

Purim 5781/2021 Corona Guidelines

By Rabbi Aryeh Frimer

Rabbi Jacob Berman Community Center,
Tiferet Moshe Synagogue, Rehovot, Israel

Purim is a joyous holiday associated with various *mitsvot* and rituals - some of which are communal requiring a *minyan*, while others are more personal that do not. Despite vaccinations, the Corona Pandemic continues to make large gatherings challenging. Indeed, one who is ill, in quarantine, or at serious risk - should by no means come to synagogue. Nevertheless, electronic technologies like video conferencing and Zoom can at times assist in bringing the community together. The following lines are meant firstly to assist congregants and their families in the fulfillment of the various customs and *mitsvot* of this joyous day. We also hope to give guidance to those not attending shul as how to best carry out the various rituals of the day - and join with the community in the festivities of Purim. (References have been kept to a minimum for the sake of brevity.)

1. Fulfilling Speech-Based Obligations Via Electronic Means¹

Because Purim falls on a weekday, we should consider whether modern technology can assist us in the fulfillment of Purim rituals. To this end we need to ask whether someone can fulfill their obligations for prayer, *berakhot*, *Megilla* and Torah readings, *Havdala* etc. via electronic media such as a microphone, telephone, whatsapp call, or Zoom.

Not surprisingly, there is a wide-ranging dispute on this matter. The stringent school represents the majority of *Poskim* and includes Torah Giants like R. Shlomo Zalman Auerbach (*Minhat Shlomo* 1:9) and R. Ovadiah Yosef (*Resp. Yehave Da'at*, III, 54; *Resp. Yabbia Omer V*, OH, 11:4). For these scholars sound transferred through electronic means is synthetic and reconstructed sound and not the natural voice of the speaker. It is thus ineffective for fulfilling speech-based obligations. These scholars are of course aware that natural speech involves the formation of sound waves which are propagated through air. However, this is the natural process. Here we are talking about sound waves which are reconstructed: converted first to electric pulses which are modulated and reconverted back to sound.

On the other hand, a minority of *poskim* including R. Abraham Isaac Kook (*Orah Mishpat*, OH sec. 48) held that reconstructed sound produced instantaneously by a vibrating membrane is like normal soundwaves which are propagated from the original voice at a

¹. For a fuller discussion of the issues mentioned here, see: "*HaKeter VeHaCovid: Corona Related Halakhic Issues; Part 1: Tefilla beTsibbur, Keri'at haTorah and Zoom.*" Aryeh A. Frimer, Pre-Tikun Leyl Shavuot Zoom Shiur, sponsored by The Rabbi Jacob Berman Community Center - Tiferet Moshe Synagogue, Rehovot, May 25th 2020. Video and audio available at: https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1A_QrkHXffl57pAK2mrkEL4wII7IWnMhS?usp=sharing. The source sheet used for the shiur is available at https://drive.google.com/open?id=1ZO6fWQ46Xsf8y_vtmEm2l5WymOUUrKg7. Shiur and Source sheet also available from: <https://www.kolcorona.com/halachot> under Tefillah.

distance. R. Yehezkel Babkoff concurs with this positions. A third school of leading scholars, including R. Avraham Yeshaya Karelitz (*Hazon Ish*, cited by R. Auerbach), R. Moshe Feinstein (*Resp. Iggerot Moshe* OH II, sec 108 and OH IV, sec. 91:4) and Rabbi Eliezer Waldenberg (*Resp. Tsits Eliezer* 18:11) felt that there was great room for leniency in time of need.

General policy throughout most of the orthodox world is to be stringent under normative situations and prohibit reliance on electronically transmitted sound for fulfilling obligations. Even in extreme situations, *bi-she'at ha-dehak*, such as Corona related isolation, both Israeli Chief Rabbis Yitzhak Yosef and David Lau have reasserted that one cannot fulfill ones obligations via electronic means. Nevertheless, R. Hershel Shachter, R. Mordechai Willig, R. Shlomo Aviner, R. Re'em HaCohen and the Rabbis of Kollel Eretz Hemda maintain that in the present life-threatening Corona situation, it is permissible when necessary to rely on the substantial lenient positions to fulfill ones halakhic obligations using **real time** (not pre-recorded) electronic means such as a live phone call, video-conferencing or Zoom.

2. *Tefilla beTsibbur*²

Let us now assume that there is a legitimate health guideline-following *minyan* taking place at our or another synagogue (e.g, the *Kotel*) – where all *minyan* members are physically present in one location. On a weekday, can one who is compelled to remain at home join in with the community via Zoom or other real-time streaming technology to answer *Amen*, *Kaddish*, *Kedusha*, *Barekhu* and listen to *keri'at ha-Torah*. If one does so, will his/her *Shemoneh Esrei* be considered *Tefilla beTsibbur*?

Briefly, *Shulhan Arukh* has ruled (O.H., 55:20) that once a bona fide *minyan* is established in a given location, others outside and neighboring the shul can join in and daven with them. By contrast, in the “Zoom to the shul” case, we are talking about a location on the other side of town or even in a distant city. It would seem clear that those strongly opposed to being *yotsei* via electronic media, would oppose here too – arguing that in this aspect Zoom is no different than listening to a movie or video.

Nevertheless, Chief Rabbi Yitzhak Yosef and others maintain that, *biShe'at haDehak*, when davening with a *bona fide* *Minyan* via Zoom transmitting in real time (not playback or video) - one can **answer** *Kaddish*, *Kedusha* and *Barekhu* and it is even considered *Tefilla beTsibbur*. Rabbis Asher Weiss, Shlomo Aviner, Menahem Pearl (present head of Tsomet) and others are more guarded. While they agree that one can **respond** *Amen*, *Kaddish*, *Kedusha* and *Barekhu*, it is still not a *bona fide Tefilla beTsibbur* - which requires the physical presence of a *minyan*. All agree, however, that one who links up to a bona fide *minyan* via Zoom cannot serve as the *Hazan* since he is not physically located with the *minyan* – as required by *Shulhan Arukh* (O.H., 55:13, 18). Thus, it is forbidden for him to **lead** those prayers commonly done so by mourners, like *Barekhu*, *Hazarat ha-Shats* or *Kaddish Yatom* or *de-Rabbanan*.

². See the discussion in reference 1.

3. *Parashat Zakhor*

There is an annual biblical obligation to remember the wanton attack on the Israelites leaving Egypt by the Amalekite armies. To this end, tradition dictates the reading of *Parashat Zakhor* (*Devarim* 25:17-19) from the *Sefer Torah* as the *Maftir aliyya* on the *Shabbat* before *Purim*. Nevertheless, should one miss this main reading, the prevalent custom of most communities is to arrange for a second reading of *Parashat Zakhor* - without any benedictions or the presence of a *minyan*.³ Further in this regard, Rabbi Hershel Schachter has recently written:⁴

The custom is to read *Parashat Zakhor* with a *minyan* from a kosher *Sefer Torah* on the *Shabbat* before *Purim*. If one is unable to do so, they may read from a kosher *Sefer Torah* without a *minyan* (without reciting the *berakhot*). If that is not an option, one should have in mind on to fulfill this obligation with the *Keri'at HaTorah* on *Purim* morning. If that too is impossible, one should have it in mind when reading *Parashat* [*Zakhor* at the end of] *Ki Teitsei* (in the summer months). If a person feels that they will not remember to have this in mind during the summer months, then an additional reading of *Parashat Zakhor* can be added this year. This should be done on a weeknight (without *berakhot*), so anyone who is unable to leave their homes may participate via Zoom.

To this end, a special Torah reading of *Parashat Zakhor* (without *berakhot* or a *minyan*) will be performed by Josh Klein on Friday afternoon, February 19, 2021 at 3:30 PM (15:30), and carried over Zoom. The link will be posted when available.

Important Clarification: We mention in this guide the use of Zoom on weekdays to fulfill one's religious obligation of *Parashat Zakhor* and *Megillat Esther* in *she'at ha-dehak* (dire circumstances) situations. To clarify, *she'at ha-dehak* describes instances where a ritual cannot be performed because the congregants are not physically or halakhically able to do so, not because they lack the desire (R. Aharon Lichtenstein). It's not a simple matter of preference. The Zoom leniency would apply to cases where one is at a real health risk attending communal services; where one is ill or in isolation (*bidud*); where one's child or family member is ill or in isolation and requires supervision - with no one to replace them; or where one is in a location where no religious services are available. In such situations, it would be better to fulfill these rituals by Zoom rather than not to fulfill them at all.

³ This is because most latter-day scholars reject the idea that a *minyan* for *Parashat Zakhor* is biblically mandated, and, consequently, that the attendant *berakhot* are an integral part of the fulfillment of the *mitsva*. For extensive citation of sources, see: Aryeh A. Frimer and Dov I. Frimer, "Women's Prayer Services: Theory and Practice. Part 1 – Theory," *Tradition*, 32:2 (1998), 5-118, section B.1 and notes 82-84 and 110-115; available online at: <https://traditiononline.org/womens-prayer-services-theory-and-practice-part-i-theory/>

⁴ R. Hershel Schachter, *Piskei Corona* #58: *Inyanei Purim*, 18 *Shevat* 5781 (January, 31, 2021); available online at: <https://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/987942/>.

We should note that most authorities rule that women have no obligation whatsoever to participate in the yearly reading of *Parshat Zakhor*. Nevertheless, many women are very careful to fulfill this *mitsva*. However, even if women are required to recall the battle with Amalek, it does not necessarily follow that they must do so through a Torah scroll reading. Accordingly, many leading *posekim* allow women to read *Parashat Zakhor* from a printed *Humash* in the privacy of their own home.⁵

4. Ta'anit Esther

A "*holeh she-ein bo sakasna*" is exempt from fasting. This category includes one who is feeling ill and achy all over, may be running a temperature and needs to go to bed - even if it's not life threatening, or one who may be feeling OK but whose health situation could readily deteriorate. Several prominent *poskim* have dealt with the issue of the Corona epidemic head on: Chief Rabbi David Lau, R. Asher Weiss, R. Hershel Schachter and Rabbi Yaakov Warhaftig. They have all given similar answers: there is no evidence that fasting one day has a negative effect on the immune system of normally healthy individuals - as far as contracting Corona. Hence, anyone who is feeling healthy, even if they are in isolation, should be able to fast normally. Nevertheless, all those diagnosed positive for Corona - even those who are asymptomatic and feeling fine - should not fast, since the situation can rapidly deteriorate. Pregnant and nursing mothers generally do not fast on the minor fasts.

5. Zekher le-Mahatsit ha-Shekel

There is a long-standing custom to set aside money for charity in commemoration of the half-shekel coins given by males to the Temple in the month of Adar. The giving of *Zekher le-Mahatsit ha-Shekel* is generally done beginning with *Minha* on *Ta'anit Esther*. *Rema* indicates that "one should give three halves of whatever the main currency is in whatever country he lives in."⁶ In Israel that would be three half-shekel coins. In most synagogues, the *gabbaim* set aside a *Zekher le-Mahatsit ha-Shekel* collection box with a bag containing three half-shekel coins therein. Each congregant, in turn, "purchases" the bag - in return for a charitable sum. They then donate/return the bag with the three half-shekel coins back in the collection box - as their fulfillment of *Zekher le-Mahatsit ha-Shekel*. If such provisions have not been made, one may give the monetary equivalent of the three half-shekels or more. Some women are stringent about this custom as well. This custom can be fulfilled in the privacy of one's home.

⁵ The common rationale behind this leniency is that the requirements of a Torah scroll, *minyan* and benedictions are all part of the general Torah reading obligation, which is rabbinic in origin and from which women are exempted. See discussion in the sources cited in reference 3.

⁶ *Rema, O.H.* 694:1.

6. *Al ha-Nissim*

Al ha-Nissim is added to the *Amida* and *Birkat ha-Mazon* throughout Purim day. One does not repeat these prayers if *Al ha-Nissim* was forgotten.

7. *Mikra Megilla*⁷

Both men and women living in unwallied cities like Rehovot have an obligation on the evening and the following day of the 14th of Adar to read or hear the reading of *Megillat Esther* hand-written by a *sofer* on *Klaf* (parchment). Following *ashkenazic* usage, males (even if they have already heard *Megilla*) can read for men or women, while women can only read for women. One fulfills their obligation even if the reading is done without cantillations (*ta'amei ha-mikra*). Preferably, the *Megilla* should be read in a *minyan* (to publicize the miracle), and the view of many leading *poskim* is that ten women are considered a *minyan* for this purpose - since they too are obligated in *Megilla*.⁸ Nevertheless, one fulfills their obligation when reading even in the absence of a *minyan*. Three benedictions are recited before a public or private reading: 1) ...*al mikra megilla*; 2) ...*she-asa nissim*; and 3) ...*she-hehiyyanu*.⁹ However, the closing *berakha* "*ha-Rav et Riveinu*" is recited only if a *minyan* is present. As noted above, ten women are considered a *minyan* for this purpose, as well.¹⁰

Individuals (of either gender) who know in advance that they will not be in *Shul* on Purim and who will not have someone to read the *megilla* live for them - should borrow or purchase a kosher *Megilla* written on *Klaf* and read it for themselves (even if it is without the *ta'amim*) with the above *berakhot*. One can find appropriate readings online or on YouTube and read along from the *Klaf* (see for example: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ijWkRYPepl>).

But these options are not always possible for those who become ill or are in quarantine. The question arises whether electronic means such as a live phone call, streaming videos or Zoom can be used to fulfill ones *megilla* obligations. As discussed above, despite the stringent rulings of Israeli Chief Rabbis Lau and Yosef - Rabbis Shachter, Willig, Aviner, Re'em haCohen and the Rabbis of *Kollel Eretz Hemda*, maintain that in the present

⁷. For documentation of the various rulings in this section, see: "Women's *Megilla* Reading," Aryeh A. Frimer, In "Traditions and Celebrations for the *Bat Mitsva*," Ora Wiskind Elper, Editor; Urim Publications: Jerusalem, 2003; pp. 281-304. HTML file available online at <http://www.daat.ac.il/daat/english/tfila/frimer2.htm>.

⁸. For full citations See reference 7, sec. III d .

⁹. Despite the ruling of Rema (*O.H.*, sec. 689, parag 2) that women should say "...*lishmo'a Megilla*," the *Pri Hadash* and *Gra* strongly dissent and many contemporary *poskim* (*inter alia*, R. Chaim Sonnenfeld, R. Moshe Sternbuch, R. Eliezer Melamed, and R. Ovadiah Yosef) conclude that "...*al mikra megilla*" is to be said by all, irrespective of gender. See reference 7, sec. III c for full citations. When reciting or hearing the *She-hehiyyanu* blessing during the day, one should have in mind the *mitsvot* of *Seudat Purim* and *Mishlo'ah Manot*, as well.

¹⁰. For full citations See reference 7, sec. III d .

life-threatening Corona *she'at ha-dehak* situation, it is permissible to rely on the lenient positions.¹¹ In this Zoom reading, the listeners should answer *Amen* to the *berakhot* of the reader, but because of the element of doubt (*safek berakhot le-hakel*) should not say the *berakhot* themselves.

To this end, for those who won't be able to attend the Purim Davening at Shul, Services and Megilla Reading will be carried over Zoom. The link will be posted when available. [See the above "Important clarification"]

8. Purim Seudah

Most years, the *Purim seuda* is held in the afternoon of Purim after *Tefillat Minha*. When, however, the 14th of Adar falls on Friday, it is highly preferable to start the *seuda* in unwalled cities like Rehovot on Friday morning.¹² This allows one enough time to recover their appetite by *Shabbat* (Rema, OH 695:2 and *Mishna Berura* sec. 10). Then, *Minha* with *Al ha-Nissim* is recited just before *Kabbalat Shabbat* – as is the common practice on *Erev Shabbat*. Most authorities concur that as a holiday meal, the *Purim seuda* should contain the elements of bread, wine and meat. *Al ha-Nissim* is added to the *Birkat ha-Mazon*, but the latter is not repeated if the addition is omitted.

This year (2021) Purim meals and get-togethers must necessarily be limited due to the pandemic, including social distancing requirements, avoidance of prolonged exposure, singing and dancing in enclosed spaces. For those who have not achieved immunity, the *Purim Seudah* would best be limited to the nuclear family. However, **various families can**

¹¹. The OU "Purim Guidance for Shuls and Communities" (<https://www.ou.org/assets/Purim-Guidance-5781FINAL.pdf>) presented the following guidance of Rabbis Hershel Schachter and Mordechai Willig:

- Generally healthy individuals should attend public Megilla readings as usual, where the community is exercising the proper precautions of social distancing and masking.
- Those who are not currently ill but are not attending a public reading because they are deemed high risk should reach out to their Rabbi and community to help arrange a private Megilla reading.
- Those who are ill or have had serious exposure and must remain in isolation must not come to shul. To fulfill the Mitsva, they should have a kosher, hand-written Megilla in hand from which they read audibly, either on their own or assisted by a reading heard electronically.
- The clear majority of Halachic authorities do not consider Halachically adequate a Megilla reading heard over the phone or online. There is however a minority opinion that does allow for this, provided that the reading is live, and not pre-recorded. Following the Halachic principle that we may rely upon minority opinions under extenuating circumstances, when no better option exists, this minority opinion can be relied upon.

¹². When the 14th of Adar falls on Friday, *Shushan Purim* in walled cities like Jerusalem, falls on *Shabbat*. This creates an anomalous situation referred to as *Purim Meshulash*, where Megilla reading and *Matanot la-Evyonim* is carried out on Friday, *Al ha-Nissim* is recited in *Davening* and *Birkat ha-Mazon* on *Shabbat*, and the *Purim Seuda* and *Mishloah Manot* are fulfilled on Sunday.

join together via Zoom and other electronic media for rejoicing: singing, dancing, quizzes, puzzles, skits, magic tricks and *grammen*. All this requires preparation - but is well worth the joint investment.

9. *Mishlo'ah Manot*:

It is an obligation to give *Mishlo'ah Manot* i.e., a gift of two different foods to one's fellow on Purim day. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) advise that cooking or preparing food and delivering it to someone, with a mask and proper social distancing, is a very low-risk activity¹³. When delivering or receiving *Mishlo'ah Manot*, visit and greet guests outside the home and leave the package on the front porch or outside the apartment door. One can fulfill the *mitsva* of *Mishlo'ah Manot* by sending the food through a third party. Alternatively, money may be given to a trustworthy person or organization in advance of Purim for the distribution of foodstuffs on Purim. Because the *Purim Seuda* will presumably start in the late morning, one would be wise to limit the number of *Mishloah Manot* gifts distributed personally, and allocate more money to *Matanot la-Evyonim*.

10. *Matanot la-Evyonim*

Another central obligation of Purim is *Matanot la-Evyonim*, i.e., to give money or food on Purim day to two different needy individuals. Money is generally collected in Shul on the morning of Purim for distribution by the *Tsedaka* Committee on Purim proper. One who will not be in shul can arrange for someone else to serve as his/her emissary to do so on Purim day. [Head Gabbai Dr. Gerald Kriger has kindly agreed to accept and distribute cash contributions received by him early in the week before Purim for distribution on Purim.] If necessary, money can be put safely aside on Purim for subsequent distribution.

La-Yehudim Hayeta Ora ve-Simha ve-Sasson vi-Yekar

¹³. Cited by OU "Purim Guidance for Shuls and Communities" in reference 11.