

VA'AD HARABANIM RABBINICAL COUNCIL OF BERGEN COUNTY, INC

PO BOX 1233 Teaneck, NJ 07666 • (844) 895-RCBC • <https://www.rcbcvaad.org>



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May 5, 2020

י"א אייר תש"פ

Dear Friends,

As Jews living in the modern world, we are mandated by the Torah to navigate the tension between our unique and singular identity as a Jewish community on the one hand and as engaged citizens of the broader community on the other. Both of these represent aspects of our religious mission. Sometimes this tension is navigated effortlessly, while other times it is fraught with complexity. This tension is evident in our relationship with the current pandemic and I would like to highlight two ways in which our reaction is, and should be, unique. One is fundamental and one is practical.

Fundamentally, the sanctity and value of human life is a cornerstone of Jewish law and thought. In this regard we have much in common with the general society in which we live. It is precisely these shared values which has allowed the RCBC and other Jewish communal leaders to communicate and collaborate with the local medical community as well as our government about ways to maximize social distancing and other life saving measures. We take great pride in the example we've set for the broader community around us, and aspire to continue being a "light unto the nations" by educating others of this core value.

At the same time, it is important to appreciate the ways in which the Jewish value on human life may be unique. Consider the fact that our Jewish community shut the doors of our schools and shuls in advance of the rest of our society (though I wish we would have acted even earlier). Why did this happen? Are we wiser? Were we better informed? Unlikely. I believe that our swift and sweeping response was primarily due to the primacy *halacha* places on the preservation of human life, and the extent to which it towers over every other core value we hold. Our communal leadership and the rabbis of the RCBC considered the question of how many lives must be endangered to justify the closing of all of our religious institutions. The answer? One. Our tradition teaches that creation originated with one individual person to teach us that one person represents an entire world; saving one life is tantamount to saving an entire world. Some people thought that our rabbis showed great courage and halachic flexibility in shutting down our communal institutions to "compromise" on so many of the laws and rituals that are a part of our daily lives. In truth, the exact opposite is the case. The rabbis followed our long tradition of stringency in our obligation to preserve life.

Many people are itching to return to our religious routines and are wondering when that time will come. Our intention is, as it has been all along, to be guided by halachic and medical advice. We will consider reopening our shuls only when we are confident that there is no significant risk to life. Please understand that it is possible that we will see a divergence in our process from that of other parts of society. Perhaps malls and shops, parks and businesses will open as soon as the "curve is flattened" and

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the spread will no longer be “so bad”. We intend to continue to be “machmir” and cautious, as is unquestionably mandated by Jewish law.

In addition, there is also a practical concern. The very phrase “social distancing” seems like an anathema to us. The rhythm of Orthodox Jewish life promotes social interaction and contact with many different people. Our days and weeks are filled with camaraderie and community. We celebrate together in happy times, and support each other in times of crisis. It is simply not our way to socially distance; community is our lifeblood. While this closeness and intimacy is a source of pride, it is also a source of added vulnerability in the current situation, and we must account for it. While we are grateful for our religious freedoms and can be confident that we will at some point be granted the legal right to once again congregate, it is the responsibility of our community, of each and every one of us, to ensure that we exercise that right only once it is safe for us to do so.

The RCBC is in constant communication with leaders from our local medical community and the area’s hospitals, and we will recommend that we resume activities like minyan once it is considered to be safe and *halachically* advisable. The guidance of our medical advisors has been invaluable and that will continue to be our primary source of direction. To be sure, the first minyanim to resume will be guided by numerous safeguards to ensure safety and social distancing. Additionally, we expect the process to be bumpy and may go forward and backwards as we follow the growth and decline of the pandemic. The RCBC will communicate these guidelines in a timely fashion.

I have been overwhelmed by the unified voice of the religious leadership and the overwhelming support of the general community and the high level of compliance. This speaks to the fact that we have all internalized the critical value of human life. This experience has also allowed us to realize the powerful impact of a unified response in times of difficulty. With Hashem’s help, may we successfully remain united and true to these timeless values, may the pain and suffering experienced by so many soon see its end, may we all be granted good health and safety, and may all of us emerge from this horrible crisis an even stronger, more unified community.

Sincerely,
Rabbi Kenny Schiowitz and the
Rabbinical Council of Bergen County