

## **To Sing or Not to Sing in a Time of COVID-19 (revised February 2021)**

*Prepared by Cantor [Steven Weiss](#) - Cantor and Director of Education at Congregation Sha'aray Shalom in Hingham, Immediate Past President of the American Conference of Cantors  
Edited by Rachel Roth, [American Conference of Cantors](#) COO*

There is risk associated with everything that we do. Congregational professionals and lay leaders need to assess the potential risk of in person communal worship – focusing parts of worship that are of a higher risk. When making decisions regarding worship, lay leaders and professionals MUST use their own state, and local regulations. The following guidance regarding singing and music are general recommendations. Please consult with your local boards of health for specific guidelines for your location.

### **“Let everything that breathes praise God.... Hallelujah” -psalm 150**

As synagogues of all sizes and types plan for resuming worship in public spaces, professional and lay leaders must weigh the risks associated with singing and playing certain types of instruments in a confined space. Music is integral to Jewish worship and it is difficult to imagine prayer without it. David played in the time that the Temple stood. So, even in this challenging time must find a way to include music in our synagogue experiences.

What do we know about the Covid-19 Virus? The virus spreads mainly person to person:

- Between people who are closer than 6 feet
- Through respiratory droplets when an infected person coughs, sneezes talks or sings
- Droplets land in mouths or noses of people in close proximity
- Contact with surfaces where droplets have “landed”
- Even if you don’t feel sick, you can still spread the COVID-19 virus to family, friends, and the community.
- Do NOT be around others if you have been exposed to someone with COVID-19, if you are sick, or if you have tested positive for COVID-19.

The following are things to consider when planning for worship inside a sanctuary:

### **Building Ventilation impacts the potential spread of the virus**

- You need to know your HVAC system and take steps to mitigate possible spread by its use.
- Increase the level of the air filter to MERV 13 or higher on recirculated air
- Inspect filters to make sure they are installed and fit correctly
- Check that sufficient airflow can be maintained across the filter
- Maintain and change filters based on manufacturer’s recommendation
- Verify ventilation and filtration performance
- Verify through commissioning and testing
- Work with an expert to evaluate building systems, ventilation, filtration, and air cleaning
- Measure carbon dioxide (CO2) as a proxy for ventilation

## **Solo and Choral Singing:**

Researchers are still unsure if vaccinated individuals can still spread the virus. Studies are being conducted now and therefore; we must assume that the same principles of spreading apply.

- Speaking produces about 10x more aerosols and singing about 60x more than breathing which produces only a small number of aerosols.
- Volume matters. The number of aerosols generated when public speaking or singing is impacted by how loud the speech or singing is. The louder the speaking or singing, the more aerosols are produced and the further they appear to travel. There are additional studies that suggest that the aerosols produced can stay suspended in the air for long periods of time.
- Face coverings, while required, may not completely prevent spread of the virus by the person speaking or singing.
- If we are going to have a single person singing, they should be wearing a high-efficiency masks, make sure there is a greater distance from those in the congregation, and adjust mechanical systems to bring in extra amounts of outdoor air which is also filtered.
- Recognizing that there is deep emotional pain associated with the loss of choral singing, until such a time as better treatments or a vaccine is available for the treatment of COVID-19, all experts agree that **choral singing in indoor spaces should not occur**. The level of risk associated with placing choir members in close vicinity with the number of aerosols being released is too high a risk for congregations to bear.

## **Communal Singing**

Communal singing is equally important in Jewish worship. The role of the *Kahal* cannot be underestimated and yet, at the same time, the risks are just as great as that of organized choir singing. **Communal in-person singing should be discouraged**. If services are occurring outdoors and significant social distancing can be achieved, the risk of transmission is lessened but not eliminated. It is recommended to not directionally face each other and maintain distance to at least 10' between anyone singing.

## **What about humming?**

The impact of humming is not yet fully known. It is likely that loud humming may have the same effect as choral singing. However, soft humming with a face covering might be an acceptable risk.

“Singing together in congregations is a practice that we love dearly and are eager to promote, but loving our neighbor is job one here and so the fine for fasting from this wonderful practice may be longer than any of us would like.”  
Rev. John Witvliet – expert on Worship

## **Can a Cantor or Soloist sing safely with an accompanist in the same room at the same time?**

While there is still risk associated with any type of indoor singing, there are steps one can take to mitigate the risk.

- Have the accompanist wear a form fitting (N95 or other type) of mask
- Place the Cantor/Soloist in a well-ventilated room. If it is possible to open doors and windows to add ventilation, that would be optimal
- Consider placing the accompanist as far away from the Cantor/Soloist as possible
- As soon as the singing is completed all parties should leave the room

### **Can there be any other individuals in the room?**

The answer to that questions depends on the size of the room that you are in. If you are in a small chapel and it is not possible to have at least 20-30 feet in all directions separating the cantor/soloist from the Rabbi or other service leader, then it should NOT be done. If the room is large and a significant amount of space can be created between the person who is singing and others, then it may be possible. Again, if the other parties in the room wear masks and other protective devices are used such as plexiglass shields, this can further decrease the risk. Consult with local officials for specific guidelines of what you can do to mitigate risk in your space.

### **What can we do about music?**

(URJ Congregations)

Each congregation will determine the delivery of their worship services. If your worship is virtual, you may consider using prepared liturgical pieces of music created by members of the American Conference of Cantors and Guild of Temple Musicians which will be released for use by the community.

Virtual choirs are exceedingly difficult, and time consuming to put together and should only be considered if the time, ability and financial considerations allow.

Should your congregation determine that in person worship is safe, you should follow your local and state guidelines when planning those services. We have included additional resources below.

### **Articles and Resources:**

- [CDC gathering guidelines as of February 19, 2021](#)
- <https://millennialpastor.ca/2020/05/26/so-your-church-is-opening-up-after-covid-19-closures-it-wont-be-what-you-are-hoping-for/>
- [https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/09/arts/music/choirs-singing-coronavirus-safe.html?referringSource=articleShare&fbclid=IwAR30AF4hfikt4J9a2QTkeGx\\_GcbSnSCykX5c79VCAx73ikh-Gq37hDzDxCM](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/09/arts/music/choirs-singing-coronavirus-safe.html?referringSource=articleShare&fbclid=IwAR30AF4hfikt4J9a2QTkeGx_GcbSnSCykX5c79VCAx73ikh-Gq37hDzDxCM)
- <https://focus.masseyeandear.org/is-singing-in-a-choir-safe-during-covid-19-a-voice-expert-explains-the-risk/>
- <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2020/06/choir-practice-during-pandemic/612868/>
- <https://www.inquirer.com/arts/choir-coronavirus-covid-19-cdc-report-philadelphia-mother-bethel-the-crossing-reaction-20200517.html>
- <https://www.emoryhealthcare.org/centers-programs/voice-center/covid-updates-choral-singers.pdf>
- <https://www.oca.org/reflections/misc-authors/what-covid-19-means-for-singing-in-church>
- CDC Studies: <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6919e6.htm>