

Clergy and Shelihei Tzibbur

 rabbinicalassembly.org/story/clergy-and-shelihei-tzibbur

Prepared by Rabbi Pamela Barmash and Toby Schonfeld, Ph.D.

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

Our need for community is even greater during this time of pandemic and physical distancing, and even though holding davenning in person as a community poses a significant challenge, our role as klei kodesh and the needs of our communities for being together, even with physical distancing, call for us to rise to the occasion, where governmental and medical authorities allow, and where the architecture of our prayer spaces permit.

Sakanat nefashot (danger to human life) is a major principle of Judaism. Rabbi Moses Isserles wrote:

וכן יזהר מכל דברים המביאים לידי סכנה כי סכנתא חמירא מאיסורא ויש לחוש יותר לספק סכנה מלספק איסור (ב"י בשם הש"ס) ולכן אסרו לילך בכל מקום סכנה כמו תחת קיר נטוי... עוד כתבו שיש לברוח מן העיר כשדבר בעיר ויש לצאת מן העיר בתחילת הדבר ולא בסופו (תשובת מהרי"ל סי' ל"ה) וכל אלו הדברים הם משום סכנה ושומר נפשו ירחק מהם ואסור לסמוך אנס או לסכן נפשו בכל כיוצא בזה ועיין בחושן משפט סימן תכ"ז:

One should avoid all things that might lead to danger because a danger to life is stricter than a prohibition. Therefore, it is forbidden to walk in a dangerous place, like under a leaning wall.... They also write that one should flee a city when there is plague in the city, and one should go when the plague is in its beginning, not at its end. One should be more concerned about a possible danger to life than a possible prohibition... And it is prohibited to rely on a miracle or to put one's life in danger. (Y.D. 116:5)

This teaches us that during this pandemic in modern times, we must take precautions to ensure our health as well as avoid endangering the health of others, and this is especially true for those of us serving as leaders and role models for Jewish communities.

Since medical science and guidelines are developing and changing, rabbis and lay leaders 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 professional and semi-professional singers and speakers, curtailing Torah processions, reducing proximity among those having officiating in the liturgy, among other practices that will need to be updated as medical science and guidelines improve.

The following information from the Secure Community Network (SCN) will help in thinking through reopening buildings and resuming in-person activities:

- ["Overview of considerations for resumption of operations and organizational re-opening"](#) was created by the SCN national working group, which includes USCJ.
- [SCN's "Guide to Low/No Cost Facility Security Guidance For Use in Re-opening" can be accessed here.](#)
- An Emergency Operations Plan Template can be [accessed here.](#)

Rabbi Jacob Blumenthal explains why Jewish institutions should factor into their decisions the values that have continued to guide us throughout the pandemic in [Reopening Our Institutions and Jewish Values.](#)

Appropriate guidelines for rabbis, hazzanim, lay shlikhei tzibbur, Torah readers, and choir members holding community services in person are:

- All must practice social distancing (advice current to the writing of this letter of guidance in late May 2020 is a minimum of 6 ft apart for individuals or congregational households sitting together, and because of aerosolization, farther apart for those singing, chanting, or speaking, whether amateur, semi-professional, and professional).
- ***Everyone*** must wear a mask to reduce the likelihood of transmitting the virus, including rabbis, hazzanim, lay shelihei tzibbur, Torah readers, and choir members, even if this gear may interfere somewhat with their ability to project their voice. A microphone may obviate or reduce muffling. In addition, a [physical barrier](#), like a plexiglass or plastic shield, can be placed around an amud and each member of a choir in order to decrease the likelihood of dispersal. If such a physical barrier is set up, medical doctors affiliated with a congregation should be consulted about whether a rabbi, hazzan, lay shelihei tzibbur, Torah reader, and choir member speaking or singing behind a barrier could remove his/her mask, depending on the lay-out of the prayer space.

- Gloves prevent transmission of the virus through the skin but do not prevent the transmission of the virus from one surface to another. Therefore, gloves should only be worn when individuals are expected to touch something that many others have touched that has not been disinfected. Assuming that the amud is disinfected in between services and they use their own siddurim, the clergy should not need to wear gloves. An example of where gloves might be appropriate might be in the case of multiple Torah readers: someone who is going to read Torah could put on a fresh pair of gloves, touch the yad and the Torah, and then discard those gloves immediately when s/he is done reading and sanitize his/her hands (in case s/he has not removed the gloves properly). And the wearer should still be very careful not to touch one's face while wearing gloves, as the wearer can still transfer the virus from gloves into the body through the eyes, nose, and mouth.
- Because the principal of *sakanat nefashot* overrides the duty of rabbis, hazzanim, lay shelihei tzibbur, shofar blowers, or Torah readers in officiating, those who may be at greater risk of a more serious reaction to COVID-19 due to age or being immuno-compromised should prepare contingency plans for a substitute and consider recusing themselves from officiating.
- Self-quarantining by rabbis, hazzanim, lay shelihei tzibbur, shofar blowers, and Torah readers who self-quarantine with their entire household with zero outside contact is an option but only until the point at which those who have self-quarantined and anyone in their household are interacting with others again. They should consult with their local public health authorities to evaluate the safety of this.
- A negative COVID-19 test is insufficient because of the rate of false negatives. But even when COVID-19 tests become more accurate, masks may still be advised to protect the wearer as well as a barrier to protect others if those with a negative test are exposed. Rabbis, hazzanim, lay shelihei tzibbur, shofar blowers, and Torah readers should consult with their local public health authorities to evaluate this option.
- Shofar blowing presents separate challenges. Please see the letter of guidance for Shofar.

Following these guidelines will enable us as rabbis, hazzanim, lay shelihei tzibbur, shofar blowers, and Torah readers to help our communities not just survive but thrive in these difficult days.