

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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June 18, 2020

כ"ו סיון תש"פ

Dear Friends,

We are writing to update you about where we presently stand as a community in regard to the pandemic. We also want to extend Mazel Tov wishes to the many graduates in all of the schools in our community and to their parents for trying to weather this storm as best as possible. We are excited to see that many children and adults are finding ways to safely reengage with each other as we all appreciate the significant social and psychological role friendship plays in our daily lives. We are saddened that so many of our children will not be able to have their typical summer experience this year and the possible additional burden that this places on their working parents. We are supportive of those offering safe alternatives and encourage parents to ascertain that their children will indeed be in safe environments.

Progress

We are very thankful that the intensity of the crisis has Baruch Hashem subsided but remain cautious and concerned about the significant rise that we are seeing in parts of the country, indicating that the crisis is definitely not yet over. We continue to believe that the gradual and careful opening of society under the guidance of medical experts is appropriate, but we all must continue to remain responsible to do our part to help contain the spread of the virus. When our attention turned to this issue in March, we faced a high-risk situation. We mandated the closing of shuls and other aspects of our lives because we maintained that this was unequivocally halachically required. No one may choose to engage in high risk behaviors that can endanger one's self or others. Now that the intensity has subsided and social distancing precautions have become the norm, we are still confronted with many lower risk behaviors and choices. We all need to make decisions about whom to allow in our homes, how to socialize, where to work, etc. Many of us confront these questions daily, if not hourly. As with all important decisions, individuals have the duty to make these choices after becoming properly informed, after consultation with relevant experts, and with a great sense of responsibility. We must also consider the consequences of all such choices. Though we may opt to take certain risks for ourselves and our immediate family members, we must always be cognizant of the possible impact on others and thus take greater precautions to avoid interactions with those who may be more vulnerable. We believe that this sacred responsibility should be taken very seriously. We have seen that a callous approach has led to many tragedies, while the more responsible choices and commitments have yielded invaluable benefits. Please speak to your individual doctors about particular decisions. Your rabbi is available to offer Halachic guidance as well, while understanding that each case may be different.

Smachot and Lifecycle Events

It is wonderful that many families are finding creative ways to continue to celebrate smachot. This is a reflection of our resilience and desire to provide our families and friends with

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joy and hope. Mourners are also now able to grieve with less loneliness and can welcome shiva visitors, in a safe way. However, we must do whatever is possible to not allow these events to turn into super-spreading events that will bring more tragedy to our community, county, state and country. **Those who plan these events should carefully design them in a way that only safe socially distant interactions and mask wearing will take place.** We should also be sensitive to our neighbors and try to hold these events in private backyards, when possible, and to be sensitive to the time and noise level of these events. This will undoubtedly require much creativity and Rabbanim are eager to work with families to plan these events successfully. Guests should be told what to expect ahead of time. No one should feel pressured to attend an event where they do not feel safe or comfortable; hosts should, therefore, be understanding and forgiving of guests who decline. Similarly, we should all be understanding of the limitations that the hosts have and thus recognize that we cannot all be invited as we perhaps were in the past. If you arrive at a simcha and the guidelines are not being maintained, it would be best to leave, whether you are there as a friend, relative, or Rav. We are confident that the community will act with diligence and discipline in this area.

Minyanim

Indoor Minyanim: The governor recently lifted many of the restrictions relating to indoor gatherings. **We nonetheless continue to recommend that any kind of transition should be done slowly and gradually.** Since we know from medical authorities that the outdoor air significantly reduces the risk of spreading COVID, it is our recommendation that all minyanim remain outside for a while longer. The outdoor minyanim have, so far, been effective in facilitating communal tefillah and seem to be maximally safe; our cost-benefit analysis therefore indicates that at present, outdoor minyanim are best for our shuls. Our community has acted with unity, patience, and discipline and we will continue to find ways to address our spiritual needs, while simultaneously advocating for the safest possible modes of religious behavior. Rabbanim, following Halachic and medical guidance and in partnership with shul leaderships, are currently considering increasing the participation at each of the shul minyanim, expanding the number of services offered and may be more flexible with restricting registrants to particular minyan groups. However, prior registration continues to be the best practice in ensuring safe minyanim and for tracing purposes.

We hope and pray that the above steps will allow for a safe return to our shuls as soon as possible. We reinforce that no one should feel pressured to attend any minyanim and that there is still no obligation/chiyuv of davening with a minyan. We also reiterate that people should not feel pressured to participate in a social get together or even a simcha if they are uncomfortable doing so, and should seek medical guidance from their own doctors regarding any such events.

May Hashem accept our tefillot and bless us all with good health and much happiness.

Sincerely,
Rabbinical Council of Bergen County