

July 2020

Returning from Lockdown: Reform Judaism & Liberal Judaism guidelines for the easing of COVID-19 lockdown restrictions

Our synagogue buildings may have been closed but our communities have always remained open and thriving. We are now entering another variation of open which may include some lifecycle events happening within the synagogue. This document has been written by a partnership consisting of lay leaders along with Liberal Judaism & Reform Judaism.

The essential physical distancing required to limit the spread of COVID-19 in society has led to a seismic shift in activities within all Jewish communities. With the initial peak of cases now behind us, attention shifts to how and when to ease the restrictions we have placed on communal activities. This is a delicate balance: whilst we all want the normal rhythms of Jewish life to return, we must also accept that there remains a very real risk. Making bad decisions now could open the door to a second peak, with more illness and more deaths. The demographics of the Jewish community means we must be especially vigilant.

The following guidelines are a tool for Reform & Liberal Communities to use while considering any in-person communal activity, whether it is a small or a large group of people. Although we are now legally permitted to be together for prayer services our decisions must remain rooted in our values. We anticipate that return to Shabbat Services in synagogue buildings will begin only after the-High Holy Days. These guidelines are here to support your decision making and explore how you can both safely, and in line with our values, conduct life-cycle events up to a maximum of 30 people in line with government guidelines if you wish to do so.

Our Values

Progressive Judaism is driven by our values. Returning to physical community life is no exception. We consider the following to be the key values which should drive decisions at this time.

- *Pikuach Nefesh*
"You shall keep my statutes and live by them, not die by them" (Yoma 85b)
Saving life is the first and most important obligation placed on us by Torah. To save a life comes before almost any other commandment. When returning to physical community life, we must not be taking actions which we know risk our own lives or the lives of others by enabling the spread of COVID-19 in our communal spaces.
- *Kol Yisrael Aravim Zeh Ba'Zeh*
"The entire Jewish people are guarantors for one another" (Shevuot 39a)
In our communities, we are each responsible for every other member. In the face of a pandemic, our actions have significant consequences beyond ourselves. We are not just responsible for the physical health of others, but for their mental and spiritual wellbeing. We must offer support on all of these fronts in whatever ways are safe.

- *B'tzelem Elohim*
"And the Eternal created humanity in the image of God" (Genesis 1:27)
Every person is created in the image of God, and thus every person has equal value and equal standing in our communities. Whilst different groups of people may face different risks, and in some cases may need to take different actions, we recognise that every member of our communities is of equal value.
- *Lifnei Iver Lo Titen Michshol*
"You shall not place a stumbling block before the blind" (Leviticus 19:14)
People should not be put into a situation where they will falter and be unable to follow the rules required of them. Whilst there may be theoretical solutions in some cases for returning to physical activities, we must consider whether we can genuinely expect people to be able to follow them in practice.

Our Guidance

Liberal Judaism & Reform Judaism's communities reflect significant diversity in numbers, demographics, personnel and activities. This guidance offers general advice to support the decision making of each synagogue. As the situation develops we will update this guidance.

Moving with caution

As some of the government-imposed restrictions are lifted, there might be a temptation to quickly increase the level of open. We encourage every synagogue to move slowly and with caution. Many of our communities are particularly vulnerable to transmission of coronavirus, as seen by the devastating number of Jewish cases and deaths, and many of our activities are difficult to perform with appropriate distancing and safety precautions. This is particularly true for large-scale events - especially the upcoming High Holidays. We advise that gatherings with a large number of members are unlikely to be possible for some time. Given this is unlikely to be true before Rosh Hashanah, we encourage communities to make plans as soon as possible for alternative methods for High Holiday activities.

Avoiding two-tier programming

We should avoid the creation of a "two-tier" community, where ability to participate is divided by characteristics related to susceptibility to the virus - for example, an individual's age or a positive COVID-19 antibody test. Such factors could mean that some people can take part in services and events in person, and at the same time others must watch as onlookers. We encourage all synagogues to remain mindful of more vulnerable members having to watch the physical experience of other members, which feels very different to everyone being online.

An example may be that your main Shabbat service remains online and a smaller gathering takes place in person for a life-cycle event eg. mincha b'nei mitzvah.

Minimising physical presence and maintenance of online options

Across Reform Judaism & Liberal Judaism, online platforms have ensured communities have still had a space for services and activities throughout this period. This quick adaptation has been one of the true successes of our response. Even as some physical activities may return, we encourage communities to continue to make their activities

equally accessible through online platforms, and to consider keeping some activities as wholly virtual where that is possible.

We recognise that those who wish the most to return are likely to be those who are isolated and vulnerable. We must acknowledge that these are often the people whom we are most determined to protect and that by opening a building we create choices and therefore risk.

Cheder

This provision is not deemed to be essential education in the same way as nurseries. The online provision our communities have provided has been outstanding and should continue. Advice will follow from the Department for Education with regards to children's summer activities and for the Autumn Term and this guidance will be updated.

Board/Council Meetings

These should remain online only. Some may be tempted to meet in gardens but that risks pressuring someone who is at risk into taking part. No-one should feel they are in a position where they must disclose their medical conditions.

Entering the building

Below are guidelines to be read in addition to those published by the Government which can be found [here](#) when considering any in-person life-cycle event within the Synagogue.

Having a plan to open the physical doors does not imply that you should do so, nor is the existence of this document a suggestion that you should. You may consider the Jewish values, discuss your vision and decide that this is not the right time. Just because the government guidance has changed does not mean that you should feel pressured in any way. At the same time please remember that the limit of 30 people for lifecycle events and capacity at 2metres social distance for services does not mean that is a target to be reached. In our conversations with the government they have been clear that the fewer the people, the shorter the amount of time, the safer we are.

We suggest a first stage is for the synagogue leadership have a conversation about what it will both look and feel like. Strict social distancing, no singing, reduced participation, encouraging family-bubbles, active members who are vulnerable unable to attend, no Kiddush nor conversations and shortened services are what we should expect.

If you feel that after this conversation you can still achieve what you hope to for your community it is time to begin thinking through the next stages which include ensuring the trustees understand their legal obligations, checking your insurance and completing a risk assessment (appendixed).

If you do not own your building but rent space you will need to begin a conversation with your space owner who should be using [this guidance](#).

Trustee Liability

Trustees are legally liable and must be able to demonstrate that they:

- ❖ have thought through the full range of considerations for reopening,
- ❖ are complying with the relevant regulations in force at the time, and
- ❖ are discharging their legal duties to the best of their abilities.

Caring for employees and volunteers

We strongly recommend that personal situations of clergy, staff, and volunteers are taken into consideration as you make decisions. There may be confidential health matters that they are living with that keeps them from returning to the building. They should be able to stay home without having to disclose what their condition is.

We also recommend that synagogues consider their organisational priorities in thinking of the welfare of staff and clergy, for example staff welfare in the run up to the High Holy Days.

Singing and speaking in a way that projects your voice.

Public Health England have advised us that singing brings with it vastly increased risk through the aerosol nature of the voice. The guidance is very clear that the only person permitted to sing in any way is the person who is leading the service. The best practice is that they are behind a plexi-glass screen which is cleaned immediately after use. Even if singing is directed away from the congregation towards the back wall the bounceback is considered high enough that a screen should still be used (and the wall cleaned).

The only way to have more than one person on the bimah whilst singing is taking place is to have a plexi-glass screen protecting not only the congregation but separating those leading the service (a 'T' shape)

There is no congregational singing permitted whatsoever.

When the congregation is reading they should be mindful to do so at a low volume that causes less projection of aerosols. At this time muttering is considered a good thing!

If your community has pre-recorded music for either Shabbat Services or for HHD's both movements ask that you share with them (and the other if you so wish) music that can be shared between communities for use online. Email a.simonon@liberaljudaism.org or Sarita@rjuk.org

Services

Bimah choreography – only one person should be on the bimah at a time; if more than one person has to be up, they should always be facing the same direction and not towards each other. A plexi-screen separating each person would be best practice in addition to a screen between the service-leader and the congregation.

Brachot should be said in situ there should be no moving to the bimah to open the ark or for an Aliyah for example. All movement should be limited and for this the ritual should be changed to fit the new reality. Again when saying a bracha the congregant must be mindful to keep their volume and projection low.

During any service there should be no passing of items between people. Whoever is going to read from the Torah should remove it from the ark for example as well as do hagbah. In the case of a b'nei mitzvah this can also be someone within the same family bubble. After the service the handles and yad must be wiped with an antibacterial wipe.

The sense of family bubbles is one that can flow throughout. For example a parent may go on the child's side of the bimah to light candles but should avoid being in contact with the person leading the service.

Timing

It should come as no surprise that the less time we are together the lower the risk of transmission. If a member of the congregation is asymptomatic they can still be a spreader unwittingly. The best practice guidelines we should follow are to keep services as short as is decently possible. Your pre-opening conversations should include a discussion around what you are using the space for and what you are aiming to achieve with the physical presence and frame the service around that.

Ventilation

Each of our community buildings are very different. Some are owned and used solely by others and some are hired spaces. The guidance here is that we use our common sense and create as much ventilation as possible. (this does not mean using fans which would serve to spread the virus) but means all possible doors and windows should be open. This will serve

If doors are open you should consider this inline with CST security guidance which can be found on their website and a section of the risk assessment should be completed. The logic is that the nearer we make the space to be effectively an 'open space' the lower the risk. The lower the ventilation the tighter you must stick to the 2 metre social distancing. If you do not have a space that permits sufficient ventilation you should consider using an alternate space where possible.

Face Coverings

There is increasing evidence that face coverings decrease transmission from someone who is positive to others.

Best practice is to encourage wearing masks, especially if there are a reasonable number of elderly people.

A final word

As we have repeated throughout this document all that we do is underpinned by our Progressive Jewish Values. We encourage all of our communities to aspire to best practice as the impact of getting any of this wrong is potentially so devastating. We hope that by reading this document you will feel confident to make the decision to delay your physical opening if that is right for your community.

For clarification of questions please contact communitypartnership@rjuk.org or a.simonon@liberaljudaism.org

To be considered in conjunction with this document

[Government advice for opening public worship](#)

[Government advice for community centres \(for those who hire space\)](#)

Risk Assessment