

SYNAGOGUE FOOD SAFETY AND CORONAVIRUS

**Prepared for the Synagogue Council of Massachusetts 3/4/2020 by
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This is intended as a guidance for synagogues to answer questions and suggest good public health protocols based on current information from the CDC, WHO and MA Department of Public Health. As new information emerges about covid-19 or anything specific to your synagogue, membership or local community the response may need to be adjusted. In general, the recommendations are good public health for all year long. The emphasis in this document is on food safety and safe food service.

Other recommendations for general public health management in the synagogue are for the Rabbi, Board and Executive Director to determine. They may include:

- 1. Have an adequate number of pump hand sanitizers throughout the building, sanctuary and kiddush room**
- 2. Consider no kissing of the Torah during processions**
- 3. No shaking hands while getting aliyot or marching with the Torah**
- 4. Ask members to stay home if they do not feel well or are actively sick (sneezing, coughing, diarrhea, vomiting, fever)**
- 5. If your synagogue relies on an HVAC system for heating and cooling, consider having a professional service the system. In particular, assess/change the filters and adjust the fresh air mix into the system. See the NYT link: <https://nyti.ms/2wqR80o>**

INTRODUCTION

We currently know that one significant way coronavirus spreads from person to person is from tiny airborne droplets produced when a sick person eats, talks, coughs or sneezes. Therefore, foods exposed to airborne droplets (sneezes, coughs, touching, speaking or other actions) are potential and significant sources for coronavirus to contaminate food.

Why is this important at kiddush, a Purim seudah or other synagogue functions? Quite often the kiddush is self-service buffet style in a crowded room with little or no supervision. I have watched many times during kiddush and observed events that make me cringe, such as:

- A child stands at the kiddush table and her mouth is directly level at the table and the uncovered food is on the table. The child sneezes directly on the food. She then puts her hands in the platter of bagels, takes a partially sliced bagel, pulls it apart with her bare hands and then puts half back for someone else to take. The child has contaminated the food by sneezing and, very likely, by hands that were not washed. I do not know, but suspect, those hands were in places and touching things that most people would not want on a bagel.
- A picky eater is standing in line holding a paper plate waiting for a turn to take some food. He looks at a small tray of food, takes a piece of the food and brings it to his nose for a smell test. He decides that it does not have an attractive smell and returns it to the tray. Again, someone else will eat the food along with what was in the person's nose.
- A kitchen volunteer regularly wears gloves in the kitchen. As she was preparing egg salad, she took a taste of the egg salad, decided it needed more spices and then tastes it

again. She never took off her gloves when she did the tastings and used the same disposable spoon for both tastings. She then proceeded to use a dirty rag to wipe a spill and proceeded to keep the same gloves on when she returned to the egg salad preparation. There were multiple opportunities for the egg salad to be contaminated.

- A kitchen volunteer is wearing disposable gloves. While removing the lid on a hummos container the lid falls to the floor. The volunteer reaches to pick up the hummos lid off the floor and throws it away in the large trash receptacle. He then resumes opening containers and prepping kiddush (without changing gloves and washing hands).

Preparing and serving foods in a synagogue kitchen for a kiddush or other event is not like working in your home kitchen. There are many more moving pieces in a synagogue kitchen – volunteers who may not be familiar with the kitchen working at multiple tasks, many people to serve, larger quantities of foods, a greater variety of foods, special requests (gluten free, no nuts), a tight deadline to finish preparing and serve in a short period of time. Some of the people eating the kiddush are elderly, very young, pregnant or have a medical condition that results in a compromised immune system. They all may be more vulnerable to illness, such as the coronavirus, which can be spread by contaminated foods. Yet, everyone expects that the food will be safe. Finally, there are more people with different training, experiences and ideas as to what is appropriate and safe food preparation all trying to work together in an often crowded kitchen.

If you serve only foods that are prepared and delivered from a caterer, you have less to be concerned about in the kitchen. If the kiddush is self-service in a crowded and hectic room, take the time to stand in an inconspicuous spot near the food table and watch. Your observations will help you identify food safety challenges and possible solutions.

GOALS OF THIS DOCUMENT

The areas of critical concern regarding a synagogue kitchen and food service include:

1. Food preparation – the kitchen:
 - a. Does the food come from an outside caterer?
 - b. Are you preparing any foods such as tuna fish or egg salad?
 - c. Are you cutting or slicing foods such as salads or bagels?
 - d. Who works in the kitchen?
2. Food service – the kiddush:
 - a. Is the kiddush self-serve?
 - b. Are the foods displayed in a buffet style?
 - c. Are the foods served to the congregants?
 - d. After the food has been on the table for the kiddush, do you return the displayed food, repackage it, return it to the refrigerator and serve for another function or kiddush?

As you read these suggestions, think about your kitchen, food handling procedures, training, volunteers and display/service of foods. Watch people stand in line and take the food displayed on the tables. Every synagogue's kitchen and service is unique but there are common practices you can adopt to help provide a safer environment for the congregants.

Most kitchens and food programs are volunteer run and the volunteers have varied training and experience with food safety. Many synagogue kitchens are not licensed by the local Board of Health and, therefore, are not subject to outside inspections or review for food safety practices and compliance. In addition, many volunteers do not receive training in food safety.

This will provide suggestions to limit or reduce the possible transmission of pathogens including Corvid-19.

VOLUNTEERS AND STAFF

- Only trained volunteers and staff should have access to the kitchen.
- No children should be allowed in the kitchen – no exceptions! Children should NOT help set up kiddush or assist with food prep.
- No one who is sick – vomiting, diarrhea, coughing, sneezing or has been diagnosed by a health care provider with certain communicable illnesses – should prepare or serve foods nor enter the kitchen area. Anyone who appears to have a runny nose, cough or is sneezing should be gently asked to leave the kiddush rotation.
- It is strongly recommended that kitchen staff and volunteers wear freshly laundered aprons or other garments to cover street clothes.
 - The aprons or other garments should never be worn outside of the kitchen.
 - The aprons or other garments should be laundered after every use.

ENTERING THE KITCHEN

The most important and easiest practice to limit and reduce the spread of viruses is handwashing! Handwashing is the single most important and easiest thing you can do to prevent getting sick and spreading the virus. This is more important than wearing gloves.

Set a good example to the volunteers and staff. When you enter the kitchen first wash your hands and this sets an expectation that others should follow your example. **Use the designated handwash sink in the kitchen. Make sure that the sink is accessible, a soap dispenser is attached to the wall and a paper towel dispenser is also attached to the wall.** Post a sign at the sink showing the proper method of handwashing. SCM is providing sample handwashing signs you can print and laminate.

- When entering the kitchen go **IMMEDIATELY** to the designated handwash sink and wash your hands for at least 20 seconds (soap and warm water), dry your hands with disposable towels and discard the towels in a trash receptacle located next to the sink.
- After washing hands you then put on disposable gloves if preparing foods that are ready to eat and will not be cooked. If handling foods that will be cooked there is no need to wear gloves.

INSIDE THE KITCHEN

- Always **CHANGE** gloves if you are changing food preparation or other activities such as handling foods that will be cooked and then handling non-cooked foods OR you leave the kitchen to go to the bathroom. Or you leave the kitchen to bring food to the kiddush table and then return to do more prep.
- **NEVER** eat or taste foods in the kitchen – that is a very easy way to contaminate hands or gloves and droplets from your mouth will likely settle on the foods being prepared.

- Keep the kitchen free of all items that are not related to food preparation or service (purses, backpacks, books, briefcases, tallis bags).
 - Store your coats and other personal items outside the kitchen.
 - Do not enter the kitchen wearing or carrying a tallit.
 - Remove other items from the kitchen such as flowers, discarded/unused equipment or non-food related supplies.
 - This will allow you to work in an uncluttered and clean space – it is safer, with fewer accidents and easier to keep clean.
- It is strongly suggested that you use a sanitizer spray or mixture to regularly wipe the food preparation counters. Preparation of the sanitizer mix will be included with this document.
- It is best to use disposable items and equipment as much as possible – this eliminates the need to clean and sanitize reusable items and reduces the possibility of contamination.

KIDDUSH AND SIMILAR EVENTS:

Watch how people handle food during a kiddush and make appropriate changes for display and handling based upon your observations. Consider the following:

- Use as many single-service items as possible, even though it generates more recycling and many are opposed to the perceived wastefulness of single serve items (ie. Single serve beverages, single serve snacks):
 - Cream cheeses
 - Hummos
 - Beverages
 - Individually wrapped cheeses (ie. cheese sticks)
 - Fruits that come with their own wrapping – bananas, clementines.
 - Prepare individual sized servings in the kitchen – individual bowls of herring, spreads, candies. Having large bowls of veggie straws, pretzels or M & M's invites people to stick their hands in the bowl and contaminates all the food.
 - Providing serving spoons or utensils without supervision does not effectively reduce contamination.
 - Consider having servers at the kiddush tables so that congregants do not have to serve themselves.
 - Consider setting or placing the bulk foods on tables at the sides of the room and servers stand between the congregants and the food. This is a variation of cafeteria style or bakery where the server and food is behind a glass barrier and not exposed to airborne droplets or other contamination from the public. The server accepts the request and serves the food, and the table acts as a barrier to the congregants in the buffet line.
 - Consider changing your menu so that the foods are easier to prepare and serve.

Kiddush is typically buffet or self-serve.

- Consider methods to serve foods that **limit or prohibit the handling of foods** by congregants.
- **Challah** - Many congregations have a custom to rip the communal challah. Instead serve pre-cut slices or after the blessing, have one person (hands washed and wearing gloves) slice the challah and serve.

- Examples - all bagels should be pre-sliced all the way through so no ripping the halves apart is required.
- Example of a very simple change in food service - very often plastic ware (knives, spoons and forks) are not pre-packaged and are displayed either on plates or haphazardly in cups/dispensers. If not pre-wrapped the business end of the utensil should be displayed business end down. In other words, when a person takes the plastic utensil, the person will handle the part of the utensil one holds but not the end that touches food. This will help eliminate the possibility of contaminating the business end of the utensil.
- Have 1 person serving coffee or ask them to use a tissue/napkin to touch the toggle to dispense coffee or hot water
- Minimize serving pieces like water pitchers or large bottles of soda that will be repeatedly touched, or use single portion water and soda or juice boxes.
- **NEVER** bring food that has been served back into the kitchen. All leftovers should be thrown away in the room they were served and not returned to the kitchen, packaged for leftovers or placed back into the refrigerator.
- Do not consolidate foods that are left on the buffet, self-serve tables.
- **DISCARD** all foods that have been left open on the buffet, self-serve tables.

OPTIONAL - SANITIZING AND THE THREE-COMPARTMENT SINK

The proper use of a three-compartment sink is the among the most effective methods of eliminating viruses on food contact surfaces, utensils, platters, plates and similar items. Please consider using the three-compartment sink. It is easy once it becomes an established part of your kitchen routine.

Many synagogue kitchens are equipped with a three-compartment sink. If you are using any equipment (platters, plates, utensils, serving pieces) that require cleaning and reuse, the appropriate use of the three-compartment sink is strongly suggested and encouraged. It will significantly help in reducing the spread of disease. The following procedures describes the proper use of the three-compartment sink. Using the sink in the following manner will kill viruses by using these five steps:

1. **SCRAPE** foods and other items off of plates, platters and utensils into a trash receptacle.
2. **WASH** the items in the first compartment.
3. **RINSE** the items in clean water in the second compartment.
4. **SANITIZE** the items in a sanitizer in the third compartment.
5. **AIR DRY** the items in a drying rack. **DO NOT** clean the items with towels or on your apron.

Note that using a dish detergent, such as those that are available in the local supermarket, will not sanitize food contact surfaces or dishes, platters and utensils.

SANITIZING SOLUTION

There are three types of approved methods to sanitize by chemical. The easiest and least expensive sanitizing solution is a bleach solution as follows:

- You must dilute the bleach – pure bleach is hazardous and may also contaminate the equipment you are trying to sanitize.
- One (1) teaspoon of unscented household bleach per gallon of water – do not estimate the amounts – Measure the water by gallon (or place a mark/tape in the third sink compartment at a particular gallon amount) and add 1 teaspoon of unscented bleach per gallon of water.
- The water temperature for the sanitizing solution should be approximately 75°F.
- Use test strips to periodically test the strength of the sanitizing solution.
- Change the solution if the water becomes dirty.

Hot water:

- Water must be between 171°F and 190°F to sanitize food contact items – utensils, dishes, platters, etc.
- Note that at these temperatures 1st, 2nd and 3rd degree burns will occur in less than one second. It is not recommended to sanitize with hot water unless it is by a dishwashing machine.

Dishwashing machines:

- Determine by what method the dishwashing machine sanitizes. It may be by chemical or heat.
- Most dishwashing machines need constant maintenance and/or service.
- Review the operating specifications for your particular machine and test to ensure that it is operating properly.

CONCLUSION

It is not possible to eliminate all sources of food contamination. However, these practices can help to significantly reduce the exposure to pathogens. In addition, establishing good food safety practices will enhance food service and preparation for this emergency and beyond.

REFERENCES AND HELPFUL MATERIAL

Attached to this guidance are some helpful references and guides. As everyone is aware, it is very easy to find inaccurate or wrong information on the internet – the best sources are from government websites such as the FDA, CDC, and local Boards of Health/state health departments.

For those who like to read regulations and review source material, I have also included the entire Massachusetts Food Code (which includes the Federal Food Code and Annex).