



Halakhic Questions

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Purim During the Coronavirus Pandemic

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Purim is a joyous festival: The coronavirus has caused us sadness and brought us to tears. Yet the Jewish people have celebrated Purim in even harder times than these, and it is the ability to celebrate Purim – amidst the tears, that helps us recognize that Hashem’s love for us continues in every place and in every situation. B’ezrat Hashem, we will celebrate Purim this year with extra joy, feel Hashem’s love for us throughout our history – and especially in our generation – and find the strength to cope better with the current reality and with our other challenges in life.

The full responsa for these different *halakhot* can be seen on the *Sulamot* website, and in the book “*Halakha MiMekora – Purim.*”

Parashat Zakhor

What should a person do if they are in isolation or have tested positive for coronavirus?

A person who is in isolation because they might have caught coronavirus **must follow the rules of the local health authorities** (for *pikuaḥ nefesh* reasons), and it is prohibited for them to go to shul to hear *Parashat Zakhor*. In such a case, this is the order of preference for how one should behave:

- **One should read *Parashat Zakhor*** (during Shabbat) **from a Ḥumash** (*Kaf HaḤayim* 685:35, *Mishna Berura*, *Seif Katan* 17). One can read even without the trop (cantillation).
- Additionally, if possible, **one should hear the leining of “*VaYavo Amalek*”** during the day of Purim (*Ma-gen Avraham* 685). And if one will not be in shul, try and hear it over **Zoom**.
- Similarly, when it comes to the *Maftir* of *Parashat Ki Tetzei*, **one should intend then to fulfil their obligation of reading *Parashat Zakhor*** (based on the *Ḥatam Sofer*, *Even HaEzer* 1:119). Because of our current communal situation, it is appropriate that on the coming Shabbat *Parashat Ki Tetzei*, the Rabbi should announce that anyone who wasn’t able to hear *Parashat Zakhor* with a minyan before Purim should intend to fulfil their obligation now.

An entire community that is not able to read *Parashat Zakhor* on Shabbat

- If they were not able to read *Parashat Zakhor* between *Shaḥarit* and *Musaf*, **they should read it after *Musaf*.**
- If they were unable to read it after *Musaf*, **they should read it after *Minḥa*.**
- If they did not read it at all, **they can read it the following Shabbat or any Shabbat during the month of *Adar***, but without a *berakha*. (*Responsa Mishnat Yosef* 13, 234, see *Ḥazon Ovadia* on Purim, page 24.)

Reading the Megilla

A person who is in isolation or who is sick with coronavirus is prohibited from leaving their house. Therefore, they must not come to hear the public reading of the Megilla, even if this means they will be unable to hear the Megilla at all!

What should one do if they cannot come to shul?

The ideal is that one should read the Megilla with the community, due to the principle of publicizing the miracle, but one can read the Megilla privately with a *berakha* (*Shulḥan Arukh Oraḥ Ḥayim* 690:18). However, one who reads the Megilla without a *minyan* does not say the final *berakha* of "*HaRav et Riveinu*" (*Rema, Oraḥ Ḥayim* 692:1). One can and should say the *berakha* without Hashem's name (*Kaf HaḤayim Seif Katan* 124).

Hearing the Megilla read in another room

One can hear the Megilla through a closed door.

Hearing a recording of the Megilla

One can hear a recording of the Megilla, and read along audibly to oneself with a Megilla scroll, and fulfil one's obligation that way. (One can also place a transparent slide with the cantillation on it over a kosher Megilla to be able to read along.)

Spreading out the Megilla

There is a beautification of the *mitzva* to spread out the entire scroll before reading it, but one is not obliged to do so. (See *Shaar HaTzion* 690:50, *Kaf HaḤayim* 690:104.)

One who does not have a kosher Megilla

If one cannot hear the Megilla from someone else: For this year, they are fulfilling their *mitzva* by not hearing the Megilla and not endangering the community. **It is appropriate to read from a printed Megilla without a *berakha*** (*Oraḥ Ḥayim* 691:10).

Should one make the *Al HaNissim* and *Sheheḥiyanu berakhot*? The *poskim* debate this, and in practice, one should not make the *berakha* if he does not have a kosher Megilla (*Igrot Moshe, Oraḥ Ḥayim* 5:20:2, *Yabia Omer, Oraḥ Ḥayim* 42:2).

Should one say Hallel? Based on the *Meiri (Megilla* 14a), it appears one should say Hallel, as the Megilla is a replacement for Hallel. In practice, if one does not have a Megilla and has no way of fulfilling his obligation as described above, there is no obligation to recite Hallel, but it is an appropriate thing to do, but without a *berakha* (*Yabia Omer* 9, *Oraḥ Ḥayim* 68).

Eating before the Megilla if one is unable to read it in the morning

If the Megilla reading is pushed off (particularly in the evening after the fast, but also in the morning), one can eat a snack (bread or *mezonot* less than the size of an egg, or fruit and other snacks as usual) before Megilla, and set a reminder to read the Megilla. This can be a person to remind them, or a reminder on one's phone. If necessary, one can eat even a full meal, as long as there is a reminder.

Hearing the Megilla over Zoom

Ideally, one should hear the Megilla directly from the reader. If it is impossible to hear it directly, one can hear the Megilla over Zoom, but the listener should have a kosher Megilla and audibly read along with the reader. They should make the *berakha* themselves before reading, but not afterwards. If there is no other option, **one can fulfil their obligation by hearing the Megilla over Zoom**, even if the listener does not have their own Megilla.

Therefore, **it is good that shuls broadcast their Megilla reading on Zoom to members of the community**. If there is no such option, an individual can read for their friend on Zoom even without a *minyan* (and if the reader has already fulfilled his obligation, he should read it without the *berakhot*).

Reading the Megilla over a speaker system in an outdoor or balcony minyan

Ideally, one should read the Megilla without a microphone, but according to many *poskim* one can fulfil one's obligation over a microphone. Therefore, if necessary, one can read over a microphone because otherwise people will not hear the Megilla.

If possible, it is good that the reader should read the Megilla loud enough (or move the microphone a distance from his mouth) so that those who are close to him will be able to hear his reading without the microphone, and in this way those people are actually fulfilling their obligation in the ideal way. (One can also use other sound systems. See more on the *Sulamot* website.)

Mishloah Manot

Personal or family Mishloah Manot through an intermediary

- *Mishloah Manot* consists of giving two foods to one person. One can give *Mishloah Manot* through an intermediary (*Binyan Tzion* 54, *Mishna Berura* 695:18). Before Purim or on Purim itself one can give money to the intermediary to buy these foods, and on Purim itself the intermediary should give the foods. This is what someone who is in isolation should do.
- One can also call the intermediary, or place an order online, and make the payment online, for an intermediary to send food for Purim to another person. (One should pay before or on Purim.)
- In our current situation, it is best to give wrapped food rather than home-prepared foods for *Mishloah Manot* (abiding to the health guidelines in each place.)

Communal or group Mishloah Manot

In a situation when one cannot give *Mishloah Manot*, or if a community is worried about people giving *Mishloah Manot* to each other, one can fulfil the obligation this year by organizing a communal *Mishloah Manot*, under the following conditions: (based on *Hazon Ovadia, Purim* p.137, *Halikhot Shlomo, Adar* 19:15).

- Everyone participating must give an amount of money that is sufficient for two portions considered normal to give a guest.

- Any person who receives these *Mishloah Manot* should receive the equivalent of two portions each time they receive one of the *Mishloah Manot*.
- One can give the money before Purim but there should be a representative appointed on behalf of each of the donors.
- The *Mishloah Manot* should arrive on Purim itself.
- It is best that each of the donors designate to whom they are giving the halakhic obligation (two portions to one person) and that the rest is not to fulfill the obligation.

The fundamental idea of *Mishloah Manot* is to connect us all. One does not have to exaggerate with elaborate *Mishloah Manot*, but we should be trying to come together and encourage unity, as in the Megilla when Esther gathered all the Jews. That unity is the key to our redemption.

Mishloah Manot over the phone

Obviously, one cannot give *Mishloah Manot* on a phone call. But it is fitting and appropriate to uplift people's spirits on Purim over the phone. I recommend that in addition to the *Mishloah Manot* to one person, and *Matanot LaEvyonim* to two people, each person or family should think of three people or families to call on Purim to see how they are, and to uplift them, even in a small way.

Seudat Purim

Over the Purim *Seuda*, which is usually a family event, one must be careful not to be the cause of spreading the virus.

People in isolation: Celebrating on Purim is very important, but we learn from the *mitzvot* of Purim that we should not merely focus on our own joy but on the joy of others. Therefore, especially this Purim, we should think about those who are having a hard time: those who live alone, those in isolation, those who are sick with coronavirus, those whose family members are unwell, and those who have sadly lost a relative this year.

Our joy is only complete when we think about others and make them happy!

Matanot LaEvyonim

One who cannot give *Matanot LaEvyonim* on Purim

One who cannot give *Matanot LaEvyonim* on Purim, because they are in isolation or because they do not know poor people, should follow the following order of preference:

1. **Messenger on Purim:** One can give on Purim itself to a messenger, and that person will give the money to a poor person (*Arukh HaShulhan* 694:2).
2. **Giving to a messenger before Purim:** One can give the money to a *tzedaka* fund before Purim, and their representative will give the *matanot* to a poor person on Purim itself (*BeOhalo Shel Torah* 2:107, *Rav Elyashiv, Halikhot VeHanhagot* p. 22)
3. **Bank transfer:** It is questionable whether one can make a bank transfer on Purim (as this is only a record held by the bank, but a check is considered like cash that can be given as *Matanot LaEvyonim*.) In practice, since a poor person can receive the money and use it, one can be lenient with this (see *Shevet HaLevi* 11:167, *Responso Minchat Asher* 109–110). Ideally, it is best to give it to two poor people in one of the first two ways (especially if they have an overdraft in their account). In our coronavirus situation, one can certainly be lenient to allow a bank transfer.

Giving through Paybox, Bit, Venmo and the like: One can give *Matanot LaEvyonim* through Paybox, Bit or Venmo and it seems this is even better than a bank transfer as the money goes straight to the poor person (even if they have an overdraft at the bank), and can be used instantly to buy food.

4. **Credit Card:** One cannot give *Matanot LaEvyonim* via credit card, because the money does not arrive on that day. There are organizations that give money to poor people on the day itself – that is worth at least a *peruta* – for every person who gives by credit card. If there are no other options, one can give via credit card, because the bank will allow him credit for the transfer (*Shevet HaLevi* ibid. 3).
5. **Another recipient on behalf of the poor person:** If it is impossible to give to a poor person on Purim or to a distributor before, one can give the money to any person on Purim with them intending to receive the money for a poor person, even though practically the money will only be given to the poor person after Purim. (And one should inform the poor person on Purim. Ideally, the above suggestions are all better than this.)
6. One who cannot do any of the above should set aside money on Purim and keep it until he finds a poor person to give it to (*Orehot Hayim, Megilla VePurim* 34, in the name of the *Maharam of Rotenburg, Shulhan Arukh* 694:4).