

June 2020

Returning from Lockdown: Reform Judaism guidelines for the easing of COVID-19 lockdown restrictions

Our synagogue buildings may have been closed but our communities are open and thriving. This document has been written by a partnership consisting of lay leaders, the Assembly of Rabbis and Cantors along with Reform Judaism.

The essential physical distancing required to limit the spread of coronavirus COVID-19 in society has led to a seismic shift in activities within all Jewish communities. With the initial peak of cases now behind us, attention shifts to how and when to ease the restrictions we have placed on communal activities. This is a delicate balance: whilst we all want the normal rhythms of Jewish life to return, we must also accept that there remains a very real risk. Making bad decisions now could open the door to a second peak, with more illness and more deaths. The demographics of the Jewish community means we must be especially vigilant.

The following guidelines are a tool for Reform Communities to use while considering any in-person communal activity, whether it is a small or a large group of people. We have no timelines to put to these, but we anticipate that easing of lockdown measures and the reintroduction of activities in synagogue buildings will begin only after the High Holy Days.

Our Values

Reform Judaism is driven by our values. Returning to physical community life is no exception. We consider the following to be the key values which should drive decisions at this time.

- *Pikuach Nefesh*
"You shall keep my statutes and live by them, not die by them" (Yoma 85b)
Saving life is the first and most important obligation placed on us by Torah. To save a life comes before almost any other commandment. When returning to physical community life, we must not be taking actions which we know risk our own lives or the lives of others by enabling the spread of COVID-19 in our communal spaces.
- *Kol Yisrael Aravim Zeh Ba'Zeh*
"The entire Jewish people are guarantors for one another" (Shevuot 39a)
In our communities, we are each responsible for every other member. In the face of a pandemic, our actions have significant consequences beyond ourselves. We are not just responsible for the physical health of others, but for their mental and spiritual wellbeing. We must offer support on all of these fronts in whatever ways are safe.

- *B'tzelem Elohim*
"And the Eternal created humanity in the image of God" (Genesis 1:27)
Every person is created in the image of God, and thus every person has equal value and equal standing in our communities. Whilst different groups of people may face different risks, and in some cases may need to take different actions, we recognise that every member of our communities is of equal value.
- *Lifnei Iver Lo Titen Michshol*
"You shall not place a stumbling block before the blind" (Leviticus 19:14)
People should not be put into a situation where they will falter and be unable to follow the rules required of them. Whilst there may be theoretical solutions in some cases for returning to physical activities, we must consider whether we can genuinely expect people to be able to follow them in practice.

Our Guidance

Reform Judaism's communities reflect significant diversity in numbers, demographics, personnel and activities. This guidance offers general advice to support the decision making of each synagogue. Further work will be required between Reform Judaism, Rabbis, Lay Leaders and members of communities over the coming months as the situation evolves and this guidance will be updated to reflect those changes.

Moving with caution

As some of the government-imposed restrictions are lifted, there will be a temptation to rush back to reopening. We encourage every synagogue to move slowly and with caution. Many of our communities are particularly vulnerable to transmission of coronavirus, as seen by the devastating number of Jewish cases and deaths, and many of our activities are difficult to perform with appropriate distancing and safety precautions. This is particularly true for large-scale events - especially the upcoming High Holidays. We advise that gatherings with a large number of members are unlikely to be possible for some time. Given this is unlikely to be true before Rosh Hashanah, we encourage communities to make plans as soon as possible for alternative methods for High Holiday activities.

Avoiding two-tier programming

We should avoid the creation of a "two-tier" community, where ability to participate is divided by characteristics related to susceptibility to the virus - for example, an individual's age or a positive COVID-19 antibody test. Such factors could mean that some people can take part in services and events in person, and at the same time others must watch as onlookers. We encourage all synagogues to remain mindful of more vulnerable members having to watch the physical experience of other members, which feels very different to everyone being online.

Minimising physical presence and maintenance of online options

Across Reform Judaism, online platforms have ensured communities have still had a space for services and activities throughout this period. This quick adaptation has been one of the true successes of our response. Even as some physical activities may return, we encourage communities to continue to make their activities equally accessible through online platforms, and to consider keeping some activities as wholly virtual where that is possible.

We recognise that those who wish the most to return are likely to be those who are isolated and vulnerable. We must acknowledge that these are often the people whom we are most determined to protect and that by opening a building we create choices and therefore risk.

Cheder

This provision is not deemed to be essential education in the same way as nurseries and should continue online only.

Board/Council Meetings

These should remain online only. Some may be tempted to meet in gardens but that risks pressuring someone who is at risk into taking part.

Activities which carry additional risk

Some normal synagogue practices increase risk. Whilst some (handshaking or face-to-face meeting) are clear, there is some evidence that singing also aids the spread of viral particles. These particular activities should be given special attention in risk assessing any return. This may affect the ability of choirs to physically meet in the synagogue during HHD or even recording as a group ahead of HHD.

For clarification or questions please contact communitypartnership@rjuk.org



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