

United Synagogue Guidance on Coronavirus Community and Rabbinic Issues: 25 March 2020

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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. You can see all United Synagogue updates at www.theus.org.uk/coronavirus

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. Given the Prime Minister's announcements of 23/3/2020, there are very limited circumstances where it is possible to proceed with a lifecycle event. Where these have been permitted, 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, should stand at least 2 metres apart and should refrain from handshaking, hugging or kissing. Ceremonies should be as short as possible.

Please note that a Rabbi retains the right to decline to carry out such lifecycle events if he is concerned about his own health or that of others.

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

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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, attendance at levoyas will be limited to immediate family only. In these circumstances, a minyan is not required. Mourners should speak to the Burial team or their Rabbi for more information. Individuals might consider livestreaming funerals in order to allow others to be included.

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.

United Synagogue cemeteries will be closed to the public until further notice.

Shivas

Mourners (*aveilim*) must sit shiva in their own homes.

At this time, a gathering of people in a shiva house does not comply with government social distancing requirements. Therefore, no shiva visits can take place. No minyanim can 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 stonesetting 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. However, to the extent permitted by Government restrictions, the tombstone itself should be erected as usual.

Until the social distancing requirements have been relaxed, **all stonesetting ceremonies have now been postponed**. As long as stonemasons are able to work, families should arrange for tombstones to be erected. This reflects the halachic imperative to correctly mark a grave.

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, a 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 Rebbetzin 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 creative ways of celebrating smachot online and ideas will be shared over the coming weeks.

Weddings

It is not possible to conduct weddings at this time.

Mikvah

The observance of *Taharat Hamishpacha* (the laws of family purity) is a fundamental mitzvah. Mikvaot remain open for women. Best-practice guidelines on hygiene and social distancing are in place at local Mikvaot in North London. As each mikvah operates independently, women should contact their mikvah for detailed information. Men who have the tradition to go to the mikvah should refrain from doing so at this time.

Brit Milah

The Initiation Society is revising their Covid-19 Guidelines to ensure that Brit Milah can continue. Only Mohelim who are registered with the Initiation Society should be used. Please contact your Rabbi if you have any questions.

Naming of a baby girl

There is a custom to name a baby girl in Shul when Kriat Hatorah (reading from the Torah) is performed. 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 (i.e. not a caesarean) and provided other criteria are met. (see Exodus 13:13–15 and Numbers 18:15-16). A rabbi should be consulted to ascertain whether a pidyon haben is necessary. If it is, it should take place on the 31st day after the birth of the child inclusive of the day of birth (regardless of whether it was possible to perform the bit milah or not).

In the current circumstances, the pidyon haben should take place as usual on the correct date. However, it should be performed without a minyan. Only the father and the Kohen should be present and there is no absolute need for the baby to be with them. The father should have a seudah at home which again should be celebrated without a minyan.

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.