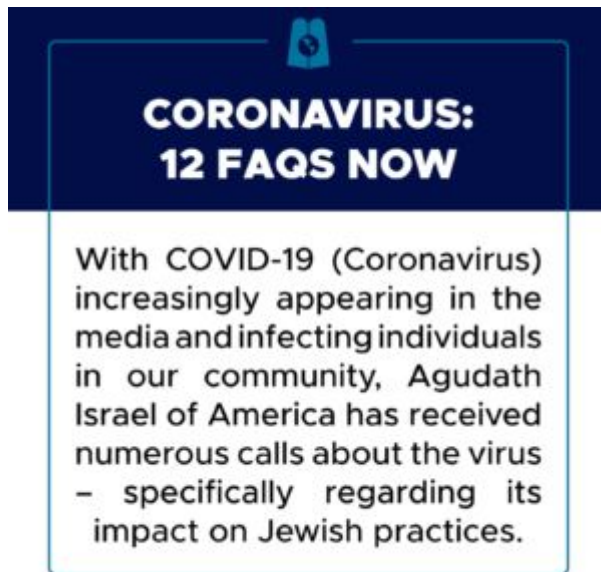


Coronavirus: 12 FAQs Now

March 9, 2020



With COVID-19 (Coronavirus) increasingly appearing in the media and infecting individuals in our community, Agudath Israel of America has received numerous calls about the virus – specifically regarding its impact on Jewish practices.

Below are answers to frequently asked questions, prepared as a public service at the request of rabbanim, and in cooperation with leading infectious diseases specialists and the NYC DOHMH (Department of Health and Mental and Hygiene).

1. How concerned should I be about this virus? Is COVID-19 highly fatal?

We are all familiar with the obligation described in the pasuk, “V’nishmartem me’od l’nafshoseichem” (Devarim 4:15). This obligation is central and recurring in halacha.

That said, while vigilance during this time is appropriate, we should be aware that even if contracted, most recover from COVID-19 without incident. Calm and common sense are needed, not panic.

2. *Are the responses below intended as blanket rules for all locations and times?*

No. They will differ by time and place. The situation is different in Eretz Yisroel than it is in the US, and different in Westchester County than Ohio. The general advice below is given for areas in the US that have experienced some cases, but have not (yet) reached outbreak status like Westchester County. Use common sense.

Moreover, Orthodox communities are often closely linked. We interact and congregate more frequently than the general population. We are community and family centered. Thus, it is unrealistic to think that if the virus has afflicted one Orthodox community it will not soon affect other Orthodox communities. It therefore behooves members of all Orthodox communities to not only exercise additional caution regarding a contagious disease spreading because it is our religious duty, but because the scientific reality demands it.

Finally, guidance given here is stated as of, and shortly after, its publication. Recommendations may change as the situation progresses.

3. *Is everyone equally at risk?*

No. While anyone can contract COVID-19, [the elderly](#) are far more vulnerable to the disease. [Reports](#) of mortality rates of those under 50 are very low, and there have been no fatalities, and very few severe cases reported in young children. But these rates increase exponentially for every decade after age 50. In addition, those with cardiovascular disease, diabetes, chronic respiratory disease, and some other chronic conditions, are [more vulnerable](#) to complications. The recommendations below are for generally healthy people under 50 or 60. Others may wish to take additional precautions.

4. *Should I avoid going to shul until this blows over?*

No. The situation does not warrant that.

However, if one has a fever and/or respiratory symptoms (such as a cough, sore throat, or shortness of breath) or has had recent contact with a known COVID-19 carrier, he should not enter a public area like a shul until found to be clear of the virus, so as not to risk endangering others. Also, see FAQ #3 for a discussion of those at greater risk.

5. *Should I avoid Megilla leining and my family's Purim mesibos? Should weddings be postponed?*

No. But see FAQ #2-4, and be mindful to practice the hygiene steps listed in FAQ #12. There is also a distinction between small, family gatherings and large gatherings where many will be packed into close quarters.

6. *Should I avoid touching siddurim or other items touched by other people?*

It is important to understand how COVID-19 spreads. COVID-19 is [generally spread](#) by respiratory droplets expelled from an infected person that come into contact with another's eyes, mouth or nose. This typically occurs from a cough or sneeze, or micro-droplets from speech. Disease can also spread when a person touches a contaminated surface and then rubs his own eyes, mouth or nose. The virus survives on surfaces for a short time.

Therefore, rather than avoiding touching all surfaces, one should focus on employing good hygiene practices described in FAQ #12. Appropriate cleaning of high-touch surfaces like doorknobs may be recommended, especially for high-risk individuals described in FAQ #3 or those in quarantine.

7. *How about avoiding shaking hands?*

Health authorities are now recommending avoiding shaking hands. Note there is no halachic requirement to shake hands on Shabbos or any other time. Any avoidance should be done respectfully.

8. *How about going to mikva?*

The NYC DOHMH said on a March 5 conference call to faith leaders that healthy individuals need not avoid public swimming pools, based on the unlikelihood of transmission through this means. Agudath Israel is not advising mikva closures or avoidance. But see FAQ #2-4. However, this is not the case for anyone with COVID-19, in quarantine, or suspects he has COVID-19.

9. *Should I avoid travel to a Pesach program in Italy?*

The CDC has [advised](#) avoiding all nonessential travel to China, Iran, South Korea, and Italy. It has advised older adults and those with chronic medical conditions to consider postponing travel to Japan. The countries under these advisories are subject to change.

10. *My shul has a communal, often damp, towel on a roll by the sink. Is this practice recommended in this climate?*

Disposable paper towels have been found to be the [most hygienic](#) method of hand drying, and is especially recommended at this time.

11. *Based on how this disease is spreading worldwide, is it realistic to expect that this will be stopped? Shouldn't we just accept that there is disease - COVID-19 and otherwise - in the world and live normally? "Shomer pesaim Hashem!"*

COVID-19 may well continue to spread despite our best efforts. However, there is a legitimate threat of disease, especially to susceptible individuals. Following the appropriate health procedures will save lives, especially of the elderly or those with conditions that place them at risk of COVID-19 complications.

Further, there will be a toll on the health care system and other industries if cases increase quickly which will adversely impact current patients. Several vaccines and potential treatments are aggressively being pursued worldwide. In other words, there is value to slowing the pace of the spread of the disease to buy time.

12. What general practices should I exercise at this time to help keep myself and others safe?

- ***Per the MOETZES GEDOLEI HATORAH, we should all [increase our Tehilim and davening on Taanis Esther](#). Purim itself is a special day of tefila. Let us all take full advantage of this opportunity to beseech Hashem to remove this decree of sickness from the world.***
- Shuls and yeshivas should adequately stock tissues so mispallelim can cover sneezes or coughs with a tissue. See FAQ #6 for a description of how the disease spreads.
- Throw out used tissues; do not leave them on tables or shtenders.
- Wash hands with soap and water regularly for at least 20 seconds, or use hand sanitizer if soap and water is unavailable.
- Shuls and yeshivas should adequately stock soap and make them available for use.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth.
- If you think you are sick, stay home. See FAQ #4 for symptoms to look out for.
- The [EPA](#) recently approved several products by Purell, Clorox, and Lysol to kill COVID-19. Disinfecting surfaces is currently being [recommended](#) primarily for those with suspected/confirmed COVID-19, some high-touch surfaces, and for those at high-risk. See FAQ #3 for who is most at risk.

- This is a new disease. More information will come to the fore as time goes on.

Special thanks the following individuals for their help in reviewing this information:

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