

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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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