Similarly, there should be no playdates for children or adults. This continues to be critically important despite the profound challenges that it poses.

2. Tefilah: Please continue to focus your tefilos on all of the people who are struggling at this time, including patients with COVID-19, health care workers, families of patients, the elderly and isolated, etc. We should not underestimate the power of prayer and the importance of empathy and connectivity with each other.

3. Hoarding: Please do not partake in the phenomenon of hoarding any supplies. This is truly an expression of selfishness that is creating strains on our society. In addition, this practice is based on highly speculative predictions. Please purchase what you need and be considerate of others. This includes foods, medications and all other supplies.

4. Mikva: We are extremely grateful to the many people who have given countless time and effort to upholding the safety and cleanliness of the mikvaot for women and for keilim. Some of the Bergen County mikvaot are able to continue to remain operational and some are not. Please consult with your mikva to determine its status. If there are people who have extenuating circumstances and cannot use the mikvaot in the usual way, please consult with your rabbi for individual guidance.

5. Food and Pesach Preparation: a number of the local restaurants and caterers are offering specials for chametz and Pesach food or other Pesach needs. Please see our website where many of these are posted:

<https://www.rcbcvaad.org/important-updates/local-food-specials>

<https://www.rcbcvaad.org/important-updates/pesach-in-a-box>

6. Kashering Homes: The Kof-K and RCBC have worked together to prepare simple video instructions of how to kasher a home for Pesach. Please see them on our website here:

<https://www.rcbcvaad.org/rcbc-kosher/kashering-videos>

7. Community Educational Events: There are quite a few community educational events that are being held virtually, including Torah learning and mental health education. Please see our website where many of these events are posted:

<https://www.rcbcvaad.org/important-updates/local-online-events>

8. RCBC Website: If anyone would like to post anything on our website that fits into the categories listed above, please contact Rabbi Kenny Schiowitz at schiowitzk@gmail.com.

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Sunday, March 29, 2020
ד' ניסן, תש"פ

Dear Friends,

These last weeks have been trying for our community in many ways. For those of us fortunate enough to be healthy, the experience of isolation, quarantine, and extreme social distancing that the COVID-19 pandemic has necessitated has been challenging. And yet, it is precisely this sacrifice that has spared the lives of many in our community. We once again wish to express our collective gratitude for your understanding of these restrictions and vigilant adherence to them. With Pesach approaching, we feel the need to issue an urgent and dedicated communication regarding celebration of the holiday this year.

At this point, we are all surely aware of the underlying facts. New Jersey has the second most cases of COVID-19 in the country, with more than double that of California, which has the next most cases, and Bergen County has, at the moment of this writing, double the number of cases than any other county in the state. Within Bergen County, the towns most impacted are Teaneck, Bergenfield, and Englewood.

Our hospitals simply cannot sustain additional cases. As we have heard from senior and trusted physicians from our shuls, and at all of the local hospitals, the conditions are unlike anything that has been seen in the United States of America in generations. Local hospitals may have to split ventilators, forcing critical COVID-19 patients to breathe the same air. For the physicians and nurses themselves, there is a dire shortage of personal protective equipment. Let us remember that for every additional person infected, another may not receive the limited critical resources available in our hospitals, whether they suffer from COVID-19 or any other life threatening illness. Moreover, each additional person who risks infection endangers the health care workers themselves, given the dire shortage in available personal protective equipment.

As such, it is our halakhic position that, on the basis of the expert testimony provided to us by our local physicians, we **cannot have any guests at all for Pesach this year**, even though we have been observing strict social distances for weeks. We will be having our *sedarim* and sharing Yom Tov **only with the family that lives with us in our homes**, and that is what everyone should do.

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We personally experience the heartbreak that this imposes and we empathize with the terrible burden of those who will be forced to have *sedarim* alone. We do this for the single reason powerful enough to justify such a profound halakhic and human cost: it is absolutely necessary to mitigate further spread of this terrible virus, to protect ourselves, and to avoid infecting others, who may further spread the virus.

For individuals with established and underlying psychiatric conditions whose health may be endangered by prolonged periods of isolation, or for people in other unique situations, reasonable solutions can be presented, on a case by case basis, by your family Rav, in consultation with the relevant medical professionals. Likewise, for those with family members in precarious health situations which require monitoring, please be in touch with your family Rav for specific guidance regarding communicating over YomTov.

The Talmud (Megillah 15a) teaches us that when there was a threat to the Jewish community on Pesach, Esther and Mordechai compromised the celebration of Pesach to declare the fast that was essential to the salvation of the community. It is now our obligation to follow in their footsteps for the welfare of our community, by restricting celebrating Pesach, including *sedarim*, to those who live together. We do so, not as a leniency in the sanctity of Yom Tov, nor with the slightest disregard for the halakhic significance of honoring parents, but, rather, as an expression of our strict adherence to the overriding Jewish value of the sanctity of human life.

לשנה הבאה בירושלים. May we all celebrate Pesach together, in good health, with our entire families, in the holy city of Jerusalem.

Sincerely.

The Rabbinical Council of Bergen County

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April 1, 2020

ז' ניסן תש"פ

Dear Friends,

We are writing with an update regarding the current health crisis and the ways that we should be reacting to it and preparing for Pesach:

A. **Most importantly:** We must continue to avoid contact with anyone outside of our immediate family that we are living with, even on Pesach. The virus is still on the rise, so our effective distancing is critical to our health and the health of our entire society. Failure to comply puts our life, and the lives of others, in grave danger. Please see [this important letter](#) that was written by over 200 physicians from Bergen County to offer guidance about this critical issue.

B. **Shopping and Delivery of Groceries:** It is commendable that so many people have been vigilant about maintaining social distances and are attempting to order groceries for delivery. However, the demands on the local stores have been overwhelming and they cannot keep up with the requests for delivery. Therefore, we recommend that healthy individuals do their own shopping and follow the limitations that are set in order to reduce crowding in the stores. Hopefully this will enable the groceries to accommodate delivery orders for people who are ill, elderly, quarantined or are otherwise unable to shop. In addition, when we all shop, let's offer to pick up groceries for neighbors who may have a harder time getting out or are attempting to minimize trips.

C. **Mikvah:** The mikvaot are continuing to operate to the greatest extent possible while maintaining a high level of cleanliness and safety. Please follow the guidelines that are set by each mikvah (and are posted on their websites). Please understand that no one may compromise on any standard that is set by the mikvah, even with halachik and medical permission.

D. **Help in the Homes:** People who have cleaning or babysitting help in your homes should try to maintain their salaries since they rely on this income. Additionally, these employees should not be coming to our homes at this time, especially if they work in multiple houses throughout the week.

E. **Research:** There is ongoing research to find treatments for COVID-19. If you have recovered from the virus, you can reach out to Mount Sinai Hospital at COVIDSerumTesting@mountsinai.org or check the [Holy Name Medical Center website](#) where there will be updates about this.

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F. Bikur Cholim: Please help others who are ill in a safe way. Consider calling, ordering food from local establishments, etc., as people may feel particularly isolated, in addition to being sick. Bikur Cholim of Bergen County is sending hundreds of packed sandwiches and snacks to employees in our local hospitals. The health of our community is dependent on the frontline healthcare workers who are working tirelessly on our behalf and at a great risk to themselves. To participate in this effort, please donate at bikurcholimbergencounty.org

G. Nichum Aveilim: There are many mourners in our community who are experiencing this sad time in a most unusual way. Please consider calling mourners even more often than we may have visited because of the unique isolation that we are experiencing.

H. Seder: We urge everyone to focus on the positive aspects of the Pesach experience in order to challenge the difficult mood that we find ourselves in. Although none of the mitzvot of Pesach may be performed before nightfall of Pesach, we may consider Zoom gatherings of separated families on erev Pesach or on Chol haMoed, during which *divrei Torah* can be shared between children, grandparents and cousins. Similarly, consider writing thoughts and messages that can be “sealed” and read at the seder.

We would like to wish everyone a *chag kasher vesamech* - a happy and healthy holiday. May we truly experience a much needed redemption.

Sincerely,

The Rabbinical Council of Bergen County

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April 21, 2020

כז' ניסן תש"פ

Dear Friends,

We are writing to update you about the ongoing health situation and our approach thereto. We are very encouraged by reports that the spread of COVID-19 is beginning to slow in our neighborhoods and in New York. The physicians with whom we consult attribute this positive trajectory to our strict adherence to social distancing over the past number of weeks. However, they warn that it is too early to stop, as prematurely relaxing our guard can easily cause another dangerous spike. We must follow the guidance of our government and of the medical leadership at our local hospitals. Right now they are conveying consistent messages of caution. (If there was to be a discrepancy between these two voices, we believe that the *halacha* mandates that we follow the **stricter** of the two approaches.) While we certainly look forward to reopening our shuls and lives soon, it is definitely not yet the time. Now we need to continue to diligently distance ourselves, stay home as much as possible, wear masks, and follow all of the ongoing instructions of our government. When that time does come to reopen, we intend to map out a unified, gradual and safe path, with consultation with governmental officials and medical leaders.

Until further notice, there will continue to be no *minyanim* in our shuls and there should be no *minyanim* anywhere else in our communities, including homes, yards, streets, etc. It is certainly heartbreaking that we are unable to convene *minyanim* for funerals, *kaddish*, *shiva*, *Bar Mitzvas*, etc. However, we continue to have no choice. **Similarly, there should be no indoor or outdoor gatherings for *kiddush* or any reason.** Any breach of this community-wide policy endangers lives; violations cannot and must not occur for *davening* or any other purpose. Additionally, public gatherings, even at "safe" distances can easily trigger anger towards our entire community from our neighbors who have and will bring this to the attention of law enforcement.

We deeply appreciate the support and compliance of everyone in this community who has contributed to this effort and we continue to pray for the health of every single member of our community and world.

Sincerely,

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Rabbi Ari Zahtz

May 5, 2020

י"א אייר תש"פ

Dear Friends,

As Jews living in the modern world, we are mandated by the Torah to navigate the tension between our unique and singular identity as a Jewish community on the one hand and as engaged citizens of the broader community on the other. Both of these represent aspects of our religious mission. Sometimes this tension is navigated effortlessly, while other times it is fraught with complexity. This tension is evident in our relationship with the current pandemic and I would like to highlight two ways in which our reaction is, and should be, unique. One is fundamental and one is practical.

Fundamentally, the sanctity and value of human life is a cornerstone of Jewish law and thought. In this regard we have much in common with the general society in which we live. It is precisely these shared values which has allowed the RCBC and other Jewish communal leaders to communicate and collaborate with the local medical community as well as our government about ways to maximize social distancing and other life saving measures. We take great pride in the example we've set for the broader community around us, and aspire to continue being a "light unto the nations" by educating others of this core value.

At the same time, it is important to appreciate the ways in which the Jewish value on human life may be unique. Consider the fact that our Jewish community shut the doors of our schools and shuls in advance of the rest of our society (though I wish we would have acted even earlier). Why did this happen? Are we wiser? Were we better informed? Unlikely. I believe that our swift and sweeping response was primarily due to the primacy *halacha* places on the preservation of human life, and the extent to which it towers over every other core value we hold. Our communal leadership and the rabbis of the RCBC considered the question of how many lives must be endangered to justify the closing of all of our religious institutions. The answer? One. Our tradition teaches that creation originated with one individual person to teach us that one person represents an entire world; saving one life is tantamount to saving an entire world. Some people thought that our rabbis showed great courage and halachic flexibility in shutting down our communal institutions to "compromise" on so many of the laws and rituals that are a part of our daily lives. In truth, the exact opposite is the case. The rabbis followed our long tradition of stringency in our obligation to preserve life.

Many people are itching to return to our religious routines and are wondering when that time will come. Our intention is, as it has been all along, to be guided by halachic and medical advice. We will consider reopening our shuls only when we are confident that there is no significant risk to life. Please understand that it is possible that we will see a divergence in our process from that of other parts of society. Perhaps malls and shops, parks and businesses will open as soon as the "curve is flattened" and

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the spread will no longer be "so bad". We intend to continue to be "machmir" and cautious, as is unquestionably mandated by Jewish law.

In addition, there is also a practical concern. The very phrase "social distancing" seems like an anathema to us. The rhythm of Orthodox Jewish life promotes social interaction and contact with many different people. Our days and weeks are filled with camaraderie and community. We celebrate together in happy times, and support each other in times of crisis. It is simply not our way to socially distance; community is our lifeblood. While this closeness and intimacy is a source of pride, it is also a source of added vulnerability in the current situation, and we must account for it. While we are grateful for our religious freedoms and can be confident that we will at some point be granted the legal right to once again congregate, it is the responsibility of our community, of each and every one of us, to ensure that we exercise that right only once it is safe for us to do so.

The RCBC is in constant communication with leaders from our local medical community and the area's hospitals, and we will recommend that we resume activities like minyan once it is considered to be safe and *halachically* advisable. The guidance of our medical advisors has been invaluable and that will continue to be our primary source of direction. To be sure, the first minyanim to resume will be guided by numerous safeguards to ensure safety and social distancing. Additionally, we expect the process to be bumpy and may go forward and backwards as we follow the growth and decline of the pandemic. The RCBC will communicate these guidelines in a timely fashion.

I have been overwhelmed by the unified voice of the religious leadership and the overwhelming support of the general community and the high level of compliance. This speaks to the fact that we have all internalized the critical value of human life. This experience has also allowed us to realize the powerful impact of a unified response in times of difficulty. With Hashem's help, may we successfully remain united and true to these timeless values, may the pain and suffering experienced by so many soon see its end, may we all be granted good health and safety, and may all of us emerge from this horrible crisis an even stronger, more unified community.

Sincerely,
Rabbi Kenny Schiowitz and the
Rabbinical Council of Bergen County

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May 13, 2020

י"ט אייר תש"פ

Dear Friends,

As the numbers of confirmed new cases of COVID-19 in our community continue to drop, we are writing to update you on our thought process as we begin to plan for the future. While that future is still very uncertain and everything is subject to change, what follows are the positions of the RCBC as things currently stand.

Patience. We all desire to see the end of this difficult period of lockdown, especially as we see the decline of new COVID cases in our area. Nevertheless, we must maintain our patience and remain steadfast in our responsibility to refrain from acting prematurely. We must realize that the current religious mission with which we have been charged is to focus on our communal health and to worship Hashem from home. We are indeed hopeful that we will be able to resume gatherings in the near future. While we will do so just as soon as it is deemed prudent in consultation with halachic authorities and health experts, we cannot predict the exact time or date and we will not compromise on the integrity of our decision making process. We must all therefore try to be as patient as possible.

OU-RCA Guidance. A letter was recently written jointly by the OU and RCA setting out some key points of guidance regarding the resumption of public davening. This was prepared following halachic consultation with Rav Hershel Schachter, Rav Mordechai Willig, Rav Dovid Cohen and Rav Asher Weiss, shlit'a. The letter may be seen [here](#). The RCBC is fundamentally aligned with the principles set out in this letter. Below are some of the salient points that we would like to highlight:

1. **Unity:** We continue to strive for a unified approach and communication as we move forward because we feel that it is critical to communal well-being. We are committed to working together to continue to navigate this situation with a uniform approach.
2. **Controlled, Planned Outdoor Minyanim:** It is possible that the first minyanim to convene will be arranged outdoors because of the medical benefits of ventilation. Nevertheless, these minyanim will need to be organized and sanctioned in a controlled fashion and absolutely cannot take place now. We appreciate that this is especially difficult for *bnai mitzvah*, *chiyuvim* and *chagim*, but we must all act responsibly in the face of this unprecedented crisis.
3. **Timing:** It is hard to predict the exact moment for us to begin to reconvene. Given the high level of interaction that our communal life entails, as well as the enormous responsibility that the Torah places on all of us to maintain safety, we will continue to be cautious. We are inclined to follow the recommendation of the OU/RCA and wait some time after gatherings become legal in order to be sure that the opening does not contribute to another surge.

Shavuot: The government has not yet announced the beginning of stage one and we remain in a mandated lockdown. As such, minyanim in our community on Shavuot, inside or outside, remain prohibited. Likewise, as of now, all other restrictions, such as gathering for meals (indoor or outdoor) with friends and family who are not currently living together similarly remain in place. Talking to others should be done only at a safe distance **and** while wearing a mask.

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Masks: We encourage everyone to follow the recommendation of the CDC to wear a mask when appropriate, especially when walking outside on Shabbos or Yom Tov in an area when one is likely to see and speak to others. You can find more information about the CDC recommendations regarding masks here:

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/downloads/cloth-face-coverings-information.pdf>

Plasma Donation and Antibody Testing: Anyone who thinks that he or she might be able to donate plasma, is urged to get tested. There is information about a local testing site here: <https://www.covidplasmaavealife.com/>. In addition, Holy Name Hospital is starting to test the public for antibodies. Please fill out this form to be contacted by the hospital for the simple test: <https://forms.gle/fmsrPqbWnh15s8uMA>. It seems that widespread testing can help us get a better handle on the spread of this disease. Any of the various testing programs are good as long as you get your own results. (Please note that positive antibody testing may enable the donation of plasma but we do not yet know if it confers true immunity. Therefore, people who test positive for antibodies should continue to practice social distancing as before.)

Non-COVID Medical Attention: There is currently a widespread fear of going to doctors' offices or hospitals because of the possibility of contracting COVID there. We are assured by the medical professionals, however, that all necessary precautions are being taken to assure patient safety on those locations. There may therefore be much more to lose by staying home and neglecting necessary medical attention. We therefore encourage anyone who needs medical attention to be sure to get it.

While the ongoing departure from the normal rhythm of our spiritual and communal lives is challenging at many levels, we take deep pride and comfort in continuing to fulfill the mandates of the Torah as they exist to safeguard life, and thereby to sanctify His Name. In so doing, we uniquely reaffirm the spirit expressed by our ancestors when the Torah was first given, *na'aseh v'nishma*, indicating that our singular objective is to fulfill the Will of Hashem, whatever that requires at a given moment. We are also inspired by the support and commitment of our community through this difficult time and by the ongoing opportunities for spiritual growth that it has presented. We look forward to celebrating this Shavuot like the very first Shavuot, "as one person, with one heart".

Sincerely,

Vaad HaRabanim of Bergen County

VA'AD HARABANIM RABBINICAL COUNCIL OF BERGEN COUNTY, INC

PO BOX 1233 Teaneck, NJ 07666 • (844) 895-RCBC • <https://www.rcbcvaad.org>



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Rabbi Benjamin Yudin
Rabbi Ari Zahtz

May 24, 2020

ר"ח סיון תש"פ

Dear Friends,

We are writing to provide guidance as to the resumption of *tefilah betzibur* in our communities. We are inspired by the support, respect and cooperation of our community throughout this challenging time. We are happy to see the continued decline in the spread of COVID in the past weeks and we pray that this will continue. On this past Thursday and Friday, the governors of NY and NJ have legalized public, socially distanced outdoor gatherings. We continue to believe that we should wait two weeks until we begin to gather in our community. This follows the guidance of the OU and RCA, who are guided by the leading poskim and doctors of our country. This is also the recommendation of the local doctors who are advising us. Therefore, the first minyanim in Bergen County are projected to be on June 4.

The above is contingent on the expectation that we will not see a rise in the prevalence of COVID between now and then. We will be closely monitoring this for the next two weeks, and beyond. If there is a rise, we will be forced to delay or cease our minyanim once again. We remain committed to the principle that safety far exceeds the obligation of communal tefila and other activities. We are only considering the resumption of the minyanim based on the assessment that they are truly safe.

The safety of these minyanim is also contingent on the strict adherence to social distancing at these minyanim. We are developing a set of guidelines that will be distributed in the coming days. These include the facts that all minyanim will be held outside, with limited numbers of people, with all participants positioned at least 6 feet apart and wearing masks. In addition, these minyanim will not be arranged informally, but will be organized through the shuls with participants registering in advance to join a consistent group. Participants will need to stay with their particular group and cannot "minyan hop" from day to day. The adherence to these principles is critical to everyone's safety, and we will not be able to continue these minyanim if they are not conducted in this way.

Our medical guidance recommends a slow and gradual phase-in of these minyanim. After the "start date", individual shuls should determine the best way to schedule minyanim that is appropriate for the conditions of each shul. Some may start with davening once a day or limit themselves to weekdays. Others may delay all minyanim for another period of time. Some will schedule one minyan for the entire shul and some will arrange many, so that everyone can participate in person. These decisions will be left to the discretion of each rav and shul.

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It is most important that no individual feel obligated to participate before feeling ready. There is a strong basis of the position that even individuals who are saying kaddish can fulfill this responsibility by listening to a minyan via Zoom and answering "amen". Additionally, those who are older or at risk for severe COVID illness such as high blood pressure, obesity, or diabetes should consult with their medical doctor prior to attending minyan.

We are overwhelmed by our community's ability - both the rabbis and the general community - to remain united through this most challenging time. We believe that this unity largely contributed to our success in getting to this point and will serve us well as we continue to grow together as a community in the years to come, with Hashem's help. We wish everyone a Chag Sameach. May it be a very happy and healthy celebration of our Torah, and may it be the last holiday that we must celebrate individually.

Sincerely,

Rabbinical Council of Bergen County

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May 26, 2020

ג' סיון תש"פ

Dear Friends,

As we previously announced, minyanim will be allowed to begin to convene on June 4, assuming that the decline in COVID cases will continue. Until then, we should abstain from communal gatherings, even for davening. Individuals can meet to socialize or learn together while maintaining social distancing and utilizing masks, as per the recommendations of the CDC. Below are the RCBC baseline instructions for such minyanim. Although these minyanim will be permitted, no one should feel obligated to participate. Anyone who has any hesitation is encouraged to continue davening at home—including rabbis. Additionally, individual shuls may build additional precautions based on their own assessments and based on the unique circumstances of each shul. These baseline precautions should be kept by everyone to protect our health and the health of those around us. We would like to wish everyone a very happy Shavuot, to be enjoyed in good health.

When:

1. Minyanim in Bergen County should begin after 2 weeks from the opening of the general society. Thus, the minyanim can begin on or after June 4, at the discretion of the individual rabbanim and shuls. Once minyanim begin, they should increase slowly and gradually.

Who:

2. Anyone who is immunocompromised, over 60 years old, obese, has heart disease, is on dialysis, has liver disease, or has another compromising condition is strongly urged to continue to daven at home and to consult with your physician to determine whether it is a good idea to join a minyan. Similarly, anyone who lives with such a person should consider continuing to daven at home.
3. Anyone who is at all sick or has a fever should not attend minyan until cleared by a doctor. Anyone has tested positive for COVID should not attend minyan within 11 days of the positive test or within 72 hours of having a fever or respiratory symptoms, whichever is longer. Furthermore, anyone who has previously tested positive must also be cleared by a doctor for participation in a minyan.
4. There should be 19 or fewer people at each minyan. Multiple people from the same family should go to the same minyan and should not split up and go to two minyanim.
5. Records must be kept of who was at each minyan. All attendees should consistently attend the same minyan every time. One should not switch from one minyan to another. People who have memberships in multiple shuls should choose one for this time period. If a shul is arranging multiple minyanim, people have to remain consistent in attending only their own minyan. It is vital that all adhere to this so that we work together to avoid the creation of a web of exposure.

Where:

6. Minyanim will be held in outdoor locations and will be supervised by shuls. All minyanim should be registered through shuls and all attendees must reserve seats through the shuls.

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How:

7. One person should be assigned as the coordinator of each minyan to ensure that all of the protocols are kept. This person should also communicate with the members of the group with any updates.
8. Everyone at every minyan must wear a mask at all times. If the chazan needs to remove his mask, he may do so if he is facing away from everyone else and if the wind is not blowing towards the others.
 - Some people may have difficulty breathing with a mask on, especially in the heat. Please consult your doctor if you are concerned about this and daven at home if this is a concern.
9. Locations for each attendee must be clearly delineated and distanced by at least 6 feet. The goal should be that there is enough distance kept so that even if another participant becomes infected, the rest would not be considered to be exposed and require quarantine.
10. There will be no bathroom use at the minyan locations.
11. The communal return to *tefilla betzibbur* represents an important step in the ongoing growth of our *tefilla*. At the same time, the time we can allot to our communal *tefilla* needs to be limited in order to further mitigate contagion and to mitigate bathroom needs. Shuls will therefore set up the structure of the tefilah to balance these concerns while also maximizing meaning and kavana. Minyanim may consider beginning shacharis with borchu and having people put on their talesim and tefillin at home. "Heicha Kedusha" is recommended for mincha, at least for the first week.
12. When laining is introduced, only the Baal Koreh will handle the Sefer Torah, do hagbah, and get all the aliyos. We will provide further guidance on how this can be managed.
13. If it rains, the group will decide whether to daven in the rain or to skip the minyan. No one should move to an indoor location.
14. There must be no congregating before, after, or during davening. If there are multiple minyanim in the same place, they will be staggered and the location should be cleaned as well as possible. No food nor drinks are permitted at any minyan - before, during or after.
15. Bring your own siddurim and chumashim and do not pass around tzedakah receptacles.
16. Given the current level of the prevalence of COVID, we believe, based on the medical advice that we have received, that the above protocols are safe. If this changes, we will reassess, and we will watch this carefully. In addition, the safety of our community will be ensured only if these protocols are followed. If they are not, we will be responsible to reevaluate.
17. Lastly, please be considerate of our neighbors when increasing the traffic and parking in areas that may not normally be set up as shuls.

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June 18, 2020

כ"ו סיון תש"פ

Dear Friends,

We are writing to update you about where we presently stand as a community in regard to the pandemic. We also want to extend Mazel Tov wishes to the many graduates in all of the schools in our community and to their parents for trying to weather this storm as best as possible. We are excited to see that many children and adults are finding ways to safely reengage with each other as we all appreciate the significant social and psychological role friendship plays in our daily lives. We are saddened that so many of our children will not be able to have their typical summer experience this year and the possible additional burden that this places on their working parents. We are supportive of those offering safe alternatives and encourage parents to ascertain that their children will indeed be in safe environments.

Progress

We are very thankful that the intensity of the crisis has Baruch Hashem subsided but remain cautious and concerned about the significant rise that we are seeing in parts of the country, indicating that the crisis is definitely not yet over. We continue to believe that the gradual and careful opening of society under the guidance of medical experts is appropriate, but we all must continue to remain responsible to do our part to help contain the spread of the virus. When our attention turned to this issue in March, we faced a high-risk situation. We mandated the closing of shuls and other aspects of our lives because we maintained that this was unequivocally halachically required. No one may choose to engage in high risk behaviors that can endanger one's self or others. Now that the intensity has subsided and social distancing precautions have become the norm, we are still confronted with many lower risk behaviors and choices. We all need to make decisions about whom to allow in our homes, how to socialize, where to work, etc. Many of us confront these questions daily, if not hourly. As with all important decisions, individuals have the duty to make these choices after becoming properly informed, after consultation with relevant experts, and with a great sense of responsibility. We must also consider the consequences of all such choices. Though we may opt to take certain risks for ourselves and our immediate family members, we must always be cognizant of the possible impact on others and thus take greater precautions to avoid interactions with those who may be more vulnerable. We believe that this sacred responsibility should be taken very seriously. We have seen that a callous approach has led to many tragedies, while the more responsible choices and commitments have yielded invaluable benefits. Please speak to your individual doctors about particular decisions. Your rabbi is available to offer Halachic guidance as well, while understanding that each case may be different.

Smachot and Lifecycle Events

It is wonderful that many families are finding creative ways to continue to celebrate smachot. This is a reflection of our resilience and desire to provide our families and friends with

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joy and hope. Mourners are also now able to grieve with less loneliness and can welcome shiva visitors, in a safe way. However, we must do whatever is possible to not allow these events to turn into super-spreading events that will bring more tragedy to our community, county, state and country. **Those who plan these events should carefully design them in a way that only safe socially distant interactions and mask wearing will take place.** We should also be sensitive to our neighbors and try to hold these events in private backyards, when possible, and to be sensitive to the time and noise level of these events. This will undoubtedly require much creativity and Rabbanim are eager to work with families to plan these events successfully. Guests should be told what to expect ahead of time. No one should feel pressured to attend an event where they do not feel safe or comfortable; hosts should, therefore, be understanding and forgiving of guests who decline. Similarly, we should all be understanding of the limitations that the hosts have and thus recognize that we cannot all be invited as we perhaps were in the past. If you arrive at a simcha and the guidelines are not being maintained, it would be best to leave, whether you are there as a friend, relative, or Rav. We are confident that the community will act with diligence and discipline in this area.

Minyanim

Indoor Minyanim: The governor recently lifted many of the restrictions relating to indoor gatherings. **We nonetheless continue to recommend that any kind of transition should be done slowly and gradually.** Since we know from medical authorities that the outdoor air significantly reduces the risk of spreading COVID, it is our recommendation that all minyanim remain outside for a while longer. The outdoor minyanim have, so far, been effective in facilitating communal tefillah and seem to be maximally safe; our cost-benefit analysis therefore indicates that at present, outdoor minyanim are best for our shuls. Our community has acted with unity, patience, and discipline and we will continue to find ways to address our spiritual needs, while simultaneously advocating for the safest possible modes of religious behavior. Rabbanim, following Halachic and medical guidance and in partnership with shul leaderships, are currently considering increasing the participation at each of the shul minyanim, expanding the number of services offered and may be more flexible with restricting registrants to particular minyan groups. However, prior registration continues to be the best practice in ensuring safe minyanim and for tracing purposes.

We hope and pray that the above steps will allow for a safe return to our shuls as soon as possible. We reinforce that no one should feel pressured to attend any minyanim and that there is still no obligation/chiyuv of davening with a minyan. We also reiterate that people should not feel pressured to participate in a social get together or even a simcha if they are uncomfortable doing so, and should seek medical guidance from their own doctors regarding any such events.

May Hashem accept our tefillot and bless us all with good health and much happiness.

Sincerely,
Rabbinical Council of Bergen County

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בס"ד

כ"ח אב תש"ף

Dear Friend,

As our community prepares for the reopening of our Yeshivot, the joint rabbinic and educational leadership of our shuls and schools, in conjunction with the medical professionals who have provided us expert guidance throughout this process, wish to communicate the following unified message.

1. Support: We are all acutely aware that the many uncertainties surrounding the reopening of our Yeshivot make this particular back to school season a uniquely anxious time for so many within our community. We wish to continue to assist you and your family in every way possible as we navigate these challenging times together.

2. Shul Groups: The durability of the reopening of our yeshivot rests heavily upon maintaining the integrity of the cohorts ("pods") that each yeshiva has carefully constructed on the basis of expert medical guidance in an effort to contain the possible spread of virus. As such, our shuls and schools are partnering in this critical effort, and our shuls will not hold indoor groups for the opening months of the school year. All shul groups will be outdoors and socially distanced. Likewise, community members should be equally conscientious of the import of preserving the integrity of these pods as essential features of our community containment strategy, and ensure that socialization which takes place outside of school and shul is fully compliant with social distancing guidelines.

3. Smachot: We all look forward to marking many *smachot* within our school communities this coming year, in particular, Bar and Bat Mitzvah celebrations. We

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urge all members of the community to be fully aware of the potential for significant amplification of virus at a simcha in which the vital guidelines of social distancing are not observed. While such an event, first and foremost, constitutes a threat to the health of those in attendance, the risk to the institutional health of our community created by such an event should not be minimized. Indeed, even one such event could easily result in the full closure of an entire yeshiva, or multiple yeshivot across our community.

We ask you for your full partnership in ensuring that all of the *smachot* that will be observed this coming year are held in full compliance with social distancing guidelines, **including travel advisories** currently in place in the State of New Jersey for those traveling from locations with high levels of community spread of COVID-19.

In particular, on the basis of our ongoing consultation with medical experts, we strongly encourage members of our community to hold *smachot* outdoors to the greatest extent possible, and for participants to wear masks, in accordance with the guidelines detailed in Governor Murphy's Executive Order 163, Section 1. (<https://nj.gov/infobank/eo/056murphy/pdf/EO-163.pdf>).

Special attention should be paid to ensuring that dancing meaningfully enhances the celebration and does not endanger those present nor, by extension, the community at large. If dancing extends beyond the members of the immediate family "pod", it is especially important that all mitigation measures, including distancing and masks, be utilized.

Finally, as the needs of public health will continue to necessitate smaller in person guest lists, we are confident that the community as a whole will demonstrate mutual understanding with respect to those who are either unable to extend or accept an invitation at this time.

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4. Quarantine: In the event that members of the community will be required to quarantine for specific periods of time, due to exposure to COVID-19 or travel, our medical professionals have advised us to issue a clear reminder that those in quarantine should **not** leave their homes unless doing so is a matter of medical necessity. Essentials such as food and medicine should be obtained via delivery, if at all possible, and all social contact outside the home must be avoided. Under no circumstances may someone under mandatory quarantine attend a minyan.

As we approach Elul and the *Yamim Noraim*, we will all surely continue to daven for much needed *siyata d'shemaya* during these profoundly challenging times.

Concomitantly, we fully embrace our singular responsibility to partner with He who is the Trusted and Faithful Healer in securing our own health, the wellbeing of all those around us, and the viability of our communal Torah institutions. We thank each and every one of you in advance for your ongoing cooperation and consideration.

Rabbinical Council of Bergen County

Heads of School of Yeshiva Day Schools

Heads of School of Yeshiva High Schools

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September 9, 2020
כ' אלול תש"פ

Dear Friends,

We are now approaching the Yamim Noraim, our annual days of introspection and reflection. It is an opportunity for us, as individuals and as a community, to reflect on the successes of the past and to pinpoint our areas for growth for the coming year. Over the last few months, the rabbis of the RCBC have remained in constant contact with each other, with other leading Rabbonim, with medical leaders, and with lay leaders in order to guide the community in a consistent way that is appropriate to the contours of each community and shul. With the opening of our schools and the approaching chagim, we feel that it is appropriate to reinforce and establish some communal protocols.

In our reaction to the current pandemic, we are proud to have acted swiftly and decisively in prioritizing the public health over our personal comforts and even over communal tefillot and mitzvot that are so dear to us all. In addition, we are proud to see the widespread compliance with the social distancing and masking requirements in our community. There is no doubt that these measures have saved lives and preserved health in our community. The infection rates have declined and many of us have been able to resume many of the normal activities of life. At the same time, it is clear that this chapter is not yet "over," as we are still seeing cases and some upticks in certain communities. We must therefore continue to act responsibly and cautiously.

We know that there are three primary ways to stop or at least limit the spread of the virus: mask wearing, social distancing (6 ft. or more), and keeping gatherings outdoors. In addition, conscientious hygiene, surface cleaning, and hand washing are very important. It is imperative that we continue to maintain these practices religiously. Preserving health and medical wellbeing is indeed a religious responsibility that is a cornerstone value of the Torah and must be observed with the utmost of care.

Sleep-over Family Guests for Chagim: We suggest that decisions regarding sleepover guests be made by each family, in consultation with their own doctors and rabbis. Every case is unique, and families need to balance the challenge of family members remaining alone for Yom Tov with the risk of contracting COVID-19. If a family decides to have sleepover company, masks, social distancing and outdoor meals should be utilized as much as possible. In addition, it is best to limit the number of guests in order to expose ourselves to as few people as possible. Certainly visitors from states that have mandated quarantine by NJ must observe those directions.

Guests for Shabbat/Yom Tov Meals: Meals that are shared indoors by multiple families on Shabbosos and Yamim Tovim pose risks not only to the particular families, but to the entire infrastructure of our community. It is extremely difficult to maintain mask-wearing and social-distancing at a meal. It is critical, therefore, that if meals are shared, they should take place outside only and with as much distancing and mask wearing as possible. We implore our members to consider the impact our choices have not only on ourselves but on so many others. Besides the serious health repercussions of a spread in COVID-19, we are all well aware of the emotional and economic impacts on children and adults if children and their classes are forced to quarantine or if yeshivot as a whole would

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be forced to close. We urge everyone to find safe ways to socialize and to enjoy each other's company.

Smachot: It has been well-documented that weddings have become mini superspreader events in multiple communities in the tri-state area. Weddings and other smachot have the potential to transform an isolated instance into an uptick that can profoundly affect the community. We are particularly concerned because we have witnessed laxity at some celebrations in our own community. We strongly urge that all safety precautions be kept at all smachot, including social distancing and mask-wearing. It is important to note that the more people attending a simcha the more difficult it is to control. We therefore recommend that families significantly reduce their guest lists to the extent possible. Dancing is a particular risk and should be done only outside, with a 6 foot distance between non-immediate family members. We understand that this can impact the ability of guests to be misameiach chatan v'kallah or the bar/bat mitzvah in the typical manner. Nonetheless, we implore our community to continue to prioritize the safety and health of fellow community members, especially at the time of a personal simcha.

Break the Stigma: Even with all of our efforts, we know that we cannot completely stop the spread of this virus. We know that people are currently infected and people will continue to become infected. It is therefore critical that we react swiftly and properly when symptoms arise. We want to offer our support and gratitude to those who alert their community institutions when they or someone in their family has tested positive or been exposed to the virus, despite the discomfort and inconvenience involved in doing so. We applaud the selflessness of those who are willing to come forward in order to safeguard our community, and we encourage others to follow suit.

The Road Back: To paraphrase the words of Shimon HaAmsoni (Pesachim 22b): just as we have earned reward for leaving our communal religious lives, so may be rewarded for seeking our return to communal religious life. Just as our exile from Israel was intended as a punishment, but has become comfortable and even preferable to many, the same may be said about our exile from shul and yeshiva. It may have become pleasant to stay home and to abstain from so many of our important practices. We are most elevated by our ability to pivot and to fully engage in the path that is most proper at any given time. When it was time to leave, we left, despite the difficulty; when it is time to return, we must return with even greater fervor. The exact moment of return may vary from person to person and should be done at the right time. Many people have resumed most of their routines while many others remain very concerned with the risks of returning to minyan. This is a personal decision that should be made on an individual basis, with appropriate consultations. Even if it is not yet the right time, we may be enriched by our anticipation and longing for that time. We hope that our community will emerge from this chapter with a greater appreciation and commitment for religious life than ever before.

We hope to combine our best efforts as outlined above with our heartfelt tefillot on the Yamim Noraim that HaKadosh Baruch Hu should inscribe our community and the whole world for a year of health, safety, religious growth, and fulfillment. We, as rabbis, are humbled to serve you and look forward to many years of growth together.

Shana Tova,
The Rabbinical Council of Bergen County

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December 2, 2020
טז כסלו תשפ"א

Dear Friends,

As our community continues to navigate the COVID-19 pandemic, we are all closely watching the news with both optimism and concern. We are optimistic about the possibility of an effective vaccine in the near future, but concerned about the continuing rise in infections around the country and in our area. We are seeing dramatic increases in positive cases, hospitalizations, ICU admissions, and intubations at our community hospitals. The hospitals have made room to accommodate the current wave of admissions, but any further significant rise can threaten their ability to effectively treat all new patients. Our community is not immune to the current wave, and we have a clear halachic and moral responsibility to do our share to contain this spread and to "flatten this curve" for the sake of ourselves and for the communities around us.

Stigma and Confidentiality: We strongly urge the entire community to completely remove any stigma associated with the contraction of this virus. No one should be judged or assumed to have been irresponsible in catching it. It is extremely important for everyone to report symptoms and positive cases as this is the most effective way to contain the spread of the virus. We cannot eradicate the virus, but we can control the contagion. All cases need to be reported to the schools, shuls and people who may be affected. Those who report promptly are truly making a difference. By contributing to an environment that is stigma-free we can all help to contain the spread.

Weddings and Smachot: Our smachot have, unfortunately, been our weakest area of compliance. This is especially concerning as outdoor events are becoming increasingly difficult in the cold weather. We urge the community to minimize the number of people at smachot, allow eating only for the closest family members, and refrain from all dancing. Even while wearing a mask, distancing is necessary. An event will not be safe on its own; it is only with careful planning, creative thinking and true flexibility that this can happen. Please seek rabbinic and medical advice in the planning of smachot and fully follow through, despite the substantial challenges.

Masks: While any mask is better than no mask, not all masks are equally effective. The doctors to whom we have spoken have emphasized that surgical masks and KN95 masks are significantly more effective than simple cotton masks or gaiters, and N95 masks are even better. Those attending an indoor minyan or event are strongly encouraged to consider wearing at least a surgical mask. If anyone is older or otherwise vulnerable, please consider an N95 and seek medical guidance.

Chanukah and Yeshiva Week: We urge the community to uphold our practices even during Chanukah and Yeshiva Week, despite our desire to celebrate with family and friends. The recent surge seems to have been fueled by large indoor gatherings, and we must not contribute to the spread of covid in our community.

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Rabbi Philip Weinberger
Rabbi Duvie Weiss
Rabbi Ezra Wiener
Rabbi Danny Wolff
Rabbi Benjamin Yudin
Rabbi Ari Zahtz

Shul: Shuls that are meeting inside are doing so with the utmost of care for safety. This will certainly continue. We continue to advise those who are in any risk category to daven outside or at home. It may be advisable to consider "upgrading" our masks, especially in higher risk situations. (see above)

Youth Activities: Despite the cold, we strongly recommend holding activities outside as much as possible. When held indoors, there should be extra supervision to truly ensure proper masking and distancing and eating should be avoided. Additionally, shuls should contact-trace and report any cases that emerge among the participants.

Hakarat HaTov: We feel a tremendous debt of gratitude to our schools, including the lay and professional leadership, the educators and the communal volunteers who have all enabled our schools to stay open in a safe way and to provide this critical need for learning, socialization and growth. We are grateful to the medical professionals of our community, both Jewish and non-Jewish, who have given their time and expertise in order to inform and advise us with the best guidance possible.

Sincerely,
The Rabbinical Council of Bergen County

RCBC Leadership

On a personal note, I would like to express my admiration for the entire Bergen County community that I have gotten to know in a new way over the past two years in my role of RCBC president. I am inspired by the dedication of my rabbinic colleagues who lead by example with a nuanced understanding of the community and of the values of the Torah which we represent. I am similarly inspired by the commitment, thoughtfulness and dedication of the entire community to those same values. We appreciate the communication and feedback that exists and look forward to many years of partnership to come. I have full faith in the new board of the RCBC which will now be led by Rabbi Zev Goldberg as president.

Sincerely,
Rabbi Kenny Schiowitz

Rabbi Zev Goldberg
PRESIDENT
Rabbi Beni Krohn
VICE PRESIDENT
Rabbi Ari Zahtz
VICE PRESIDENT, KASHRUT
Rabbi Jeremy Donath
SECRETARY
Rabbi Kenny Schiowitz
TREASURER
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Rabbi Danny Wolff
Rabbi Benjamin Yudin
Rabbi Ari Zahtz

February 2021

Dear Friends,

It is hard to believe that we are nearing the one-year mark in our battle against Covid-19. Despite the difficulties of the past year, our community's unity and adherence to safety protocols have been the benchmark for communities throughout the country. We have much of which to be proud.

The holidays of Purim and Pesach will soon be upon us. While each rabbi will communicate directly with his congregation, we collectively believe it is important to reiterate a number of community-wide safety protocols.

Covid-19 Vaccine

Words cannot adequately express our immense gratitude to Hashem for enabling the discovery of vaccines for Covid-19. We **strongly** encourage every eligible individual to get vaccinated as soon as possible. At the same time, we know the frustration many are facing as they wait to be inoculated. We stress how critically important it is for everyone to register for the vaccine in accordance with the government guidelines. We have an opportunity to create a Kiddush Hashem by carefully following the vaccine distribution guidelines.

Social Distancing and Masks

Despite the advances, the virus remains active and is spreading in certain sectors of our community and beyond. We must remain vigilant in our observance of all CDC regulations. This includes social distancing, mask wearing, hand washing, and quarantining when necessary. It is precisely because our community shuls have maintained a strict adherence to these protocols that our shuls have not been causes of contagion.

We empathize with the general feelings of "Covid-19 fatigue". However, we must continue to follow the guidance of our medical professionals. Until our community doctors advise to the contrary, our public safety measures will stay in effect in every RCBC-member synagogue. As we learn more information about the vaccine, each shul will communicate directly regarding changes in policy for those who are fully vaccinated.

Celebrating Purim and Pesach

We understand that many people are anxious to celebrate Purim and Pesach together with family and friends this year. **We urge everyone to exercise great caution when planning for these holidays, as the beautiful mitzvot associated with them do not override our paramount concern for safety.** For example, mishloach manot should be delivered with great attention paid to social distancing. Consider dedicating more funds to matanot l'evyonim and preparing fewer mishloach manot packages. The Purim seudah should not put anyone in a compromised health situation.

VA'AD HARABANIM RABBINICAL COUNCIL OF BERGEN COUNTY, INC

<https://www.rcbcvaad.org>



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Similar considerations should be taken when making arrangements for the Sedarim and the week of Pesach. Our earnest desire to spend time with our family and friends cannot jeopardize anyone's safety. At the same time, to the extent it is possible, please keep in mind your relatives, friends and neighbors who will be alone during this holiday season. Even small acts of kindness, such as a phone call or a socially distant visit, can have a significant impact.

We recognize that some individuals in our community will be fully vaccinated by the time Purim and Pesach arrive; we encourage everyone to consult with their physicians for specific medical guidance.

We have been inspired by you, the members of our community, as you have continued to sacrifice not only for your personal well-being but on behalf of others. May Hashem see our commitment to safeguarding others and speedily bring us to a time when these types of measures will be a distant memory.

Wishing everyone a safe, meaningful, and happy Purim and Pesach.

The Rabbinical Council of Bergen County