

Lifecycle | The Rabbinical Assembly

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The following are short answers by CJLS members in response to halakhic questions raised by COVID-19 on lifecycle events. Please note that these are not official responsa of the CJLS.

If you have a question to submit for consideration, please send it to [Rabbi Ashira Konigsburg](#).

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Death and Mourning:

Should hevra kadisha members perform **tohorah** on those who have died of COVID-19, or should that be discouraged/prohibited due to health concerns?

(Answer by Rabbi Pamela Barmash, updated July 8, 2020) *The prevalence and course of COVID-19 differ from community to community, and whether a hevra kadisha should be in contact with the deceased's body will differ accordingly. Local hevra kadisha groups should heed the advice of the local and state health departments where they reside as to their safety during preparing the body of the deceased for burial. Importantly, the organization Kavod V'Nichum's updated guidelines call for hevra kadisha groups to cease all contact with bodies. See [here](#). If a hevra kadisha decides to resume performing tohora, whether or not the deceased died from COVID-19, standard infectious disease precautions should be in place to protect the team from infection from the deceased. The handling of the body and its dressing in takhrikin may be done by the hevra kadisha or the funeral staff. The body of the deceased may be wiped (in place*

of the usual washing). The funeral home staff who must already be in contact with the body may wrap the body in takhrikin (sometimes with the body still in the body bag), and may place the body in the coffin along with some earth. Whether or not full tohorah was performed, a member of the hevra kadisha may recite the suggested liturgy either online or from an appropriate distance from the body of the deceased.

How should **funerals**/memorials be conducted?

(Answer by Rabbi Pamela Barmash) Funeral should be graveside only. The minyan for kaddish can be constituted by ten adult Jews who are in sight of one another but are otherwise standing at a distance or by an internet minyan. See the [CJLS guidance on remote minyan](#).

How should **shivas** be conducted?

(Answer by Rabbi Pamela Barmash) Those in mourning are advised to announce to their potential visitors that they are having virtual visiting hours, that their visitors email them when they want to zoom in, then they can send a zoom link. This way it's not an open link in which anyone can peek into their home. They may also take telephone visits. Clergy should not enter congregant homes until public health officials lift the ban on group meetings.

How should **mourning before the burial** be observed?

(Answer by Rabbi Elliot Dorff) In Los Angeles and in other areas where the COVID-19 virus and the death toll from the virus have surged in recent weeks, not only hospitals and vaccination sites, but also mortuaries and funeral homes have been overwhelmed. In Los Angeles as of this date (January 19, 2021), somebody who dies today cannot be buried in a Jewish cemetery for at least two weeks. This raises the question of how rabbis should meet the needs of those whose family members have died but have not yet been buried. The normal category for that stage of the burial and mourning process is anninut, during which close family members are exempted from many halakhic duties to enable them to prepare for the funeral, but that is assumed to be a few days at most; now, if the family waits for burial, that period is lasting for weeks. In the current circumstances, I would recommend either of the following courses of action (A or B), depending on the situation:

A. Begin shiva as soon as arrangements for burial have been made, even though burial will be delayed for some time. If this alternative is chosen, follow the instructions in the

responsum of Rabbi Joshua Heller [here](#). (Special thanks to Rabbi Pamela Barmash for reminding me of Rabbi Heller's responsum.)

B. Rabbi Heller's responsum, however, was written for cases in which traditional Jewish burial was not anticipated. In many cases occurring now, though, families do intend to bury their loved ones in the traditional manner; they are just prevented from doing so in a timely manner because mortuaries and cemeteries have been overwhelmed with bodies to bury because of the pandemic. In such cases, rabbis may choose to advise mourners and the community to do this:

1. Family members of the deceased (parents, children, spouse, siblings) in aninut for an extended period of time may take advantage of the exemptions from halakhic duties that traditional Jewish law grants them, but once they have made funeral and shiva arrangements, they may also resume praying daily and the other normal activities of Jewish life until the funeral.
2. Family members may rip their clothes as an act of mourning (kri'ah) and recite the accompanying berakhah at any time after the moment of death (or hearing of it). It may well be a great comfort to mourners to do this as a graphic expression of their grief soon after the death of their close relative. Rabbis may also invite members of the family to recall memories of the deceased in whatever communal services are possible during the pandemic even though the formal eulogy will take place at the funeral.
3. The community should follow the guidance of Rabbi Daniel Greyber's responsum in regard to comforting the mourners. His responsum addressed the cases in which the burial is postponed because of a Festival, but the same reasoning and practices that he develops for that context should be applied to this new one as well, when the funeral is postponed for lack of personnel to handle in the normal time frame of a few days the preparation of the bodies and their burial of the many people dying of COVID. His responsum is [here](#). (Special thanks to Rabbi Daniel Greyber for his suggestions for adding to the original draft of this guidance.)
4. In line with Rabbi Greyber's responsum, which advocates comforting the mourners (nihum aveilim) even when formal shiva is postponed, rabbis are encouraged to announce the death to the congregation when it occurs and name and acknowledge the pain that the bereaved are suffering now so that congregants can engage in consoling the bereaved in the interim, even though the official shiva and communal support for the mourners is being postponed until after burial.

5. Mourners may join a minyan in saying Mourner's Kaddish during this time, for that prayer is simply a shortened version of Full Kaddish that we say several times daily. Moreover, it does not include a berakhah, and so reciting it cannot be construed as a berakhah levatalah, even though their loved one has yet to be buried. Rabbis may suggest various sections of the Book of Psalms or other readings to aid in comforting the bereaved in this time period in place of, or in addition to, Mourner's Kaddish. Mourners may, but need not, sit on low stools or cover their mirrors during an extended period of aninut.

B'nai Mitzvah

A young person becomes **bar/bat mitzvah** on the date that they come of age on the Jewish calendar. Nevertheless, the observance of B'nai Mitzvah celebrations are a significant milestones for young people, their family and their community, and disruptions and possible rescheduling of B'nai Mitzvah are a significant source of anxiety. How are such situations to be handled?

(Answer by Rabbi Joshua Heller) B'nai Mitzvah ceremonies should ideally be conducted in the presence of a minyan, with understanding that additional guests may be watching on live stream. Even that may not be safe or feasible in the current circumstances. In any case, celebrations and parties should be delayed until public health guidance allows for gatherings.

In the current circumstances, many B'nai Mitzvah observances and celebrations are being postponed. Many communities are asking for guidance how to handle rescheduled observances where young people have invested significant effort learning a Torah reading and/or Haftarah that the congregation has skipped.

We suggest the following options:

The bar mitzvah could be delayed until the next time the Torah portion is read as part of the annual cycle.

If the celebration is rescheduled to another shabbat morning, a portion that the child has already learned may be read as a "maftir" portion from a second scroll, and their Haftarah would replace the regular Haftarah. This would not be recommended on a shabbat that already has a specially mandated reading (Rosh Hodesh, Mahar Hodesh, the 7 Haftarot of consolation, Shabbat Shuvah, Hanukkah, the 4 parshiot).

If the celebration is rescheduled to a shabbat afternoon or weekday morning, the reading the young person has studied could be substituted or added to the regular

weekly reading, even though it will be the incorrect parshah. At least 10 verses of Torah must be read when a minyan gathers, and since there are moments in history in which people were on different cycles, these 10 verses will still fulfill that communal obligation. If the child knows at least 10 verses that may be subdivided into 3 aliyot, this would be one option. It would also be possible to take out two scrolls, combine the three weekday aliyot into two and have the child read their original maftir as the third. A Haftarah reading might be added to Shabbat Minhah, though there is disagreement as to whether it could be done with the brakhot.

Weddings

Can a **wedding** be conducted virtually?

(Answer by Rabbi Aaron Alexander) When it is determined that a wedding cannot be postponed, the following procedure may be used:

- The couple must be in the same physical space. This may present challenges in certain cases, in which case medical and public health experts must be consulted before proceeding.*
- The officiating rabbis and two valid witnesses (same rules apply) may be present via-sight based technology, and in real-time, but in three different physical locations. One witness should have copy of the ketubbah.*
- Have each partner (hatan/kallah, hatan/hatan, kallah/kallah) present with two pens in front of them.*
- Rabbi reads the ketubbah and asks each for their acceptance of conditions. Each, so that witnesses can see live, picks up pen in front of them to validly enact.*
- First witness signs the ketubbah. Snaps picture or converts to PDF and sends to second witness, then same procedure to rabbi (if signing), and then sends to the couple, who either print or bring up on device and hold together.*
- Officiant (or couple) chants first blessings (with amen), couple drinks from their glasses. (Officiant should have glass if chanting, all should have wine/grape juice)*
- Witnesses attest to rings/ownership/value of rings.*
- Ring exchange, led by the officiant.*
- At this point, the couple can move straight to declaration/birkat kohanim/glass breaking and save 7 berakhot for another time. Or, for those communities who consider 10 adults in a zoom room a minyan, 7 berakhot can be chanted by anyone present (Who could otherwise chant them in a normal situation).*

A physical huppah is preferred, but the inability to acquire one doesn't invalidate the wedding, as in antiquity huppah often meant the home in which the couple began their

marriage.

What happens to the original ketubah if a **wedding** is rescheduled?

(Answer by Rabbi Elliot Dorff) If a wedding is postponed and the couple has a calligraphed ketubah recording the date originally planned for the wedding, the calligraphed ketubah may be displayed at the wedding, even under the huppah, and it may be signed on the postponed date of the wedding, but another, printed ketubah with the actual date that the wedding is taking place should also be signed on the postponed date of the wedding and used for the ceremony.

(Answer by Rabbi Elliot Dorff) Another way to handle this is to have unrelated Jewish friends of the couple come to the rabbi's home or office before the wedding, sign the ketubbah, and then observe the wedding on Zoom. That is, for sure, not edut in the same room, as we are used to it, but nevertheless can constitute edut for two reasons: (1) We normally allow witnesses to sign the ketubbah before the wedding on the grounds that they will be shortly witnessing what they are signing that they have already witnessed (namely, that the groom put a ring on his bride's finger and said "Harei at..." and, in egalitarian weddings, what the bride does as well to effectuate the betrothal); and (2) in the world of contemporary business, even electronic signatures -- which often have nothing to do with the person's actual signature -- are taken as legally binding, and in the scenario suggested here we have on the ketubbah the actual signatures of the witnesses who both see and hear the ceremony, including the groom putting a ring on the bride's finger and saying "Harei at...", and, in egalitarian weddings, what the bride does to effectuate betrothal as well.

Brit Milah

Should the timing of the **brit milah** be changed?

(Answer by Rabbi Elliot Dorff, in consultation with a urologist who is also a mohel and a pediatrician who is also a mohelet. This answer was revised on May 8, 2020.)

Brit milah for baby boys born during the pandemic should be done as follows:

1. *Because the circumcision is taking place before the 8th day, we should not say the usual berakhot for brit milah. In the opposite direction, though, if the brit milah had to be postponed because of the boy's medical condition or because the pandemic makes it impossible to do the procedure safely (the third option that I mentioned, in which the circumcision is postponed until people can gather safely), then we should say the usual berakhot before and after the circumcision.*
2. *It does not matter halakhically if the person doing the medical procedure in the hospital is Jewish or not, but it may matter emotionally and symbolically to the family. So I would tell them that the person need not be Jewish (so as to relieve any guilt they may have if no qualified Jew is available to circumcise their son), but if there is someone on the hospital staff who is Jewish and skilled at this, they should see if he or she is available. Even if the person performing the circumcision is Jewish, the traditional berakhot of brit milah are not recited when the circumcision takes place before the eighth day.*
3. *When it is safe to come together again and the family arranges a gathering of family and friends, we forgo the blessings for brit milah because it is not actually a circumcision that is taking place in these cases. Its substitute, hatafah, is neither a biblical nor a Rabbinic commandment; it is a custom beginning in the Middle Ages, and so it is not what the usual blessing describes when it describes the procedure as fulfilling a commandment, "asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav, v'tzivanu al ha-milah." When we are allowed to reconvene, though, and the parents, family, and friends gather to celebrate, the parents both may and should be encouraged to recite the blessing, "asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu l'hakhniso b'vrato shel avraham avinu" because they are indeed bringing him into the Covenant of Abraham through the rituals available to them during this pandemic. I would use the wine and its blessing, for we are celebrating the infant's birth; I would not say the blessings after circumcision about the procedure because in these circumstances we have not just done a brit milah; but then I would include the naming liturgy as usual.*