

Summer Camps Shuttered for 2020: Statement by Agudath Israel

June 12, 2020



Agudath Israel of America expresses its deep disappointment in New York Governor Andrew Cuomo and his administration for shuttering overnight camps for tens of thousands of children.

The news, released in a late Friday news dump in the form of a statement by State Health Commissioner Howard Zucker, will be a blow to the physical, socioemotional, and psychological well-being of children who have already endured forced quarantine for nearly three months, as well as their religious development.

Especially troubling about this development is the fact that it comes at a time when cases of COVID-19 in NY have plummeted for six consecutive weeks. Further, among the nearly 8 million COVID-19 cases worldwide there have been few cases, and even fewer serious cases, among children.

In an effort to minimize risk of infection in a summer camp setting, Agudath Israel and the Association of Jewish Camp Operators (AJCO) had proactively commissioned leading infectious disease doctors around the country to create rigorous, safe [camping protocols](#) for the COVID-19 era. Agudath Israel then brought this proposal to the Governor's office and intensively [advocated for this cause](#).

The proposal included, among other safety measures, rigorously testing

children at multiple points before and during the summer and submitting documentation attesting to this. No positive cases would enter camp, and the camps would then completely lock down in a “protective bubble.”

Yet despite the strong support of this proposal by internationally renowned medical experts, Commissioner Zucker rejected it out of hand.

This is not the only troubling use of Governor Cuomo’s executive authority, and we have [noted this before](#). Governmental power has also been used as a sword against religion, instead of the shield the Founding Fathers intended it to be.

For example, all religious services in New York City are still strictly limited to 10 individuals per building. This cap is irrespective of the size of the building, number of floors in the building, and the wearing of PPE or implementation of social distancing. Nor is there any additional latitude afforded for outdoor services.

In contrast, horse racing has no fixed upper limit on the number allowed to participate, up to 50% of maximum room capacity. Similarly, professional sports training is allowed statewide where occupancy is below 50% of maximum occupancy, with no arbitrary numerical ceiling. As of June 26th, outdoor graduations are allowed for up to 150 people. And it is no secret that mass protests of far greater than 150 people have been implicitly allowed. Yet Orthodox Jews cannot pray outside in numbers greater than 10.

We respect that Governor Cuomo is forced to make difficult decisions in these difficult times. But his mantra has been to follow the data, follow the science, and follow the law.

Sadly, his decisions regarding overnight summer camps and religious practices fall far short of this ideal.

In light of today’s development, Agudath Israel and other summer camp representatives will consider whatever remaining options may be available to them.