

On Davening with a Minyan during an Epidemic

Translated by Elli Fischer

Nissan 5780

TO MY DEAR FRIEND, Rav Aharon Gordon
Kew Gardens Hills, New York:

*"May abundant peace [flourish] as long
as the moon endures."*

Tehillim 72:7

I will honor your request and write what I deem proper with respect to *tefillah b'tzibbur* during this difficult epidemic.

In our neighborhood, the homes of many observant Jews are next to one another, and residents can see one another from their yards. Is it proper to encourage members of the community to daven with a minyan from their yards, even if word of their actions will spread? Or is it better to organize a secret minyan in one of the larger yards, where it is possible to maintain distance between people? One of the rabbanim in the community does so, gathering ten men from among the neighbors into his yard, where they daven b'tzibbur while maintaining caution and distance. It should be noted that both options are permissible according to the law and the regulations of health authorities. Or perhaps it is better for everyone to daven at home, individually?

It is a twofold and threefold question.

I generally refrain from expressing my opinion on matters of *hashkafah* and public guidance in other countries, and in my view, it is incumbent upon *Gedolei Yisrael* in the United States to decide such matters. However, since I have heard that the community's *rabbanim* have not offered their opinions on this matter, and many people want to hear what I think, I will not refrain from expressing what seems correct, in my humble opinion, with regard to these questions.

For the past month and a half, I have been standing and shouting from every rooftop that there is an absolute obligation at this time for each person to distance themselves from others—not spiritually, *chas v'shalom*, but physically. This is the only way to minimize and prevent the spread of the epidemic, as has been proven time and again, and as is clear as day.

Chazal instruct us:¹ "Our Rabbis taught: When there is plague in the city, go inside, as it says, 'Go, my people, enter your chambers and close your doors behind you....'"² Maharsha comments: "He should go inside and not go out in the streets."

1 Bava Kamma 60b.

2 Yeshayahu 26:20.

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Since this is a matter of *pikuach nefesh*, which supersedes the entire Torah, it is clear and certain that *pikuach nefesh* supersedes the *mitzvah* of *tefillah b'tzibbur*.

On the other hand, if it is possible to daven with a *minyan* such that each person stands in his home and yard, one can uphold both [*pikuach nefesh* and *tefillah b'tzibbur*]; grasp the one without letting go of the other.

Rambam writes:³ "The *tefillah* of a *tzibbur* is always heard; even if there were sinners among them, Hakadosh Baruch Hu does not despise the prayers of a multitude. Therefore, a person must participate in a *tzibbur* and not daven individually whenever he can daven with a *tzibbur*."

It is precisely at a time of trouble and distress that we need the *tefillah* of the *tzibbur*, which always has an effect. Therefore, I think that if there is indeed a possibility of davening with a *minyan* of ten in which each person stands in his private yard or on the balcony of his home, and no one leaves home, how good and how sweet it is.

In fact, the words of the Gemara prove explicitly that even when they meticulously followed the instructions of Chazal and isolated themselves at home in times of disease, they nevertheless davened *b'tzibbur*, for the Gemara in *Bava Kamma* continues: "Our Rabbis taught: When there is plague in the city, an individual person should not enter a synagogue, because the *Malach Ha'maves* deposits his instruments there. This applies when children are not learning there and **ten are not praying there**." Thus, even in times of plague, they davened with a *minyan* in shul.

We likewise find in *Sefer Likutei Amarim*⁴ that the *tzadik* Rav Mendel of Vitebsk, a student of the Maggid of Mezeritch, wrote as follows during the terrible plague of 5546 (1786) in Teverya: "We isolated ourselves in a new courtyard where there was more than a *minyan*, in order to daven *b'tzibbur*..." We see that even in times of plague and epidemic, they made efforts to daven *b'tzibbur*.

Nevertheless, we should certainly not learn from this that it is permitted to gather to daven *b'tzibbur*; they isolated themselves together at the beginning of the plague.

No one entered or left. It was as though they were one family, and no one was exposed to the plague. This is not the case in the present circumstances.

When it concerns risk and the status of *pikuach nefesh*, we rely completely on the words of contemporary doctors and experts, who have determined beyond a shadow of a doubt that there is no way to prevent the spread of the epidemic except through social distancing and isolation.

I have already explained at length my opinion that in times like these, even *l'chatchilah* one may make a *minyan* in yards and balconies when the people see and hear one another (see the halachic compendium that we published).

On the other hand, I am exceedingly concerned about the organization of *minyanim* in homes and yards, even if participants try to maintain distance from one another, because experience has proven that there is no way to ensure that everyone keeps a safe distance, and it is clear as day that once people start leaving their homes to attend *minyanim*, more people will become infected, and more people will die.

Therefore, the right and proper thing is to prevent *minyanim* where people leave their homes, even if they will maintain distance, and to encourage *minyanim* where each person stands in the private domain of his home or yard.

It is also important to be attentive and not cause a *chillul Hashem*. In mixed neighborhoods where Jews and non-Jews live side by side, *minyanim* in yards should not be loud, so that they do not disturb the neighbors. As I have explained elsewhere, *chillul Hashem* applies to how we are perceived by non-Jews as well, not just by Jews. Nowadays especially, when haters and enemies of the Jews are resurgent and anti-Semitism runs rampant all over the world, we should be cautious about anything that may cause a desecration of the name of Hashem or hatred of Jews.

B'yakra d'Oraysa,
Asher Weiss

These essays were written during various stages of the coronavirus pandemic. Facts and knowledge about this virus change daily. Torah is forever.

³ Hilchos Tefillah 8:1.

⁴ Letter §13.