

WORLD

Israel Girds for Covid-19 Disruptions to Jewish Holidays

Religious leaders and business owners in Israel are rushing to prepare for an expected three-week shutdown that is set to upend the Jewish holidays, as health workers brace for a new wave of Covid-19 infections.



By Felicia Schwartz and Dov Lieber

TEL AVIV—Religious leaders and business owners in Israel are rushing to prepare for a second nationwide lockdown that is set to upend the Jewish holidays, as health workers brace for a new wave of Covid-19 infections.

The lockdown—which is expected to last through Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur and Sukkot—is in response to Israel dealing with one of the worst daily coronavirus-infection rates per capita in the world. New cases are

hovering at more than 3,000 a day. Some health officials warn Israel’s hospitals could be overwhelmed during the coming flu season.

“If something will not be done very quickly, we will have to use extreme scenarios,” said Dr. Michael Halberthal, the general director and chief executive of Rambam Hospital in Haifa. “We will have to obviously

stop some of the care that we are giving to the non-Covid-19 patients in the hospital.”

Israel’s high-holiday season is usually one where large families congregate together and synagogues are often filled with hundreds to thousands of people. Concerns about the new coronavirus that causes Covid-19 are dramatically altering this year’s prayers, where gatherings will be confined to smaller groups in improvised settings.

Rabbi Shimon Rabinowitz, an official in the ultra-Orthodox town Kfar Chabad, said his town usually has 10 different congregations that gather in synagogues for the Rosh Hashana holiday for nearly daylong services. This year, he is preparing for 100 microcongregations, to conform to social-distancing regulations.

To do this, Mr. Rabinowitz plans to set up 40 tents and convert the town’s kindergartens into prayer areas. He said 50 people were trained on how to blow the traditional ram’s horn, or shofar, a key part of the services. Musical discs were distributed to help train novices on how to conduct the special prayers usually led by paid professionals.

His town has also made 40 tiny wooden arks to house Torah scrolls. “It’s going to be an interesting holiday,” Mr. Rabinowitz said.

In the current climate, some services won’t proceed.

Jerusalem’s Great Synagogue, renowned for its rare use of a choir, will close its doors for the first time since opening in 1958. “An important factor in this decision is the lack of knowledge, the confusion, and the debates between experts and the changes in regulations,” the synagogue wrote in a letter to its congregants.

In Bnei Brak, a major ultra-Orthodox center, synagogue employees used nylon drapes to section off synagogue areas to allow groups of 10 people to isolate themselves from one another.

The expected three-week shutdown is likely to deal a significant blow to many business owners who haven’t recovered from the first lockdown, which began in mid-March. All of the initial shutdown’s restrictions were lifted by mid-May.

Natan Galkowycz, 68 years old, owner of the Brazilian

cuisine restaurant Mides, located in a small farming village in Israel's south, said he will have to close his business for the whole three weeks because he doesn't have the necessary infrastructure to offer deliveries. The first closure in April cost him about \$35,000, and he received a little over \$4,000 in compensation from the government. He expects to lose \$29,000 during this closure.

"Every business is paying a price. I'm no different and I'm paying a high price," Mr. Galkowycz said. "I hope I can survive," he said.

Under the lockdown regulations, restaurants must be closed but can still deliver. Bars, hotels, gyms and entertainment and cultural sites will remain shut. Private companies can stay open if they don't receive the public, so some people will continue to commute to work. People must stay within about one-third of a mile of their homes unless shopping for essential goods or seeking essential services.

Some Israelis say they are hoping to apply lessons learned from the previous lockdown.

Shira Tober, 33, who works at an education-technology company, said she has already started to map various walking routes from her house that comply with the government's 500-meter directive, particularly after she struggled with her work-life balance the first time around.

"I'm going to need to find creative ways to make sure that I can get sunshine, so that I can feel a little bit active," she said. "I know if I am just confined to my home it can lead to a downward spiral." Corrections & Amplifications Mr. Rabinowitz has plans to set up forty tents and convert the town's kindergartens into prayer areas. An earlier version of this article incorrectly gave his name as Mr. Reichman. (Corrected on Sept. 15, 2020)

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