

Choirs | The Rabbinical Assembly

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Please note that this is not an official responsum of the CJLS.

Shiru IAdomai shir hadash

The choral tradition is one with deep roots in Jewish musico-liturgical practice. From the time of the Levites in the Beit Mikdash (Jerusalem Temple) to the present, choral music has enhanced Jewish worship. Jewish choirs are a mainstay at many synagogues for the High Holidays in particular, including both amateur and professional voices who enhance the davenen of the hazzan.

The desirability of *hiddur mitzvah* notwithstanding, the current COVID-19 pandemic has severely restricted choral music of all types. There is growing evidence that the aerosolization effect of choral singing (as well as other singing and even loud speaking) results in the practice being considered a “super-spreader” of the disease (see the following articles from [LiveScience](#) and [NATS](#)). As a result, choral singing in synagogues for the High Holidays might be creating a significant *sakanat nefashot* (endangering of life). Indeed, the same might be true of solo cantorial singing and Torah chanting. Please see the CJLS letter of guidance for Clergy and Shelihei Tzibbur.

Since medical science and guidelines are developing and changing, hazzanim, rabbis, lay leaders, choral conductors, and choir members are advised to consult with their national and local medical authorities for guidance as it is updated and revised. Among the preventive measures that should be considered are physical distancing, masks, and hand sanitizer for everyone, physical barriers around singers and speakers, curtailing Torah processions, reducing proximity among those officiating in the liturgy, among other practices that will need to be updated as medical science and guidelines improve.

As a result of the likelihood of aerosolization, we believe that choral singing should not take place for this High Holiday season unless the following conditions can be reasonably met:

1) The number of members of a choir must be at a minimum. Because of aerosolization, each member of a choir needs to be behind a separate physical barrier, like a plexiglass or some sort of plastic shield, and the choir director should be separated from them. Choir members must wear a mask when outside the barrier. Medical doctors affiliated with a congregation should be consulted about whether a choir member speaking or singing behind a barrier could remove his/her mask, depending on the lay-out of the prayer space.

2) No public rehearsing prior to services should take place; rather, all rehearsals should be conducted in a video-conferencing modality. Although this makes choral coordination difficult, it is the only safe way to prepare repertoire prior to the High Holiday season.

3) Video-conferencing and streaming of the choir might be an alternative to in-synagogue singing. However, it is not currently possible (late May 2020) to fully synch sound across video conference platforms such as Zoom to enable true synchronous choral singing. Perhaps these technologies will soon be developed, in which case choral singing could occur from different (safe) locations simultaneously. Even were these issues overcome, there would still be the problem of singing physically separated from the hazzan and/or choir directors, thus making the likelihood of true choral accompaniment difficult.

4) Finally, pre-recorded music must be avoided due to halakhic and technical reasons. Among the halakhic problems are 1) whether a recorded choir can fulfill the obligation of others, and 2) if a recorded choir is accompanying a live hazzan, that hazzan has to be sure to recite every word, not necessarily a characteristic of some cantorial compositions. Synching a recording and a live hazzan and congregation can be problematic.

5) Similar precautions should be employed for the hazzan and/or lay sheliach tzibbur, the rabbi, Torah reader, and shofar blower. See the CJLS letter of guidance on [Clergy and Shelihei Tzibbur](#).