



# **Guidance for Shuls and Communities Fall 5781**

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As we move into the fall and winter season, we must review the policies, values, and considerations that will inform our behavior in the coming months.

The ongoing commitment of our shuls, rabbis, and lay leadership to provide a safe and compliant environment for so many of their members has been a true *Kiddush HaShem*, particularly as these efforts enabled us to experience a meaningful, yet safe, Yom Tov season in and around our shuls. We hope and pray that *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* will view these efforts as a merit for *klal Yisrael*, and that He will see fit to bring a safe and speedy conclusion to the pandemic and its challenges.

The pandemic continues to be a real concern. While – *Baruch Hashem* – the levels of hospitalization and death are significantly less than at the earliest stages of the pandemic, the disease continues to be present, highly contagious, and often very dangerous. As such, we are obligated to continue to maintain necessary public health measures. While continued observance of these measures is increasingly challenging, it is ever more important as colder weather sets in and many outdoor activities will need to move indoors where the environment poses more of a risk for spreading the virus.

Our *poskim* have established that the primary guideposts for determining communal decisions and policies are the following:

**Pikuach Nefesh**: Concern for life is a paramount value in halacha. We are compelled to violate most halachic prohibitions when confronting a possible risk to life, or a possible opportunity to save a life. As long as the current potential danger continues, we remain obligated to follow the majority of serious medical opinion that counsels ongoing caution, including social distancing, masking and diligent hand hygiene.

**Finding Balance**: Shielding against the risk of virus, however, cannot be the sole consideration in determining behaviors and communal public health policy. Halacha and practical realities demand that a balance be found between the safety of isolation and the importance to health of maintaining a normal life. Such considerations include fundamental social interactions, without which serious health risks may occur. Similarly, decisions must take into account the immediate and long-term impact of the continued functioning of our shuls and yeshivas, our community's truly "essential services." We must work to keep these institutions operating in a truly safe manner and pursue safe ways of restoring more opportunities for social connection.

**Respecting the Role of Government**: Concerns and questions abound regarding many aspects of the government's handling of the pandemic, especially vis-à-vis our community. We are troubled by government policies and practices imposing limitations on public religious observances and prayer while

allowing unlimited civil rights demonstrations; by drastic and overly burdensome measures to lock down schools or Zip Codes without regard for the specifics of each situation; by the imbalanced focus on, and vocal targeting of the Orthodox community; and by the unilateral imposition of regulations and enforcement rather than efforts to build trust and cooperative communal engagement.

Yet, despite our serious concerns and disappointments, communal decisions should be guided by the recognition that government officials and agencies are critical leaders and partners in public health, including in the effort to stem the current pandemic. Notwithstanding disagreements with, and offense taken to, government policies and decisions, communal guidelines must recognize government authority in the realm of public health as *takanat bnei hamedinah*. Anarchy in public health must be avoided.

In addition to adhering to the letter of the law, we also cannot violate the spirit of the law, whether as individuals, as institutions, or as a community. Doing otherwise is itself improper and is a manner of conduct that may engender inappropriate long-term attitudes and habits. למדו לשונם דבר שקר.

**Appropriate Advocacy:** Our community is blessed to reside in a time and place in which we are entitled to, and should, advocate for our community's material and spiritual needs, even when in opposition to prevailing government policies or practices. In so doing, however, our long-standing *mesorah* (tradition) of communal *shtadlanut* (government advocacy), both as public policy and strategy, is to avoid unnecessary antagonism and to show fundamental respect for the governmental system and its members, assiduously avoiding personal attacks or rhetorical accusations of anti-Semitism.

**Aiyva/Anti-Semitism:** In formulating communal policy and behavior, halacha mandates that we consider how our choices affect others' attitudes toward our community. It is therefore incumbent upon us to be models of public health and to avoid behaviors that can be perceived as endangering our health and the health of the surrounding community.

**Fiercely Pursuing Peace:** Side-by-side with the pandemic, our society and community are experiencing another plague - one of division, strife, and strident disagreement. The level of national and communal division that has arisen surrounding the response to the pandemic is not only regrettable; it endangers the future of our community and our country. While communal leaders and segments invariably adopt different views and attitudes in how to grapple with challenges, retaining and enhancing mutual respect and concern must be of paramount concern. Divisive language and public criticism are unlikely to effect change. Rather than pointing fingers, we must focus on what we ourselves can do better, improving ourselves before critiquing others.

We hope and pray that these efforts will – with G-d's help – bring a resolution to our challenges and be a source of *Kiddush Hashem*.