Attending Synagogue When Sick; Dealing with Recalcitrants; Synagogue Kiddush--Rabbi Marc Angel Replies to Questions from the Jewish Press

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Is it Proper for a person with a bad cold (or virus) to daven with a minyan?

Let’s begin with several related questions. Is it generally proper for someone to act in a way that is detrimental to his/her health? Is it proper for someone with an infectious disease to knowingly come into contact with people thereby endangering their health?

“Venishmartem me’od lenafshoteihem.” The Torah instructs us to preserve our health to the extent possible. We are not supposed to take irresponsible risks that undermine our physical wellbeing. If we are sick, we need to take care of ourselves. If we have bad colds, flus or covid we need to manage these illnesses properly and not do things that can worsen our condition.

Moreover, it is a basic moral responsibility to be concerned about the health of those near us. If we have an infectious disease, we should be as careful as possible not to transmit it to others.

If a person has a bad cold, flu or covid, should he daven with a minyan anyway? If he is a mourner who wants to say Kaddish with a minyan, should that override health concerns for himself and others?

If he is very sick, he should pray at home. Hashem surely understands the situation.

If, though, he feels well enough to attend a minyan, he should only do so in a manner that poses no threat to his health or the health of others. He should be masked. He should pray as far away as possible from others in the minyan. If he’s praying in a shul, he should sit off in a corner. He should not attend minyan in a crowded room.

Yes, one may feel a strong emotional, religious need to pray with a minyan. But health issues must take priority. Hashem knows what is in our hearts.

What is the proper thing to do when seeing someone who is mesurav l'din at a simcha, Jewish communal event, or some other place where you can't just leave?

If a person receives a summons to appear before a reputable beth din, it is halakhically mandatory to show up. But some people, for various reasons, choose to ignore the summons. They know that the beth din lacks governmental authority to force compliance.

The beth din system depends on the cooperation of the general community to bring pressure on recalcitrant individuals. If the mesurav l’din is made to feel as an outcast, this might prompt compliance with the beth din’s summons.

If the community wants an effective beth din system, then it needs to ensure that people comply with summonses issued by batei din. It needs to convince recalcitrant individuals by persuasion or through social ostracizing. It is generally best to avoid social contact with a mesurav l’din.

But it is important first to ascertain that the mesurav l’din is in fact acting irresponsibly. It may be that the person refuses to appear before a beth din, believing it to be biased or improperly staffed.

The problem is especially painful in cases involving a get, where one of the parties—usually the husband—refuses to appear before the beth din to effect a divorce. The recalcitrant party is not only guilty of disobeying the beth din, but is casting an ugly shadow on the entire halakhic system. People who use get-refusal to advance their own agendas are an embarrassment to our community and should be shunned to the extent possible until they comply.

What's the ideal and most appropriate format for kiddush--standing around, sitting at tables; lots of hot food, a few cold items?

Why do synagogues sponsor Kiddush after Shabbat morning services? Why don't people just come to pray and then go home to their own Shabbat lunch?

The basic answer is that Kiddush offers people the opportunity of socializing and gaining a sense of community. The Kiddush is an informal setting where congregants can renew old friendships and make new ones, where visitors can be welcomed, where the Shabbat spirit can be spread among old and young alike. It is an opportunity for those who live alone to celebrate Shabbat with a community.

How can the Kiddush accomplish these worthy goals? Each synagogue/minyan needs to do what makes most sense for their particular congregation. In some communities, Kiddush becomes a sit-down lunch…very nice, and often very expensive. In other shuls, the hope is for people to greet each other, take a bit of refreshment and then return home for their own Shabbat lunch.

Unfortunately, some people view the Kiddush as the most important feature of Shabbat morning at shul. They arrive at services as late as possible, and then hurry to fill their plates at the Kiddush. I've heard of people who actually call the local synagogues on Friday to see which shul provides the best food!

Shuls' budgets must realistically plan for the weekly cost of Kiddush. The search for weekly Kiddush sponsors can be burdensome. In larger congregations where hundreds of people attend services each Shabbat morning, the costs involved are not insignificant.

Each synagogue/shul/minyan should strive to provide Kiddush that is appropriate for its community. There is no single ideal Kiddush format that is ideal for every community.