



# Beth Jacob Synagogue

AFFILIATED WITH THE UNITED SYNAGOGUE OF CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM

Founded 1886

375 Aberdeen Ave., Hamilton, Ontario, Canada L8P 2R7 Tel: 905.522.1351 Fax: 905.522.8410

יום רביעי, י"ח בסיון תש"פ.  
2020-06-10

HILLEL H. LAVERY-YISRAËLI  
Rabbi

SHIRA KATES  
Synagogue Manager

Officers:  
BRENDA BURJAW  
TED LAX  
DAN LEVY  
JEFF LEVY  
LORNE RICHTER

Directors:  
GARRY BARANKIN  
ELLIOT BIRO  
ABIGAIL CUKIER  
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JOHN LEVY  
PHILIP PRICE  
JAMIE RICHTER  
DAVID WALMAN

## An important statement on our reopening timeline from Rabbi Hillel Lavery-Yisraëli

”וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת חֻקֹּתַי וְאֶת מִשְׁפָּטַי, אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה אֹתָם הָאָדָם וְחַי בָּהֶם,  
אֲנִי ה'”

“Keep My statutes and laws, which are intended for people to observe and **live** by, I am God.” (Leviticus 18:5)

”וְחַי בָּהֶם – וְלֹא שְׂיָמוּת בָּהֶם.”  
“‘To live by’ – and not to die by.”  
(*Talmud, Sanhedrin 74a*)

”אִין לָךְ דְּבַר הָעוֹמֵד בְּפָנַי פְּקוּחַ נַפְשׁ.”  
“There is nothing [=no religious requirement] that stands in the way of saving a life.” (*Tosefta, Shabbat 16:14*)

Dear congregants,

The shock we experienced when the world suddenly went on lockdown in March is no less felt months later. Living in this surreal manner is extremely challenging for everyone. We all look forward to being able to meet in person once again, have social gatherings, share meals, sing and dance together and hug our friends.

On Monday, June 8, Premier Doug Ford announced that beginning Friday, June 12, places of worship are allowed to reopen at 30% of the building's capacity.

Well before receiving this news I had been researching safe opening practices and observing those being done in other parts of the world. Since reading Premier Ford's declaration I have had phone conversations



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Rabbi Hillel Lavery-Yisraeli  
הרב הלל חיים לברי-ישראל

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בית הכנסת בית-יעקב

Hamilton ON

and email correspondences with health experts – both members of our synagogue and of the broader Hamilton community, my rabbinic colleagues in Hamilton and other rabbis elsewhere in Ontario, the mayor of Hamilton, the Chief Medical Officer of Health, Dr. Elizabeth Richardson, and Public Health Inspector for the City of Hamilton, Latchman Nandu. All have been very helpful in providing reliable information. The following is based on that information and their recommendations, as Jewish Law requires us to make important health decisions based primarily on the advice of experts in the relevant field.

Despite Premier Ford's announcement, Beth Jacob's building will remain closed at least until the end of August. Beth Jacob, as a spiritual community, remains active, and we will continue to provide support and programming through online channels and will continue to expand these efforts.

Reopening now would be a violation of Jewish values and *Halakha* (Jewish Law), which positions health, safety and life above all else. In these conversations with the medical experts I was made to understand that the relaxation of restrictions at this time is not the result of data indicating that the risk of contagion has lessened, but merely an assessment that we have adequate hospital capacity, ventilators and other equipment to treat the people who will inevitably become infected due to reopening, and therefore the number of deaths which we can expect as a result will be under the 'acceptable' threshold from their point-of-view.

Jewishly, we are not permitted to knowingly expose people to even small chances of serious risks to their health even if we can assume that they will be healed if they do get ill. For example, tradition teaches us that in order to prevent infection, we must purposely desecrate *Shabbat* and *Yom Kippur* and delay *Brit Milah*, even when antibiotics are readily available. Reopening under the current situation would be a serious violation of a very fundamental Jewish law.

We must bear in mind that the majority of our membership falls in the high-risk category. Many people who might attend should we reopen would be endangering their very lives by doing so. While we respect all people's rights to govern their own conduct as they see fit, as a Jewish institution we cannot be even indirectly responsible for such an outcome.

Furthermore, upon analysis of the protocols and guidelines being presented to religious institutions to allow for 'safe' reopening, we must be aware of the restrictions which would have to be imposed: We would need to ban singing, moving out of one's seat to walk around the sanctuary during services and socializing after services. We would not be able to allow congregants to approach the *Bimah* or the Torah. Books, *kippot* and *tallitot* would have to be brought from home. We would have to mandate mask wearing at all times, pre-registration, temperature checks upon entrance, and more. All these would make our synagogue experience unrecognizable and likely unpleasant, and the financial burden it would impose upon our synagogue would also likely be unmanageable.

For all these reasons, Beth Jacob's building will remain closed (although it is constantly patrolled for security purposes), and we will continue with our new reality of distance-synagogue for the foreseeable future. Decisions about the High Holidays have yet to be made, but they will be made with the same approach of placing the preservation of our



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members' health above all else. We ask for your ongoing understanding and patience, and that you all continue to be extremely careful and vigilant, following all the experts' health and safety recommendations **religiously**, to preserve your health and the health of all those around you. And at the same time, increase safe, permissible acts of caring for one another through frequent phone calls and online chatting, and attending our Zoom services and events.

While our public ceremonies must temporarily decrease, our private, home spirituality must increase. This is your golden opportunity to learn that Jewish skill you have always wished to have. If you would like a refresher or personalized crash-course on how to observe any of our rituals at home with your families please email or call me today ([r.hillel@bethjacobsynagogue.ca](mailto:r.hillel@bethjacobsynagogue.ca), 905.966.0960). If you seek spiritual guidance or just need to talk, do not hesitate to reach out to me. No issue is too insignificant; I am here for you.

**Lab'ri'ut!** To health!

**L'chaim!** To life!

**Rabbi Hillel Lavery-Yisraeli**

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Hamilton, ON, Canada

[r.hillel@bethjacobsynagogue.ca](mailto:r.hillel@bethjacobsynagogue.ca)

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