

17 Adar 5780  
March 13, 2020



Dear Westchester Jewish Community,

In Pirkei Avot we learn, “הַלֵּל אָמַר: אַל תִּפְרָשׁ מִן הַצִּבּוּר.” “Hillel taught, ‘Do not separate yourself from the community.’” Gathering together is embedded in the cultural DNA of the Jewish people. It is what helps us to build connection and commitment in our ever more fractured world. And still, these times demand that we physically separate for the protection and safety of our community and the broader society.

Since Westchester is highly affected by the current health crisis, we therefore encourage all synagogues and members of the Jewish community to adopt the following practices:

1. Follow the guidelines of the CDC and other authorities with respect to attending school, working from home, community gatherings, school attendance, and all other personal and communal precautionary measures.
2. Synagogues should suspend public worship services, religious school, and adult education. When possible – given a synagogue’s religious practices – these activities should be conducted virtually.
3. Lifecycle observances should be limited to the fewest number of people possible and large celebrations should be postponed.
4. Shiva visits should be conducted by phone or video.
5. People should observe Shabbat in their own homes rather than attending gatherings in one another’s homes.

*Pikuah nefesh*, saving lives, is the most important commandment in our tradition and overrides the observance of others. These social distancing measures will help to “flatten the curve” of coronavirus transmission and thus ensure that our health care system maintains the capacity it needs to treat those who become gravely ill. Thus, the Jewish community will do its part to help save lives while fulfilling a mitzvah, a sacred commandment.

Finally, as we understand it, social distancing is merely a physical act. Emotionally and spiritually we are all together and we are here for one another. If your community streams services, log on and be “with” one another. When there are virtual adult education sessions, join in and allow Torah to sooth the anxiety of this time. If your children’s religious school offers online learning, ensure that your children continue to be nourished by the light of Torah. Think of people in your community who would benefit from a phone call or some other type of assistance and reach out. And, of course, do not hesitate to contact your clergy. They are there for you in these times as they are at all times.

In the end, though we will physically “separate from the community,” we believe that these trying times will actually draw our community closer making us, and the broader society, stronger and more resilient. If you need any assistance, please be in touch with your local synagogue or Jewish communal resource.

While our facilities may be temporarily closed, our Jewish community always remains open for you

L’Shalom u’Vracha,  
With Peace and Blessings,  
The Executive Committee of the Westchester Board of Rabbis

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