

Call with Dr. Anthony Fauci – Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases

May 7, 2020

Q = Rabbi Moshe Hauer; A = Dr. Fauci

Q: When we open gradually and carefully with social distancing, masks, smaller numbers, should we be allowing or creating possibilities for our congregants to return to x/day, 7 day/wk for prayer or would it be prudent to do things more gradually – coming a few times a week?

A: Like the measles outbreak in the upper New York City area, the Jewish social culture has unfortunately led to a situation of higher risk. My short answer to your question is that I would modify the 3x/day 7 days/wk to do staggering. There's the gateway of 14 days which you will abide by. But you're referring to phase 1 of reopening of America with crowds no more than 10, 6' of social distancing, wearing masks when you can't control distance between you and others. I would adhere to that. But in the situation of the presence in synagogue, if there's any way you can do staggering so you make it easier for people to stay 6' apart and, if they can't, with a mask, you can do that with some degree of creativity. I'm afraid that if you do it exactly the way you did it before, even under the circumstances of trying to maintain distance, you'll put yourselves at risk. Don't give it up completely but modify it in a way to minimize the kinds of ways we know are risks.

Q: The guidance we crafted and will be publishing includes removing seats, when possible, so social distancing is fixed. We're encouraging masks in addition to 6' of distancing and, knowing how we like to get together, we're encouraging 8' because it may be closer to 6'.

A: Yes, the emotional culture of the Jewish people – you can't resist!

Q: Yes, this has been such an upheaval for everyone, and we want to get together. We want to be extra careful to be extra safe and if you encourage that path...

D: I do encourage that.

Q: Aside from staggering services, should we tell people to come staggered and social distance 3x/day or should we phase that in?

D: I don't have a full appreciation of the importance of the timetable of 3x/day. How disruptive would it be to a variety of aspects, including spiritual wellbeing, if you not only did the extra spacing and physical separation but also said that, for the time being, once a day and 5 days/wk instead of 3x/day, 7/wk. If you can phase that in, though I don't know what that would mean to you spiritually, but if it can be modified at least temporarily I would modify number of days, times of day, and separation. The Jewish community is scattered throughout the country but you'd have to determine where you are in the outbreak. If you're in New York City or Chicago - which still has a lot of death - that's much different than in Washington State or Wyoming or Arkansas. If the level of infection in your community is low, you might say "we'll do physical distancing, but we'll do 3x/day." But if you're in a suburb of Chicago or New Orleans you might do once a day and 3 days a week. You need to be flexible.

Q: That's very helpful and very clarifying.

Many depend on the synagogue, especially the older members who are high risk, and many are high risk. One thing we're hearing is people who have some level of obesity. We have to figure out how to approach this. We're worried about the isolation, especially for the elderly, that being removed from community has created. When we open up, they'll want to come back. Should we forbid or discourage them?

A: This is essential. It's important and it could really have an impact. Given the vulnerability of people with underlying conditions – obesity, diabetes and hypertension – it's absolutely essential that we protect the vulnerable. They should be the last to return. As you tiptoe into physical separation at "x" amount of times per day and per week, I wouldn't bring them in until you do that for a while and it looks like there's no change. You've been doing it for a few weeks, there are no unanticipated infections, then you can think about the vulnerable. I have family members in the same boat. But you've got to make sure they're really protected until you feel very comfortable that nothing is happening when you go out with less mitigation. I would not all enter at the same time. If you're young and healthy and don't have risk factors, leave the elderly and those with risk where they are before you bring them back.

Q: you mentioned you don't know how disruptive it is for us to reduce frequency of our services. We've been without our synagogues for a few months. We've been praying 3x, though not communally. We're together on zoom but we're going to come back. Our rulings will be built first and foremost on the science of knowing that it's safe. Our primary value is preservation of life so your guidance this afternoon is going to inform what we do.

A: By the way, as you're doing your praying, make sure you include me in that, ok?

Q: We started with a prayer and we will continue having you in your prayers – G-d should continue to grant you good health and wisdom...

Many orthodox communities in the NY/NJ area were hard hit and the community has stepped forward when it comes to plasma donations. We've had thousands of members of our community tested and donated towards this effort. They have proven levels of antibodies not from a simple test but the ones used by the blood banks. What can you tell us about this? If they're using my plasma to heal others, am I not vulnerable to anything? Can you guide us?

A: Yes, please be careful. Although it's a reasonable assumption that after a person gets infected and clears the virus and have antibodies that those antibodies are protective. That's the basis for doing the plasma transfusions. What we don't know definitively but have a reasonable assumption to assume that those antibodies are protective. If you're the one who was infected and have a positive result, you can assume you're protected but science hasn't proven it yet. My recommendation is to keep your eye out for studies that say a certain level of antibodies means protection. But until then I would not relax the recommended precautions merely because your antibody test is positive. We think that's the case but we don't know that's the case....we're making assumptions and those are reasonable assumptions but as a scientist I'd like to have something proven to tell you that if you're antibody positive you're immune. If this were measles, the evidence over decades is so compelling, I could tell you 'don't worry, if you're antibody positive for measles you're good to go, don't have to worry about anything.' I can't tell you the same thing in early may 2020 about coronavirus, although I do suspect that is the case.

Q: Would they be shedding the virus?

A: If I'm infected and I recover and I want to return to work. If the nasal test is negative twice in a row you're good. Don't rely only on the antibody test; you have to test negative for the virus 2x 24-hours apart.

Q: The Jewish People were guided by prophets and we haven't had one for a while, I'm hoping you can look ahead for us. We're hoping that when we can reopen, give us some projection – we hear things that are frightening about second waves. For many, the high holy days in the fall – will we be able to? We understand you can't predict with certainty but if you can share with us what we should be thinking...

A: It would be folly and inappropriate for me to give you definitive predictions. I can tell you what I'm thinking. It is likely that if we continue in a measured reopening, gradually by phases that I hear you speak about and I'm pleased to hear that your community feels cautious about that, if we do that, I'd imagine by the time we get to June, July and August the level of infection will be quite low. As we get to the fall there will almost certainly be virus. Whether that becomes a second wave depends on our preparedness and our ability, when infections do reappear, we can put the lid on them by identification, isolation and contact tracing. You need certain tools to do that. You need to test efficiently and quickly. You need to isolate people out of society when they're infected so they don't spread. You need to do surveillance in vulnerable situations – nursing home, prisons, meatpacking facilities – if we have that in place in October, November and December, even if there are cases we should be able to handle them. We should be able to get back to **some** normality but it will be a **new** normality. It won't be like it was a year ago. It will take at least a season or two to get herd immunity down and hopefully by then we'll have a vaccine in a year and a half. Go with caution in the fall, adhere to recommendations of whatever is going on in your community and be patient. We're not going to be 100% normal for at least another couple cycles.

-- End of Q&A with Dr. Fauci --

Rabbi Hauer:

OU guidelines will be released within the next day.

We're not ready to implement the guidelines yet. In this process of preparing for reopening, and to create a document of principles when every locale is different, we're not in a position to say that "on this date every community should reopen." There are differences in each area. We had to craft something based on core principles that would be applicable in each area. It's been one of the great aspects of this plague, the silver lining, is the level of cooperation among leadership and we're trying to keep that together. In crafting the principles we were guided by Rav Hershel Schachter shlit"a, Rav Mordechai Willig shlit"a – who have given of themselves tirelessly – and these principles have also been approved and reviewed by Rav Dovid Cohen and Rav Asher Weiss. They have advocated strongly that a core principle of their psak is that we're dealing with a situation of pikauch nefesh. We know the terrible tragedies – the hundreds of people in our community who have fallen – and the tens of thousands in our country. This is arguably the most consequential decision that each of us will make – to open up our shuls, to open the possibility r"l of reversing the very positive trends that social distancing has created.

It's the position of our poskim that we be very conservative going forward. Every state will allow gatherings of 10. Technically speaking we will be within the law. However, the advice of our poskim – whether it's minyan indoors or outdoors, in shuls or backyards or parking lots – that restarting the social dynamic, which is the essence of our community - of gathering all the time for minyanim and learning and kiddush - we are high risk, the situation is high risk and our poskim firmly want us to wait. They want us not to be in a rush. They want us not to grieve over something we really shouldn't be doing. We miss the opportunities to daven tefilah b'tzibur but it would be the wrong thing for us to be getting together. We need to wait patiently to wait after 14 days where the area has started to open up and we've seen 14 days pass with safety and numbers continuing to decline, then to open our shuls slowly and gradually. As Dr. Fauci advised on the call, with proper spacing, masking, staggered minyanim, and not everyone davening all the time. There is a value to the outdoor environment but we need to be extremely careful and our poskim are telling us not to create a situation where everyone is let out. We crave getting back together but our experience has been that when we do – even the 10 people for a levaya – it's hard for us to maintain that. We need to work with structure and seriousness to keep this in check.

We will be publishing these guidelines over the next 24 hours. They've been created under the direction of Rav Schachter and Rav Willig with approval of Rav Dovid Cohen and Rav Asher Weiss. Every one of us is being pressured to open up. In Eretz Yisrael they're doing it, elsewhere they're doing it. Eretz Yisrael is in a different situation. Every area is different. Make the decisions with an eye towards pikuach nefesh within the spirit of v'chai bahem to avert crisis. With strength we have accomplished so much b"H, the curve has been flattened and we need to be so careful to hold on to these gains. As a group let's be machmir in pikuach nefesh. The tefilos that are rising from each of our houses, they are piercing the heavens. We hope and pray be"H we'll be able to hold together to keep this going in the right direction.

מנחלתך - אבינו מלכנו מנע מגפה מנחלתך - May Hashem stop the plague, bring healing to those who have suffered its impact, bring nechama to the families affected, and may we soon see the day when Hashem will make a machul l'tzadikim - to actually be able to hold hands and rejoice together - with this be"H behind us.