

HM 427:8.2020

Loneliness, Family, and Community During the Pandemic

Elliot N. Dorff

September, 2020

Approved on September 14, 2020 by a vote of 13-0-0. Voting in favor: Rabbis Jaymee Alpert, Pamela Barmash, Elliot Dorff, David Booth, Nate Crane, David Fine, Susan Grossman, Jan Kaufman, Avram Reisner, Robert Scheinberg, Deborah Silver, Ariel Stofenmacher, and Ellen Wolintz-Fields. Voting Against: none. Abstaining: none.

Question: What are the Jewish legal duties of individuals, families, and Jewish institutions to combat the loneliness, depression, loss of patience, and even violence that can accompany the medical need to sequester ourselves to diminish the spread of the COVID-19 virus?

Answer:¹

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced all of us to sequester ourselves from others for long periods of time. This has produced widespread loneliness and depression, undermining, as it does, the mode and extent of our normal relationships with the members of our family, our community, and the people we meet in our jobs. This leads to some deep questions about how some fundamental Jewish perspectives and values might help us understand the pressures of loneliness and how important Jewish laws should help us cope with them.

Philosophical Foundations for Judaism's Laws Governing Mental Health

The Jewish legal duties discussed in this responsum flow from Judaism's deep conviction about the nature of our individual identity and its relationship to that of others. Because Jews tend to think that the whole world perceives such matters exactly as Judaism does, it will be helpful to point out that Judaism's perspective is not obvious, that, in fact, two other traditions with which Western Jews are familiar—Western philosophy and Christianity -- take a radically different stance. Fair warning: this section is philosophy, not law, but it seeks to lay the philosophical foundations on which the relevant laws are based.

The Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Rabbinical Assembly provides guidance in matters of halakhah for the Conservative movement. The individual rabbi, however, is the authority for the interpretation and application of all matters of halakhah. This teshuvah was approved by the CJLS in a fast-track process intended to provide expeditious answers during a time of urgency.

¹ I would like to thank Rabbis Pamela Barmash, Joshua Heller, Daniel Nevins, and Avram Reisner for their helpful comments and suggestions on an earlier draft of this responsum.

1. *God owns us.* First, in Western thought and law, adults own their own bodies. This was made explicit in American law in the *Nancy Cruzan* case, in which the United States Supreme Court affirmed the right of every adult to refuse medical care, including artificial nutrition and hydration.² In Jewish thought and law, in contrast, God, as Creator of the world, owns everything in it, including us human beings.

הוּ לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֵיךָ הַשָּׁמַיִם וְהַשָּׁמַיִם הָאָרְצִי וְכָל־אֲשֶׁר־בָּהּ:

Mark, the heavens to their uttermost reaches belong to the LORD your God, the earth and all that is on it!³

Therefore, if and how we take care of ourselves is not just a matter of what we choose to do with what is ours; it is rather a duty we have to God to take care of God's property and to enable us to serve God. Although in the following passage Maimonides does not connect this duty to God's creation of us, he articulately makes the point that we must take care of our bodies not just for our own practical needs and goals, but to know and serve God:

הַמְנַהֵג עֲצָמוֹ עַל פִּי הַרְפוּאָה. אִם שָׁם עַל לְבוֹ שְׂיֵהֵיגָה כָּל גּוּפוֹ וְאֵיבָרָיו שְׁלֵמִים בְּלִבָּד וְשְׂיֵהֵיוּ לוֹ בְּנִים עוֹשִׂין מְלֵאכָתוֹ וְעִמְלִין לְצָרְכוֹ אֵין זֶה דֶּרֶךְ טוֹבָה. אֲלֵא יִשִּׁים עַל לְבוֹ שְׂיֵהֵא גּוּפוֹ שְׁלֵם וְחִזְק כְּדֵי שְׂתֵהֵיגָה נַפְשׁוֹ יִשְׁרָה לְדַעַת אֵת ה'. ... נִמְצָא הַמְהַלֵּךְ בְּדֶרֶךְ זֶה כָּל יָמָיו עוֹבֵד אֵת ה' תָּמִיד. אֲפֵלוֹ בְּשַׁעַה שֶׁנּוֹשָׂא וְנוֹתֵן וְאֲפֵלוֹ בְּשַׁעַה שֶׁבּוֹעֵל. מִפְּנֵי שֶׁמְחַשְׁבָּתוֹ בְּכָל כְּדֵי שְׂיִמְצָא צָרְכָיו עַד שְׂיֵהֵיגָה גּוּפוֹ שְׁלֵם לְעַבֵּד אֵת ה'. וְאֲפֵלוֹ בְּשַׁעַה שֶׁהוּא יִשָּׁן ...

He who regulates his life in accordance with the laws of hygiene with the sole motive of maintaining a sound and vigorous physique and begetting children to do his work and labor for his benefit is not following the right course. A man should aim to maintain physical health and vigor in order that his soul may be upright, in a condition to know God...Whoever throughout his life follows this course will be continually serving God, even while engaged in business and even during cohabitation, because his purpose in all that he does will be to satisfy his needs so as to have a sound body with which to serve God. And even when he sleeps...⁴

As the next section demonstrates, our body, mind, emotions, and will are, as perceived in the Jewish tradition, integrated within us, and God created both. So one's duty to God to preserve one's health includes one's inner being (mind, emotions, will) as well as one's body.

² *Cruzan v. Director, Missouri Department of Health*, 497 U.S. 261 (1990).

³ Deuteronomy 10:14. See also Psalms 24:1; 100:3.

⁴ M.T. *Laws of Ethics (De'ot)* 3:3.

2. *Our body, mind, emotions, and will are integrated within us.* In Western thought, beginning with Plato, there is a sharp dichotomy between the body and the mind. The body is the animal in each of us, and the mind is the distinctly human part of us. This leads to a stock question in Western thought – namely, how are the body and mind connected? This is “the mind/body problem.” Descartes thought that the magical place where this happened was the pineal gland in the head, and contemporary thinkers are using MRI machines to trace in nanoseconds the way the brain responds to choices to determine if and when choices that you think are free are in fact determined by the structure of your mind.

A similar dichotomy characterizes Christian thought, but there it is between the body and the soul, where again the body fares badly: the body is the animal in a person, and the soul is the divine in him or her. This dichotomy is especially in evidence in Catholic thought and practice, where the ideal people are those who purposely suppress the desires of the body in order to cultivate the soul – namely, priests, nuns, and monks.

Jewish perspectives and laws stand in sharp contrast to this perspective. It sees our bodies and souls (including our minds, emotions, and wills) as inextricably intertwined within us. One clear expression of this is the following story in the Talmud:

אמר ליה אנטונינוס לרבי גוף ונשמה יכולין לפטור עצמן מן הדין כיצד גוף
אומר נשמה חטאת שמיום שפירשה ממני הריני מוטל כאבן דומם בקבר ונשמה
אומרת גוף חטא שמיום שפירשתי ממנו הריני פורחת באויר כצפור אמר ליה אמשול
לך משל למה הדבר דומה למלך בשר ודם שהיה לו פרדס נאה והיה בו בכורות נאות
והושיב בו שני שומרים אחד היגר ואחד סומא אמר לו היגר לסומא בכורות נאות
אני רואה בפרדס בא והרכיבני ונביאם לאכלם רכב היגר על גבי סומא והביאום
ואכלום

Antoninus said to Rabbi, "The body and soul could exonerate themselves from judgment. How is this so? The body says, 'The soul sinned, for from the day that it separated from me, lo, I am like a silent stone in the grave!' And the soul says, 'The body is the sinner, for from the day that I separated from it, lo, I fly like a bird.'" Rabbi answered him, "I will tell you a parable. What is the matter like? It is like a king of flesh and blood who had a beautiful orchard, and there were in it lovely ripe fruit. He placed two guardians over it, one a cripple and the other blind. Said the cripple to the blind man, 'I see beautiful ripe fruit in the orchard. Come and carry me, and we will bring and eat them.' The cripple rode on the back of the blind man and they brought and ate them. After a while the owner of the orchard came and said to them, 'Where is my lovely fruit?' The cripple answered, 'Do I have legs to go?' The blind man answered, 'Do I have eyes to see?' What did the owner do? He placed the cripple on the back of the blind man and judged them as one. So also the Holy Blessed One brings the soul and throws it into the body and judges them as one.⁵

⁵ B. *Sanhedrin* 91a-91b.

This integration of body and soul manifests itself not only in the measure of our guilt; it also is important in how we plan our lives. So even though the Rabbis were deeply invested in the life of the mind as expressed in the study of Torah, Rabbban Gamliel says this:

רַבּוֹן גַּמְלִיאֵל בְּנוֹ שֶׁל רַבִּי יְהוּדָה הַנְּשִׂיא אֹמֵר, יָפָה תְּלִמּוּד תּוֹרָה עִם דְּרוֹךְ אֶרֶץ, לְשִׁיגִיעַת נְשִׁיָּהֶם מִשְׁכַּחַת עֵוֹן. וְכֹל תּוֹרָה לְשִׂאֵין עֲמָה מְלָאכָה, סוֹפָה בְּטִלָּה וְגוֹרְרַת עֵוֹן.

The study of the Torah is commendable when combined with a gainful occupation, for when a person toils in both, sin is driven from the mind. Study alone without a gainful occupation leads to idleness and ultimately to sin.⁶

Put more generally, what these sources are asserting is that the way we think, feel, and will affects the way we treat our bodies, and, conversely, the way we treat our bodies has major implications for how we think and feel about ourselves and what we want in life.

3. *We are integrally tied to our community.* Furthermore, in contrast to the emphasis on individual freedom in Western (and especially American) thought, and in contrast to the Christian doctrine that it is the individual who is either saved or damned, Judaism sees each of us as embedded in a thick web of relationships with our family and community.

כל ישראל ערבים זה בזה

The entire Jewish people are responsible for one another.⁷

And then, of course, Hillel's famous dictum:

הִלֵּל אֹמֵר, אַל תִּפְרָשׁ מִן הַצִּבּוֹר

Hillel said: Do not separate yourself from the community.⁸

We are each created in the image of God and therefore deserving of respect and care as such,⁹ but from the moment we are born we are embedded in a family and community, however supportive or dysfunctional that is. This cognizance of both one's individual needs, both physical

⁶ M. *Avot* 2:2.

⁷ This phrase is used negatively – that we are all responsible for each other's sins – in B. *Shevu'ot* 39a. It is used positively – that we each are accredited with the righteousness of a righteous person among us – in *Tanhuma Buber* on Deuteronomy 29:9, and it is used positively in a different way – that we are all responsible to each other to learn, teach, and fulfill the Torah of our God – in *Pesikta Zutarta (Lekah Tov)* 12a, which compares the singular verbs in Deuteronomy 10:12 with the plural verbs in 11:2 to teach us that we are both unique individuals and responsible to each other to learn, teach, and live up to the Torah. I would like to thank Rabbi Avram Reisner for alerting me to the negative implications of the first of these sources and the alternative sources that use the same phrase to assert our positive connections as a People.

⁸ M. *Avot* 2:4 (2:5 in some editions).

⁹ Genesis 1:27; 5:1; 9:6. This extends even to someone being punished for a capital crime: the person may be hanged for committing that crime, but his or her body must be removed before nightfall “because an impaled body is an affront to God” (Deuteronomy 22:22-23).

and mental/emotional/conative/psychological, and also our being part of a family and community whose welfare we must also serve is famously stated by Hillel in another passage:

הוּא הִקִּיחַ אוֹמֵר, אִם אֵין אֲנִי לִי, מִי לִי. וְכִשְׁאֲנִי לְעַצְמִי, מָה אֲנִי. וְאִם לֹא עֲכָשְׁרִי, אֵימָתִי :

He [also] used to say: If I am not for myself, who is for me? But if I am for my own self [only], what am I? And if not now, when?¹⁰

Preserving One's Own Mental Health

First, then, what does this strongly communitarian understanding of who we are mean for us as individuals?

Minimally, it means that we need connections to others. We all need our own individual space from time to time, and some of us need private time and space more than others. Extended time alone, though, is unhealthy for us. Probably the most graphic proof of this assertion occurs in the prison environment, where, short of execution or torture, the harshest penalty is solitary confinement. Unfortunately, because there have been many people held in isolation for extended periods of time, we know well what that does to many people: they go insane. In that environment it is not only the isolation that produces insanity; the harsh and small physical conditions, poor air, lack of mental stimulation, and other factors undoubtedly play a role in this, but the sheer isolation is definitely a significant factor in driving people mad. So while some of us like to be alone more than others, all of us need connections to others.

In light of that, and in light of our duty to take care of ourselves as creatures owned by God, during the need for quarantine and social distancing that the COVID-19 pandemic has imposed on us to stop the spread of the virus and thereby preserve our own physical health and that of others, we also need to take steps to connect with others. This means that we should use available technology (Zoom, Facetime, the phone -- yes, that still works!) to talk with others, including, perhaps, some with whom we have not talked for a long time. That is definitely not nearly as fulfilling psychologically as having lunch with a friend, playing a sport with one or more other people, or hugging someone, to mention just a few examples of how we normally interact with others; but reaching out electronically to other people or arranging to visit other people while sitting at a distance of at least six feet with face masks on, as the health specialists require, enables us to reengage with others and gain at least some of the social connections that we all desperately need to preserve our own psychological health.

There are unfortunately good data that demonstrate that our restricted ability to interact with others has led to many more of us feeling anxious and depressed. According to a study

¹⁰ M. Avot 1:14. Although we Jews take for granted this double need to take care of oneself and others, the communitarian emphasis in Judaism is much more prominent than it is in either Christian or American secular thought. I would like to thank Rabbi Pamela Barmash for reminding me to note that here. For a more thorough comparison of the foundational beliefs of the American, Christian, and Jewish ways of understanding ourselves and our ties to our community, see Elliot N. Dorff, *To Do the Right and the Good: A Jewish Approach to Modern Social Ethics* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2002), Chapter One.

produced by a novel partnership of the National Center for Health Statistics and the Census Bureau of the United States, young adults in particular are manifesting much higher rates of anxiety and depression than they did before the pandemic as they find that not only their social interactions, but their professional opportunities are limited or even curtailed by the pandemic.¹¹ The professional obstacles range from high school students who have had difficulty taking college admissions tests to high school and college graduates who cannot apply for jobs in person and are finding fewer jobs available because of the pandemic, to law school and medical school graduates who cannot take the qualifying examinations to gain their license to practice their professions.¹² Another study at Boston University has shown that signs of depression have tripled in the United States in the months since the pandemic began.¹³

Such results are unfortunately not surprising. The conditions that the pandemic have imposed on us, including the lack of social connections and the routines that have sustained us physically and emotionally for years, the loss of a job, and/or the illness and maybe even death of family or friends and the anxiety that we too may get sick have made some of us clinically depressed. This is understandable and nothing to be ashamed of. Such people should reach out to get the professional help they need without any embarrassment whatsoever; on the contrary, the Jewish duty to take care of ourselves both physically and mentally requires people who need professional help to seek it.¹⁴

Finally, precisely because the Jewish tradition sees the physical, mental, emotional, and conative parts of our being as all intertwined within us, the duty to save our lives (*pikku'ah nefesh*)¹⁵ applies to our mental and emotional health just as much as it does to our physical health. This means that even those who normally refrain from using electronic devices on

¹¹ The survey tracked people over twelve weeks from April 23, 2020 to July 21, 2020, asking about 900,000 Americans questions that indicated their levels of anxiety and depression. Among adults between 18 and 29, 71% reported “not being able to stop or control worrying” and feeling “down, depressed, or hopeless,” while that was true for only 40% of respondents who were 80 or older, the group far more likely to die from contracting COVID-19. See U.S. Census, “Household and Pulse Surveys,”

<https://data.census.gov/cedsci/all?q=anxiety%20and%20depression> (accessed 9/6/2020). For an article describing the survey and its results, see Phillip Reese, “Anxiety and Depression Rampant Amid Pandemic” *Los Angeles Times*, September 5, 2020, p. B2 in the print edition, available online (and dated August 25, 2020) at <https://www.latimes.com/science/story/2020-08-25/feeling-anxious-and-depressed-in-california-youre-right-at-home> (accessed 9/6/2020).

¹² See Emma Goldberg, “Bar and Medical Exam Delays Keep Graduates in Limbo,” *New York Times*, September 4, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/04/us/bar-exam-coronavirus.html> (accessed 9/6/2020) for one example of this.,

¹³ Catherine K. Ettman, *et. al.*, “Prevalence of Depression Symptoms in U.S. Adults Before and During the COVID-19 Pandemic,”

<https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2770146?widget=personalizedcontent&previousarticle=0> (accessed 9/6/2020). For a description of the study, see Karen Kaplan, “Signs of Depression Have Tripled in the U.S. Since the COVID-19 Pandemic Got Underway,” *Los Angeles Times* September 3, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/science/story/2020-09-03/signs-of-depression-have-tripled-since-start-of-covid-pandemic> (accessed 9/6/2020).

¹⁴ It also requires the community to provide it, but that is a much larger discussion. For one assessment of that duty, see the responsum of Elliot N. Dorff and Aaron L. Mackler, “Responsibilities for the Provision of Health Care,” https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/assets/public/halakhah/teshuvot/19912000/dorffmackler_care.pdf (accessed 8/5/20).

¹⁵ B. *Yoma* 85a-b; B. *Sanhedrin* 74a-b; Mekhilta on Exodus 31:13; S.A. *Hoshen Mispat* 359:4; 380:3. I would like to thank Rabbi Daniel Nevins for alerting me to this important legal ramification of the duty to preserve our mental and emotional health.

Shabbat and Yom Tov are legally obliged to use them if that is necessary to get the help they need on those days to emerge safely from severe depression or suicidal thoughts.

Family and Community

From childhood through adulthood, we look to our families for love and support. Thankfully, many families provide that for their members. Nobody is perfect, of course, and sometimes interactions among family members can be less than ideal; but often those negative interactions can be remedied in the hours or days thereafter. As the pandemic is daily illustrating, however, even emotionally healthy families need some time apart from each other. Many are thinking and maybe even saying to the members of their family, “I love you, but I don’t want to be with you 24/7.” This is true for elementary school age children, all the more for middle school and high school students, and for many adults as well.

Furthermore, as the biblical book of Genesis amply illustrates, families, even during normal times, can be dysfunctional. Parents and children can act badly toward each other, and so can siblings. Sometimes that bad behavior can rise to the level of emotional or physical abuse. Unfortunately, we have good evidence that the pandemic has increased the rate of family violence, often engendered by the loss of jobs, the use of alcohol, and the unrelenting time that the family spends together and apart from others.¹⁶ I have written a responsum about family violence,¹⁷ and it unfortunately needs to be revisited during this pandemic.

¹⁶ See, for example, this U.S. Government report from the National Institutes of Health: Andrew M. Campbell, “An increasing risk of family violence during the Covid-19 pandemic: Strengthening community collaborations to save lives,” <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7152912/> (published online on April 12, 2020; accessed 8/5/20). Campbell reports that as of early April, “In China, domestic violence is reported to have tripled during their shelter in-place mandate. Additionally, France has indicated a 30 % increase in domestic violence reports, Brazil estimates domestic violence reports have jumped 40–50 %, and Italy has also indicated reports of domestic violence are on the rise. In Spain, reports have surfaced of a horrific domestic violence-related homicide – a trend that is unfortunately likely to continue around the globe as stress continues to build and shelter in-place measures extend into the future.” See also this more recent research that indicated that “the proportion of men and women whose abuse was physical – rather than verbal or emotional – was 80% higher in 2020 than in all three earlier years put together. And the physical abuse was much more severe.” Melissa Healy, “Domestic Abuse Worsens in Pandemic,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 19, 2020, p. A9 in the printed edition; published on August 18, 2020 online: <https://www.latimes.com/science/story/2020-08-18/intimate-partner-violence-spiked-80-after-pandemic-lockdown-began> (accessed 8/20/20). That article reports the results of this research: Babina Gosangi, et. al., “Exacerbation of Physical Intimate Partner Violence during COVID-19 Lockdown,” *Radiology*, August 13, 2020, <https://pubs.rsna.org/doi/10.1148/radiol.2020202866> (accessed 8/20/20).

¹⁷ Elliot N. Dorff, “Family Violence,” https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/assets/public/halakhah/teshuvot/19912000/dorff_violence.pdf (accessed 8/5/20), reprinted with some revisions in Elliot N. Dorff, *Love Your Neighbor and Yourself: A Jewish Approach to Modern Personal Ethics* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2003), Chapter Five. As it happens, I am writing this section on August 5, 2020, and today’s printed edition of the *New York Times* includes an obituary for Richard Gelles, a sociologist whose work focused on family violence and child welfare. See, for example, these books of his: *The Violent Home: A Study of Physical Aggression Between Husbands and Wives* (1974); *Behind Closed Doors* (with Murray A. Straus and Suzanne Steinmetz, 1980), which, according to the obituary, is “a seven-year study of more than 2,000 families [that] showed how thoroughly domestic violence was woven into the fabric of family life”; and *The Book of David: How Preserving Families Can Cost Children’s Lives*

Prevention, of course, is much better than cure in psychological issues as well as physical ones. Adults must not only recognize the extra pressures that the pandemic has imposed on their family's relationships, but also name them explicitly in conversations with each other so that they can take steps to cope with them and, if possible, diminish them. Exercising extra precaution to avoid making angry or negative comments to or about other members of one's family is one important factor in diminishing the tension within families that are cooped up together for long periods of time, for such words do hurt. What other steps to take to promote and protect good family relationships during conditions of quarantine will vary greatly from family to family, but the overarching Jewish duty is to do what is necessary to avoid family violence, as adumbrated in my responsum on the subject.

One hopes, of course, that families can go beyond that in finding ways not only to avoid bad interactions but to increase the love and support that they have for each other through new ways of deepening that in new activities that they share. Coping with the extra pressures of COVID, however, will often, if not always, entail finding ways for family members to be apart from each other, even when living under the same roof, and it will also require each of the members of the family to reach out electronically and in other safe ways to people outside their immediate family. This is not only wise advice; it is a Jewish duty that is part of our obligation to take care of ourselves and our family.

A large part of our psychological health is based on our interactions with people outside our family. Moreover, we have a vested interest in strong communal ties, not only for our own mental health, but also for the many tasks we can achieve only through communal effort and for the many relationships that we cherish. Maintaining a sense of community and the various functions it serves is hard enough in normal times; it is much more difficult now. Here too we must name the problem in our conversation with other members of our community so that we can take steps to maintain our community through the pandemic and continue as many of its functions as possible.

Visiting the Sick

If healthy people feel a deep need to connect with others during this time, sick people feel it all the more. One of the aspects of illness that makes it so difficult is that it isolates us from the people and places we normally frequent. Our tradition therefore made visiting the sick not only a nice thing to do, but a commandment (*bikkur holim*).¹⁸

Interrupting the sick person's isolation and reinforcing that person's assurance that other people think and care about them is, in normal times, best done in person, but even then it can be done remotely and be helpful. One of the tragedies of COVID-19 is that even family members

(1996), in which he argues that a child's welfare, rather than reunion with the child's biological parents, should be the criterion for child placement. For the obituary see <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/25/us/richard-gelles-dead.html> (accessed 8/5/20).

¹⁸ M. T. Laws of Mourning 14:4; S.A. Orah Hayyim 335. For a discussion of why many of us dislike visiting the sick and how to overcome those feelings and help the sick person during one's visit, see Elliot N. Dorff, *The Way Into Tikkun Olam [Repairing the World]* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2005), pp 157-162.

and friends who would love to visit someone who is infected with the virus cannot do so, even if that person is dying. In fact, many hospitals forbid visitors for all patients, out of fear that visitors, even those with normal temperatures and unaware that they are infected, will spread the virus to patients and staff in the hospital. Because nobody can visit the sick in person during the pandemic and therefore the isolation of patients is even greater than normal, our duty to visit the sick electronically at this time is even more imperative than usual, whether they are at home, invalids in a nursing home or other long-term care facility, or in a hospital.

Synagogues and Other Jewish Institutions

To put it bluntly, there are real limits to the extent that you can know and love people from a distance, let alone create a community with many people. As we are finding in the efforts of schools and universities to open, even though there are some advantages to having classes online, there are also major deficits. Jewish law requires a minyan for parts of the service, and that requires a minimum of ten adult Jews in a room together;¹⁹ as a result, even those rabbis who are permitting the communal parts of the service to be said through a minyan constituted exclusively on Zoom or some other online platform are doing so only while we cannot congregate because of the pandemic as an emergency measure (*sha'at ha'd'hak*). Singing on Zoom lacks much of the energy and joy that singing in the same room with others entails, and it is very hard in that medium to hear each other as we try to sing together. You certainly cannot hug people from a distance, and your ability to rejoice with them or mourn with them is also limited. Community needs proximity, and we all need community.

Synagogues and other Jewish institutions are struggling during the pandemic to maintain their membership's interest in them when people cannot meet together to do all the things that these institutions do. Nobody is quite sure what ways of doing things that have become necessary during the pandemic will last thereafter as well. Because of the factors mentioned above, however, one both hopes and expects that the many communal needs that our synagogues, schools, youth groups, camps, and communal institutions (Federation, Jewish Family Service, Board of Jewish Education, Jewish Vocational Service, Jewish Free Loan, etc.) provide, people will support them as well as they can now and continue to support them with their activity and money in the future.

In the meantime, rabbinic and lay leaders of these institutions must do what they can to continue to engage the interest and commitment of their constituents. They should also reevaluate how what they are doing now should, or should not, affect what they do once the pandemic is over. Such leaders do not need a teshuvah to say that; it is in their own best interests. It is also, though, a Jewish duty because of the important ways each of these religious, educational, and social service institutions makes it possible for the Jewish community to fulfill many commandments and ultimately enables the Jewish tradition and the Jewish community to thrive.

Piskei Halakhah (Legal Rulings):

¹⁹ Rabbi Avram Israel Reisner, "Wired to the Kadosh Barukh Hu: Minyan Via Internet," <https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/Reisner%20-%20Internet.pdf> (accessed 7/28/20).

1. The Jewish legal duty to take care of oneself emotionally and psychologically is no less imperative than the Jewish legal duty to protect oneself physically. Although we all need some time alone, Judaism recognizes the inherent social nature of us as human beings. Therefore, during the pandemic, when we cannot congregate in groups large and small in the ways we usually do, preserving our mental health requires us to reach out electronically and in other safe ways to connect with others, both for our own sake and for theirs.
2. Even those who normally do not use electronic devices on Shabbat or Yom Tov are legally obliged to use them if that is necessary to rescue themselves from a deep depression or suicidal thoughts.
3. Families who find themselves sequestered together with little or no opportunity to interact with others should recognize and name the new pressures that that situation puts on family relationships and conscientiously take steps to reduce those pressures in order to retain good relations and avoid family violence.
4. Normally fulfilling the Jewish legal duty to visit the sick is best done in person, but that is not safe during the pandemic, and hence ill people feel even more isolated now than they would under normal circumstances. This makes that duty even more needed and more imperative to fulfill during the pandemic. Jews should make extra efforts to visit the sick remotely during this time so that ill people isolated from their family and friends can retain their sanity, their sense of belonging to a community, and their will to do what is necessary to get well.
5. The Jewish tradition asserts that people are inherently social and need community, both emotionally and practically. Therefore, although synagogues and other Jewish institutions must first and foremost obey the advice of medical authorities to ensure the physical safety of their members, staff, and visitors, they also have a duty to do what they can to interact with their members and continue the work of their sacred missions of religion, education, and social service. This duty to carry out their usual activities as much as possible now is not only to assure their continued existence after the pandemic passes, but also to accomplish their communal bonding functions and live up to the many commandments that their very missions enable the Jewish community to fulfill. Both of these are needed now more than ever.