

**United Synagogue Guidance on Coronavirus
Community and Rabbinic Issues: 20 March 2020**

Please note: As the situation is fluid and government restrictions and advice are changing every day, this advice will be updated online regularly. Please ensure that you are reading the latest version.

Principles

One of the most fundamental principles in Jewish practice is the concept of community. We celebrate together, we grieve together, we mark moments of transition in each other's lives together, we pray together, and we eat together. Our sages even warned us not to separate ourselves from the community (Pirkei Avot 2:4). Yet sadly, during this period of social distancing and self-isolation, it is necessary for us to adapt our lifecycle events and to explain why we are doing so to our members, family and friends.

This document outlines the key social distancing principles, which apply to all the occasions outlined below. Attendees must be asymptomatic, not subject to the requirement to self-isolate and not be in an 'at risk' category such as being 70 years old and over and/or those who have underlying medical conditions.

All attendees at events should wash their hands regularly according to best-practice and should refrain from handshaking, hugging or kissing. Ceremonies that do take place with small groups of people should ensure that individuals are kept apart from one another and that the ceremony is as short as possible.

Bereavement

Bereavement is one of the most difficult experiences we encounter. Jewish burial and mourning practices often provide enormous comfort to those who are grieving. However, while we must do what we can to afford the greatest of respect to our dearly departed, we must also apply the fundamental Jewish principle of *pikach nefesh* – the preservation of life. This means that some of our practices must change during these deeply troubling times.

It is important to understand the fundamental *mitzvot* are *levayat hameit* (the funeral) in which the mourners, together with their family and friends accompany the deceased to their final resting place) the *kevurah* (the actual burial) and *nichum aveilim* (the comforting of the mourners). The idea of "sitting shiva" actually describes the period of seven days following the burial, which is observed by the mourners. The shiva period exists even if there are no formal services held or *kaddish* is not recited. The *azkarah* (memorial prayer) may still be recited even without a *minyan*.

Levayas (lit. accompanying [the deceased]) The Funeral

In order to avoid the potential spread of the virus, a total of 20 people, including the mourners (*aveilim*) will be allowed to attend a funeral. Mourners or family members should invite the people that they wish to attend (normally expected to be immediate family and/or very close friends) and those who do not receive an invitation should not attend. It would be helpful if this message were shared beyond the local community.

All funerals will be held outdoors and people will be asked to stand some distance apart from one another. No transport will be provided. Only mourners will be asked to put in earth.

Individuals or community representatives might consider livestreaming funerals in order to allow others to be included.

Shivas

Mourners (*aveilim*) who are over 70 or medically vulnerable or who must self-isolate should sit shiva alone at home. Chairs and books for the mourner/s to read can be made available by the synagogue office.

At this time, a gathering of people in a shiva house does not comply with government social distancing requirements. Therefore, we would advise against shiva visits taking place. No minyanim should be held at shiva houses and the Rabbi and Rebbetzen will not visit the shiva house. Community members are encouraged to fulfil the mitzvah of *nichum aveilim* (comforting the mourners) in other ways, such as through phone calls and email.

Stonesettings (matzevot)

The 'stone-setting' ceremony itself is an important tradition, but not entirely essential. It is customary to hold this ceremony within the first year after the burial of the deceased, but if this is not possible, it may be held at a later date. The key element is the recital of the *azkarah* (memorial prayer) which may be recited without a *minyan*. The tombstone itself could be erected before the service if necessary, in order to fulfil the obligation to mark the grave.

If a stone-setting is to take place, in order to avoid the potential spread of the virus, a total of 20 people, including the mourners (*aveilim*) will be allowed to attend a stone-setting. Mourners or family members should invite the people that they wish to attend (normally expected to be immediate family and/or very close friends) and those who do not receive an invitation should not attend. It would be helpful if this message were shared beyond the local community.

All stone-settings will be held at the graveside. People will be asked to stand some distance apart from one another. No transport will be provided. Individuals or community representatives might consider livestreaming funerals in order to allow others to be included.

Should the family prefer, the stonesetting can be delayed to a later date in consultation with the United Synagogue.

Members saying Kaddish

The recital of Kaddish is an ancient tradition but can only take place in the presence of a *minyan*. For a minyan to take place 10 men over the age of Bar Mitzvah need to be present in the same place. A virtual gathering whether by phone or tele-conferencing does not constitute a minyan and kaddish cannot be said.

As the mourner recites these passages which relate God's greatness and splendour, he or she elevates the soul of their loved one. It is therefore very unsettling not to be able to say Kaddish. However, an equally worthy alternative is to study a Mishna for each service at which you would otherwise say Kaddish. On a weekday that would mean one Mishna in the morning, one in the afternoon and one in the evening. On Shabbat, you would study a further Mishna corresponding to Musaf. We suggest you study the Mishna of Pirkei Avot, which is found in the green siddur starting on page 524.

Communities might be set up a virtual group for such study. Otherwise, please look at the US Facebook page for Mishna study with one of our rabbis.

Vidui

Where possible, with the facilitation of a family member or friend, end-of-life prayers should be said over the phone with the Rabbi.

Rabbinic hospitality

In order to protect both Rabbinic families and members, there can be no Rabbinic hospitality. This means that, until further notice, Rabbis and Rebbetzins cannot invite people to their homes for meals, for any food or drink, or for a meeting or private conversation. Social and communal conversations can take place over the phone or online.

Rabbinic visits

Until further notice, Rabbis and Rebbetzins are not able to visit members in their homes either as a pastoral visit or in order to have a meeting or conversation. Instead, these conversations can be had over the phone or online.

Smachot

Joining together to celebrate smachot is core to community life and a mitzvah in itself. However, as gatherings are no longer permitted, we will have to adjust our practice and devise new creative ways of marking significant moments together, whilst apart.

The Rabbi or community should not facilitate, support or publicise any minyanim or smachot in members' homes. Sifrei Torah should not be loaned for these purposes. The Rabbi or Rebbetzen cannot visit a Bar/Batmitvah child nor make a presentation to them in person.

As an alternative, they might record or write a message or sermon in advance and arrange for it to be shared online. On a weekday they might also use videoconferencing to hear a Batmitvah girl give a Dvar Torah or to see a Barmitvah boy put on tefillin for the first time or leyn some of his sedra. Communities are already devising new ways of connecting online at these times and these ideas will be shared in the coming months.

Mikvah

Mikvaot remain open and detailed guidance has been shared with mikvah attendants. Women are advised to contact the mikvah for more information. Men who have the tradition to go to mikvah should refrain from doing so at this time.

Brit Milah

The same guidelines about gathering of people apply here. We advise that the number of people present at a brit milah (bris) is kept to the minimum required i.e. the Rabbi, Mohel, Sandek, parents and immediate family.

Naming of a baby girl

There is a custom to name a baby girl in Shul on Shabbat morning. Whilst this will no longer be possible, a baby girl can be named at home, using the service on page 816 of the Green siddur. During the week, this could be facilitated online by a Rabbi.

Pidyon Haben

There is a mitzvah to 'redeem' every firstborn son who is born to parents who are both Yisraelim (not kohanim or leviim) provided the birth was natural (see Exodus 13:13–15 and Numbers 18:15-16). This is because before the sin of the Golden Calf, the priestly obligations fell to the firstborn son. After the sin, the firstborn lost their elevated status, which was then conferred to the descendants of Aaron, the brother of Moses. A rabbi should be consulted to ascertain whether a pidyon haben is necessary. If it is, it should take place at least 30 days after the birth of the child (regardless of whether it was possible to perform the bit milah or not).

It is possible to perform the ceremony of the pidyon haben at a later date, as gatherings are not permitted, this ceremony must be postponed but should take place soon after social-isolating restrictions are lifted.

Shalom Zachor

It is customary to hold a Shalom Zachor on the Friday evening immediately following the birth of a baby boy. A Shalom Zachor should not take place whilst restrictions on public and social gatherings are in place.

Pesach

We will be sending a more detailed update on Pesach very shortly.