

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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Rabbi Ari Zahtz

December 2, 2020

טז כסלו תשפ"א

Dear Friends,

As our community continues to navigate the COVID-19 pandemic, we are all closely watching the news with both optimism and concern. We are optimistic about the possibility of an effective vaccine in the near future, but concerned about the continuing rise in infections around the country and in our area. We are seeing dramatic increases in positive cases, hospitalizations, ICU admissions, and intubations at our community hospitals. The hospitals have made room to accommodate the current wave of admissions, but any further significant rise can threaten their ability to effectively treat all new patients. Our community is not immune to the current wave, and we have a clear halachic and moral responsibility to do our share to contain this spread and to "flatten this curve" for the sake of ourselves and for the communities around us.

Stigma and Confidentiality: We strongly urge the entire community to completely remove any stigma associated with the contraction of this virus. No one should be judged or assumed to have been irresponsible in catching it. It is extremely important for everyone to report symptoms and positive cases as this is the most effective way to contain the spread of the virus. We cannot eradicate the virus, but we can control the contagion. All cases need to be reported to the schools, shuls and people who may be affected. Those who report promptly are truly making a difference. By contributing to an environment that is stigma-free we can all help to contain the spread.

Weddings and Smachot: Our smachot have, unfortunately, been our weakest area of compliance. This is especially concerning as outdoor events are becoming increasingly difficult in the cold weather. We urge the community to minimize the number of people at smachot, allow eating only for the closest family members, and refrain from all dancing. Even while wearing a mask, distancing is necessary. An event will not be safe on its own; it is only with careful planning, creative thinking and true flexibility that this can happen. Please seek rabbinic and medical advice in the planning of smachot and fully follow through, despite the substantial challenges.

Masks: While any mask is better than no mask, not all masks are equally effective. The doctors to whom we have spoken have emphasized that surgical masks and KN95 masks are significantly more effective than simple cotton masks or gaiters, and N95 masks are even better. Those attending an indoor minyan or event are strongly encouraged to consider wearing at least a surgical mask. If anyone is older or otherwise vulnerable, please consider an N95 and seek medical guidance.

Chanukah and Yeshiva Week: We urge the community to uphold our practices even during Chanukah and Yeshiva Week, despite our desire to celebrate with family and friends. The recent surge seems to have been fueled by large indoor gatherings, and we must not contribute to the spread of covid in our community.

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Shul: Shuls that are meeting inside are doing so with the utmost of care for safety. This will certainly continue. We continue to advise those who are in any risk category to daven outside or at home. It may be advisable to consider "upgrading" our masks, especially in higher risk situations. (see above)

Youth Activities: Despite the cold, we strongly recommend holding activities outside as much as possible. When held indoors, there should be extra supervision to truly ensure proper masking and distancing and eating should be avoided. Additionally, shuls should contact-trace and report any cases that emerge among the participants.

Hakarat HaTov: We feel a tremendous debt of gratitude to our schools, including the lay and professional leadership, the educators and the communal volunteers who have all enabled our schools to stay open in a safe way and to provide this critical need for learning, socialization and growth. We are grateful to the medical professionals of our community, both Jewish and non-Jewish, who have given their time and expertise in order to inform and advise us with the best guidance possible.

RCBC Leadership: On a personal note, I would like to express my admiration for the entire Bergen County community that I have gotten to know in a new way over the past two years in my role of RCBC president. I am inspired by the dedication of my rabbinic colleagues who lead by example with a nuanced understanding of the community and of the values of the Torah which we represent. I am similarly inspired by the commitment, thoughtfulness and dedication of the entire community to those same values. We appreciate the communication and feedback that exists and look forward to many years of partnership to come. I have full faith in the new board of the RCBC which will now be led by Rabbi Zev Goldberg as president.

Sincerely,
The Rabbinical Council of Bergen County