

Updated 6th January 2021

National Lockdown: Stay at Home

Everyone at Reform Judaism hugely values the incredible efforts which have been made by the leadership of all our synagogues in maintaining community over the past year. Despite the need for physical distancing, a huge amount of work from clergy, staff and lay leadership has enabled our communities to be as close as ever. Collectively, we have provided a spiritual refuge which our members have needed and valued.

The current number of cases, hospitalisations and deaths is incredibly high and the risk to our members is now similar to last March with the new variant potentially even more serious. We therefore strongly urge all of our communities to remain closed for in-person activities at the current time. *Pikuach Nefesh* - the obligation to preserve life - has been the central value of our decision-making at all stages. Whilst our synagogues are legally permitted to open, this does not mean we must or should do so. By continuing to limit our contacts, we protect members and professional staff in our synagogues whilst supporting the national effort to limit the transmission of COVID-19. It would be particularly devastating for the virus to be allowed to spread in our communities now when the prospect of the vaccines delivering widespread immunity is so close.

Together, we have achieved so much in facing down a challenge we have not seen in any of our lifetimes. Two vaccines are now approved for use so there is a light at the end of the tunnel. We encourage all our members who are invited to be vaccinated to do so. The transition to virtual spaces; the care and support structures we have managed to put in place; and the spirit of togetherness which transcends distance - there is so much we should all be proud of. Reform Judaism will continue to offer you and your community all of the support we can as we seek to navigate what we all hope will be the beginning of the end of the pandemic and a new beginning for us all.

The full government guidance for Places of Worship has not yet been updated but the advice we have received from the Cabinet Office is:

Communal worship can continue at places of worship but people cannot mix outside of their household or support bubble. Funerals can continue with up to 30 attendees, and stone settings can take place with up to 6 people. Weddings can take place with up to 6 attendees, but these should only happen in exceptional circumstances.

Our Values

Progressive 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. As the situation develops we will update this guidance.

Having a plan to open the physical doors does not imply that you should do so, nor is the existence of this document a suggestion that you should. You may consider the Jewish values, discuss your vision and decide that this is not the right time. In our conversations with the government they have been clear that the fewer the people, the shorter the amount of time, the greater the ventilation, the safer we are.

We suggest a first stage is for the synagogue leadership have a conversation about what it will both look and feel like. Strict social distancing, reduced or no congregational singing, reduced participation, active members who are vulnerable unable to attend, no Kiddush nor conversations and shortened services are what we should expect. Singing has its [own guidelines](#)

If you feel that after this conversation you can still achieve what you hope to for your community it is time to begin thinking through the next stages which include ensuring the trustees understand their legal obligations, checking your insurance and completing a risk assessment (appendixed).

If you do not own your building but rent space you will need to begin a conversation with your space owner who should be using [this guidance](#).

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.

An example may be that your main Shabbat service remains online and a smaller gathering takes place in person for a life-cycle event eg. mincha b’nei mitzvah.

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

In person Cheder is not permitted

Weddings

Should only take place in exceptional circumstances with a maximum of 6 people. Detailed guidance is at the end of the document.

Funerals

Up to a maximum of 30 people and attendees are not permitted to interact outside of their household/support bubble. Detailed guidance is at the end of the document. JJBS have taken a more prudent approach and limited the numbers further. Their guidance can be found [here](#)

Stone Settings

Are permitted up to 6 people. This does not include anyone working i.e. cemetery staff or clergy.

Entering the building

Below are guidelines to be read in addition to those published by the Government which can be found [here](#) when considering any in-person life-cycle event within the Synagogue.

Trustee Liability

Trustees are legally liable and must be able to demonstrate that they:

- ❖ have thought through the full range of considerations for reopening,
- ❖ are complying with the relevant regulations in force at the time, and
- ❖ are discharging their legal duties to the best of their abilities.

Caring for employees and volunteers

We strongly recommend that personal situations of clergy, staff, and volunteers are taken into consideration as you make decisions. There may be confidential health matters that they are living with that keeps them from returning to the building. They should be able to stay home without having to disclose what their condition is.

Singing and speaking in a way that projects your voice.

Singing has its' own guidelines which should be read carefully. [You can find them here](#)

Timing

It should come as no surprise that the less time we are together the lower the risk of transmission. If a member of the congregation is asymptomatic they can still be a spreader unwittingly. The best practice guidelines we should follow are to keep services as short as is decently possible. Your pre-opening conversations should include a discussion around what you are using the space for and what you are aiming to achieve with the physical presence and frame the service around that.

Ventilation

Each of our community buildings are very different. Some are owned and used solely by others and some are hired spaces. The guidance here is that we use our common sense and create as much ventilation as possible. (this does not mean using fans which would serve to spread the virus) but means all possible doors and windows should be open.

If doors are open you should consider this inline with CST security guidance which can be found on their website and a section of the risk assessment should be completed. The logic is that the nearer we make the space to be effectively an 'open space' the lower the risk. The lower the ventilation the tighter you must stick to the 2 metre social distancing. If you do not have a space that permits sufficient ventilation you should consider using an alternate space where possible.

Face Coverings

Face coverings are mandatory in places of worship and other indoor settings from 8 August 2020. Those responsible for a place of worship, and those serving in that place at the request of or with the agreement of the person responsible, are not required to wear face coverings as they carry out their duties and responsibilities. This would include the person leading a service or event, or those supporting for that event at the request of the host – for example when leading prayer. There are also valid exemptions for some individuals and groups to not wear a face covering in these settings (e.g. children under 11 or people with disabilities which prevent them from putting on a face covering).

A final word

As we have repeated throughout this document all that we do is underpinned by our Progressive Jewish Values. We encourage all of our communities to aspire to best practice as the impact of getting any of this wrong is potentially so devastating. We hope that by reading this document you will feel confident to make the decision to delay your physical opening if that is right for your community.

For clarification of questions please contact Sarah@rjuk.org

To be considered in conjunction with this document

[Singing](#)

[Local restriction tiers guidelines](#)

[Government advice for opening public worship](#)

[Government advice for community centres \(for those who hire space\)](#)

[DfE – guidance for in-person Cheder](#)

[Guidance for small weddings and civil partnerships](#)

[Guidance for funerals](#)

Risk Assessment