

**MAY 2020**

**STATEMENT FROM THE RABBINICAL ASSOCIATION OF GREATER KANSAS CITY - REOPENING**

We, the Rabbinical Association of Greater Kansas City have and continue to recognize that living through this COVID 19 pandemic presents an urgent on-going risk to the health and life of those we love, our Jewish community, the broader communities in which we live and our world. We have met in a spirit of cooperation and shared purpose demanded by the moment to meet our obligations to protect the health of our congregants, and to be an example of how all humanity is responsible one-for-the-other. Our respective synagogues and lay leadership have responded in that same spirit, and have been integral in responding to COVID 19 reflecting our highest Jewish values. Speaking with one voice gives real guidance in the face of often-times conflicting information.

We all understand the need to formulate and convey policy with both a sense of firmness and compassion. We need to be firm and resolute because lives depend on our ability to establish and enforce protective measures. We also know that our communities are anxious and tired. We must acknowledge the emotional challenges faced by our communities.

In presenting policies to safeguard the lives of our congregants, we must also acknowledge that the situation with this pandemic continues to evolve on a daily basis. The policies put forth here are based on the best information available to us at this specific time. In doing our best to anticipate future conditions, we are discussing how services will be handled for the High Holy Days.

Our overarching guidepost is Pikuach Nefesh, safeguarding/preserving human life, a commandment that overrides virtually all other commandments. When a life is at risk, almost every other commandment and Halakhic precept, Jewish law, is suspended. The obligation to save a life is not just to ourselves, but to others as well. Thus, during this health crisis we send a clear message that everyone's actions impact not only themselves, but can do more to either insure the health and well-being of others, or put others at far greater risk.

In the spirit of community cooperation, we will begin with our respective jurisdictions' (Johnson County, KS or Kansas City, MO) plans for reopening as a guide. However, we are concerned that scheduled re-openings may be premature.

The guidelines set forth by the Center for Disease Control (CDC), based on recognized scientific standards in which reopening would be predicated on 14 days of declining number of cases in documented cases of COVID 19, have not been achieved in any local jurisdiction. This 14 day guideline focuses on the following per population of 100,000:

- A 14 day period of declining new COVID 19 cases
- A downward trajectory in the number of COVID 19 hospital admissions (in-patient) over a 14 day period
- A decreasing number of deaths over a 14 day period

Our focus here is whether or not it is safe for our congregants to gather in-person for prayer, study, or social programs. Further influencing our decisions is the instruction of health experts that singing presents a far greater risk of spreading COVID 19 than speaking. We have serious concerns about congregants being able to pray together in physical space and adhering to restrictions to not sing during the service.

Both Johnson County, KS and Kansas City, MO are beginning with a Phase 1 reopening that limits in-person gatherings to 10 people. In Johnson County, the intent is to move toward a Phase 4 full access reopening, with interim steps of 30 people allowed together in Phase 2, and a maximum of 90 in Phase 3.

Together, the members of the Rabbinical Association and our synagogues commit to decisions that are at least as strict as those set forth by our respective local jurisdictions. In the interest of Pikuach Nefesh, saving life, we will take a more restrictive stance by adhering to the 14 day criteria delineated above.

Each congregation, in comportment with their respective local jurisdictions, will make their own determination as to when staff will begin working in their buildings, holding small meetings in their buildings and other normal business; we understand that there are differing accommodations for the different congregation buildings.

At least for the first three phases of opening set forth by Johnson County, KS, our communities agree that the following health and policy procedures should remain in place:

- Masks should be worn in all public settings (particularly with the understanding of our obligation to protect the lives and health of others).
- Six foot physical distancing should continue to be maintained.
- Personal hygiene guidelines such as hand-washing should continue.
- Individuals exhibiting any signs of illness, people over age sixty-five, and other populations identified as vulnerable should remain at home.

As our Jewish community meets these challenging days ahead in a spirit of shared compassion, concern and responsibility, we pray and know we will emerge from this pandemic stronger and with continued hope for a bright future.