

Halacha and the Use of Video Conferencing at the Seder (Yom Tov)

The following halachic rendering is submitted after extensive research, consultation and personal introspection.

By Rabbi Eliot H. Pearlson

I pray that HaShem will appraise my deliberations and decision with the holy intentions of which I have intended. **(Enclosed at the end of this document is my complete written statement with sources)**

Summary:

Question: “May we use internet conferencing on Yom Tov to share the Seder with family sequestered elsewhere?”

Answer:

The first option is to have a seder-like video meeting before candle lighting at 7:23 pm. A creative family ceremony can include the Four Questions, favorite songs and even rituals karpas... hiding the afikomen... sharing the Magid stories and songs. The evening can end with the lighting of candles and signing off.

If a family decides that it is preferential and befitting for the use of teleconferencing technology for the seder, and will abide by the below listed guidelines, then it is permissible to use such technology. It is imperative that the guidelines be followed to ensure halachic compliance.

המחמיר תבוא עליו ברכה והמקיל יש לו על מה לסמוך

“Blessed is the one who is strict...”

But the lenient have a legitimate source upon which to rely”

Guidelines

How to convene the virtual meeting on Yom Tov:

- * The devices must be turned on before the start of the holiday and left on through its duration.
- * Using this allowance means accepting the condition that this may be used only during the present crisis.
- * Using this leniency means accepting the condition that this allowance is used only to fulfill THIS mitzvah on Yom Tov (and not for visiting the homebound, entertaining friends, virtual parties, etc.)
- * Using this leniency means accepting the ruling that this allowance is granted only “to address the need to alleviate sadness from elders and the needy.”

Summary of Conditions:

- a. No changing of electronic settings
- b. No adjusting volume or camera or view
- c. If transmission is lost, no reconnecting
- d. Process must be left on and cannot be terminated
- e. Acceptance infers agreeing this is only to be used during this current state of emergency.
Upon return to normalcy, no video conferencing for any home or synagogue holiday or shabbat rituals will be held.

The Rabbis Emphasize:

It must be clear to everyone that this is a one-time, emergency ruling, and only for the Seders. This is not a carte-blanche permission for the use of technology on Yom Tov and definitely not on Shabbat.

May the devotions of our Seder and Yom Tov prayers speedily usher in a Refuah Shleimah – a ‘Complete Healing’ for the whole world.

And may our victories over these difficult times will be remembered as the standard for a future of great accomplishments.

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## FULL TEXT OF SHAILA AND TESHUVA OF RABBI ELIOT H. PEARLSON

### The Use of Tele-Communication for the Seder During the Coronavirus Restrictions

#### Question:

We are in a grievous community crisis. Current restrictions forbid groups of non-nuclear family to assemble within 6 feet of each other (i.e.: people who do not live full time under one roof).

The foundation of the Passover holiday is the attendance at the Seder by extended family, friends, and others who do not have a seder to join.

Forbidding the attendance of extended family and friends can cause additional grievous emotional stress, manifest depression in an already anxious community, or cause some to improperly observe the rituals due to lack of familiarity or knowledge.

**MAY THE TECHNOLOGY OF VIRTUAL CONFERENCING (SUCH AS ZOOM, GOOGLE HANGOUTS-MEET OR FACETIME) BE USED TO CONNECT PEOPLE TO A LIVE SEDER ON YOM TOV?**

## The Three Main Halachic Issues:

- Turning on and using an electrical device during a holiday
- Committing a “secular act” that cheapens the spiritual essence of the holiday (עובדין דחול)
- Concern that the practice may continue in the future (when this crisis status has past) therein decentralizing synagogue and community.
- Abusing any accommodation (accidently or with intent) by extending any decision beyond its original parameters

An example of the precedent: there are situations when Shabbat laws can be put aside to give medical treatment even when patients are not in an obvious, immediate, life-threatening situation.

## How to Convene the Virtual Meeting on Yom Tov:

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- \* Using this leniency means accepting the condition that this allowance is used only to fulfill THIS mitzvah on Yom Tov (and not for visiting the homebound, entertaining friends, virtual parties, etc.)
- \* Using this leniency means accepting the ruling that this allowance is granted only “to address the need to alleviate sadness from elders and the needy.”  
**The rabbis emphasized that “it must be clear to everyone that this is a one-time, emergency ruling, and only for the Seders – this is not a carte-blanche permission for the use of technology on Yom Tov and definitely not on Shabbat.”**

## Summary of Conditions:

- a. No changing of electronic settings
- b. No adjusting volume or camera or view
- c. If transmission is lost, no reconnecting
- d. Process must be left on and cannot be terminated
- e. Acceptance infers agreeing this is only to be used during this current state of emergency.  
*Upon return to normalcy, no video conferencing for any home or synagogue holiday or shabbat rituals will be held.*

## Rabbinic Source:

*(The following is the synopsis of a private discussion between myself and a leading Rosh Yeshiva of Modern Orthodoxy. I took notes and the below represents my best efforts to convey his insights. Any mistakes are mine alone. If one needs further erudition, please call me personally)*

1. Use of the electric mechanisms of a computer and video apparatuses most probably doesn't transgress rabbinic injunctions let alone biblical law since they are not “aish - fire” or even

incandescent lights (produce light and heat). On shabbat the above use remains problematic. On Yom Tov this is less difficult, since on Yom Tov we can cook and use existing fire.

2. If the device is set up and on **before** Yom Tov it appears to be similar to talking to a person that is using a hearing aid (all are electric i.e. battery powered) or walking by a security camera that is always on and we are being viewed or recorded – which is permissible.

3. In cases where a person is isolated, alone, doesn't know how to run a Seder, cannot run a Seder for physical or emotional reasons, then these leniencies may be appropriate.

4. It is imperative that if one decides to use such technology that the obvious limitations of desecrating the sanctity of the Day is enforced (see above **Summary of Conditions**).

### **Responsa of Some Israeli Sefardi Rabbis:**

The Coronavirus crisis has created an **extreme** situation that merits drawing on special leniencies in Jewish law.

**14 Sephardic Orthodox rabbis issued a statement that the Passover Seder may be held via video conference. Among them are:**

- Rabbi Eliyahu Abergel, head of Jerusalem's rabbinical court
- Chief Rabbi Shlomo Ben Hamo of Kiryat Gat
- Rabbi Eyal Vered of Jerusalem's Machon Meir institution
- Rabbi Yehudah Shlush - Municipal Rabbi of Netanya
- Rabbi Moshe Elharar
- Rabbi Refael Daloiah
- Rabbi David Zano
- Rabbi Daniel Boskilah

### **Rabbi Eliot Pearlson's Conclusion:**

The first option is to have a seder-like video meeting before candle lighting at 7:23 pm. A creative family ceremony can include the Four Questions, favorite songs and even rituals karpas... hiding the afikomen... sharing the Magid stories and songs. The evening can end with the lighting of candles and signing off.

***If a family decides that it is preferential and befitting for the use of tele-conferencing technology for the seder, and will abide by the below listed guidelines, then it is permissible to use such technology. It is imperative that the guidelines be followed to ensure halachic compliance.***

המחמיר תבוא עליו ברכה והמקיל יש לו על מה לסמך

*"hamachmir, tavo alav baracha, v'hameikil yeish lo al mah lismoch"*

*Blessed is the one who is strict... **But the lenient have a legitimate source upon which to rely***