

# **Services in a Covid endemic time: Seven Principles for Safer Synagogues**

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# Assumptions

- We will be living and praying in a covid-endemic environment for some time, and need to reflect that in our practice. This requires us to develop new habits and behaviours for a world in which SARS-CoV-2 remains endemic.
- It will be permitted to reopen without restrictions from 19 July, but this does not mean that we should. Public health advice remains to be cautious. Opening should be phased and continue to contain risk mitigation measures if it is to be safe for staff and members.
- This is still a matter of Pikuach Nefesh – the risk of serious illness, death, and long covid remains. The vaccine has been an extraordinary blessing, but risk remains. Not all of our congregants are vaccinated; the vaccine has less efficacy for those with suppressed/compromised immune systems; those with vulnerabilities remain at greater risk; the vaccine reduces but does not fully prevent infection and transmission.
- Variants of SARS-CoV-2 may well continue to cause outbreaks, so it is important to have good processes in place for such eventualities.
- Synagogues and faith leaders have a responsibility to model a commitment to the common good by developing and being exemplars of good practice and showing others how to do so; as well as continuing to encourage vaccination, isolation and testing.

# Seven Principles

- Principle 1: Settings have the right and obligation to set their own rules
- Principle 2: Success looks different in the context of an endemic Covid.
- Principle 3: No one should feel pressure to return.
- Principle 4: There is still a risk that needs to be managed
- Principle 5: Communication remains crucial
- Principle 6: 'The way we always did it' might not yet be the safe way
- Principle 7: It is reasonable to have high expectations of members

# Principle 1: Settings have the right and obligation to set their own rules

- All synagogues are still allowed and expected to set their own protocols and guidelines, to develop their own procedures and behaviours that are right for their setting. We may be permitted to relax in many ways, but this does not mean that we have to. Public health advice remains to exercise caution.
- The leadership of each synagogue (trustees and professionals) are responsible for what happens in their synagogue, and for ensuring there are appropriate policies and practices in place.
- There is a difference between the freedom of an individual in their personal interactions at home and outside, and the behaviours expected inside a public space with others. Place of Worship are not venues in which personal choice alone can be the determiner of practice.
- Comparisons between settings are deeply unhelpful and should be discouraged. No two institutions are the same – we have different demographics, attendance rates, buildings, service styles etc.

# Principle 2: Success looks different in the context of an endemic Covid

- For the time being, success for Places of Worship is not about maximising capacity or returning to 'normal' as soon as possible, but about working to create joyful and meaningful in-person services while also continuing to mitigate risk and serving the needs of those unable to return.
- Unlike other sectors (pubs, theatres, restaurants) we do not have to operate at full capacity immediately in order to maximise profit – other considerations are more important.
- The reputational risk associated with doing this badly, especially the risk of hosting an outbreak, as well as the potential impact on members, is far more important than potential frustration with small continued inconveniences.
- We have a broader responsibility to model good practice, whatever is happening in wider society and the private sector.

## **Principle 3: No one should feel pressure to return.**

- Not everyone can or will come back to synagogue in person at this stage. We should not expect, or want them to.
- Those who are especially at risk, or for whom the vaccine is likely to be less efficacious, should be encouraged to seriously consider their wellbeing. Those who are unwell must not feel a pressure to come into our buildings.
- To this end, we should avoid presenting a hierarchy of ways to join, in which 'in-person' is seen as the best or encouraged option.
- The responsibility of synagogues is to continue to respond to the needs of those who are unable or not yet ready in as creative a way as possible until they are able to return safely. This might include online and targeted access provision.
- To encourage safe return, we should be sensitive to the diverse needs of congregants, including awareness of the importance of continued risk mitigation, and setting expectations about greeting/physical touch

# Principle 4: There is still a risk that needs to be managed

- The link between infection and ill health / death has been weakened, but Covid remains dangerous, and the way in which it is transmitted has not changed. The nature of our activities means they remain dangerous, and a risk of super spreading. This is especially true of singing which is so central to our prayer life.
- We should therefore still be conscious of important features of our buildings and prayer lives:
  - Ventilation is especially important. Outside and well ventilated spaces are safer than inside.
  - Mask wearing is still advisable indoors, especially in crowded and badly ventilated spaces, but face coverings are not a panacea (especially for singing).
  - The four Ds remain important. We should still consider how we mitigate risk in our setting with reference to: Distance, direction, density, duration.
  - As well as singing, informal face to face gathering (proximal contact) is also a risk. Ingress and egress and planning for toilet use may still require special attention, especially in settings with difficult configurations / bottlenecks.

# Principle 5: Communication remains crucial

- Living with Covid requires the development of new habits in personal behaviour. Institutions can encourage this through clear and responsible messaging. Key measures might include:
  - Pre-booking procedures even where numbers do not need to be managed (“contract of entry”)
  - Advanced information for those attending on expected behaviours.
  - Visual cues on entry (signs)
  - Entry and one way systems
- Design measures are important in communicating how people should behave and the priorities of the institution, as well as indicating a broader responsibility for the common good
- As well as communication, as clergy we have a role as exemplars of safe practice (for example, mask wearing in public)

# **Principle 6: 'The way we always did it' might not yet be the safe way**

- It remains necessary to rethink key aspects of synagogue life in order to mitigate associated risk. Everything does not need to go back to as it was immediately, and some features of our communal life may never return to pre-Covid practice.
- Examples of activities that might still require adaptation for a covid-endemic time:
  - Continuing to reduce the duration of services
  - Rethinking choreography to minimise interactions (such as whether to reintroduce processions).
  - Kiddush / refreshments – whether to offer these at all, and if so, how to do so in a way that minimises risk (removal of communal crisp bowls, dips etc)

# Principle 7: It is reasonable to have high expectations of members

- We are all partners in making our communities as safe as possible.
- It is the responsibility of everyone in our communities not to put others at risk. It is therefore not unreasonable to have high expectations of those attending synagogue.
- In particular:
  - Those who feel unwell should be *expected* not to come to synagogue
  - It is reasonable to encourage people to take a test beforehand
  - It is reasonable, though not advised, to have temperature checks before entry in your risk assessment (they are not scientifically valuable).
- Synagogues are allowed to introduce certification checks (Covid passports) as part of their risk procedures if they wish. This may be the best option where other risk mitigation is not possible.