NASCK

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF CHEVRA KADISHA

June 15, 2020

The following are guidelines and precautions necessary to protect chevra kadisha members from possible transmission of COVID-19 as they perform a tahara.

In light of the COVID-19 health crisis, and in response to questions from many *chevros kadisha*, NASCK is suggesting the following set of protocols be followed.

These protocols are based on the best available information from the **CDC** at this time. NASCK has also consulted with the **Office of the Chief Medical Examiner** in NYC and other infectious disease specialists including **Rabbi Dr Aaron Glatt**, Hospital Epidemiologist and Chief of the Department of Medicine at Mount Sinai South Nassau Community Hospital. Rabbi Dr Glatt also serves as the Associate Rabbi at Congregation Anshei Chesed and Assistant Rabbi at the Young Israel of Woodmere.

In addition, these protocols were also discussed with and approved by *rabbonim* and *poskim* across the spectrum of the *frum* community.

This information was last updated on March 25, 2020, and will be updated as required.

There are two distinct areas of concern with regard to possible transmission of COVID-19 during the tahara process:

a) Potential transmission **from the body itself**
(whether or not the person had tested positive for coronavirus)

b) Potential transmission **from the chevrah members** to each other because of the close proximity in which they perform a tahara

Page 2 of this document contains protocols that address the first area of concern.

Pages 3-4 contain protocols that address the second area.

PREVENTING TRANSMISSION FROM THE BODY OF THE *NIFTER/ES:*

1. Strictly follow the list of universal precautions recommended by the CDC and OSHA. These include use of:

- Disposable gloves (Nitrile or Latex are recommended)
- Full-length disposable gowns that cover the arms to the wrist
- Face masks. This is now mandatory. Any surgical mask is sufficient. People with glasses who may find that some masks fog their glasses, should find a mask that allows them to breathe without fogging.
- Face shields should be worn either attached to the mask or separately.
- Additional personal protection equipment (PPE) is optional, including booties and head covers. If one is wearing open shoes, foot covers (booties) are mandatory.

2. Add Clorox to the water used for the *rechitzah* (washing of the body). The mixture should be 1 part Clorox to 10-12 parts water. Lemon-scented bleach, if available, is easier to work with.

3. Prepare any supplies you might need for the tahara in advance. This includes Monsel's Solution in a cup, toothpicks, Q-tips, cotton towels, chucks, etc.

4. Discard all unused supplies that were present at the tahara. *Do not* put them back with your clean supplies.

5. Before opening the pouch or other body wrap, spray its entire length with sanitizer. We recommend using Dis-spray or a 1 to 10-12 part mixture of bleach and water. After opening the pouch, spray sanitizer liberally along the entire inside of the pouch, along the entire length of the body.

6. When pouring for the *rechitzah* and the tahara, pour gently in order to minimize any splashing. This also limits the smell of the Clorox.

7. Use of *tishah kabin* is strongly recommended instead of using a *mikvah*.

8. To prevent the possible escape of respiratory fluids from the mouth and nose of the *nifter/es,* pack the mouth and nose with Webril cotton towels for the entire tahara process. These should only be removed once the *nifter/es* has been placed in the *aron*.

9. Clean and sanitize all surfaces, including counter tops, doorknobs, spigots, etc, before leaving the tahara room. Clorox bleach is the preferred sanitizer.

10. Anyone who has any symptoms of any illness may not attend a tahara.

11. Make sure your funeral home and *chevra* are well-stocked with all necessary supplies.

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PREVENTING TRANSMISSION BETWEEN CHEVRA MEMBERS:

According to infectious disease professionals, *at the moment*, this concern is considered greater than concern about transmission from the body.

These protocols aim to accomplish two important goals:

- To **maintain as much social distancing** as possible during the tahara process.
- To **limit the amount of time** *chevra* members spend in close proximity to each other.

1. Limit the number of people attending a tahara to four. If at all possible, have one or two core groups of the same four men / four women doing all the *taharos* in the community during this time.

2. All Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) should be available in an open area outside the tahara room and easily accessible to the members of the chevra kadisha as they arrive. **Chevra members should don and remove their protective equipment at an appropriate distance from each other.** They should do so in different rooms or at a distance of at least six feet. This ensures that whenever they are in close contact, they are already fully protected.

3. Traveling to the funeral home is best done in separate cars.

4. Each *metaher/es* should work separately to set up and prepare for the tahara.

This includes:

- One person preparing the *aron.*
- One person filling the buckets of water. If you have enough buckets, the tahara water should be filled and set aside in a corner, or in the next room.
- One person setting up supplies.
- One person preparing the body by opening the pouch, checking for and removing nail polish, cleaning surface blood, packing the nose and mouth, etc.
- Two chevra members will have to work together to bring in the *meis.*

5. Once everything is ready, the *meis* should be completely removed from the wrapping (sheet, pouch, clothing, etc.) and the *rechitzah* can begin.

6. When a *meis* is relatively clean, the *rechitzah* should be expedited even if it will be more perfunctory, resembling a rinsing more than a full *rechitzah*.

- Follow the usual order of face, right side, etc.
- Any blood on the surface of the *meis* (torn skin, open puncture, etc.) should be cleaned and saved, and Monsel's Solution used to stop the flow.
- Foley catheters should be removed.
- Any mucus or fecal matter should be washed away.
- Feeding tubes should be knotted, and intra-venal tubes left in.
- Packing with Webril should be done when necessary, but **no internal cleansing should be done**.
- Tahara with *tishah kabin* and dressing in *tachrichim* should be performed as usual.

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PREVENTING TRANSMISSION BETWEEN CHEVRA MEMBERS:

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7. When the *meis* is not relatively clean and requires a lot of work, the *meis* should be placed in the *aron* and *tachrichim* laid out on top.

This includes the following cases:

- When an autopsy has been performed
- When there are extensive bedsores, surgical wounds, or bleeding
- Very heavy cases, especially with skin slippage, etc.

Of course, in all these cases, care should be taken to make sure the *aron* is protected from leaking.

8. Once the *meis* is in the *aron*, no more than two people should be working together, and cleaning of the room should begin (see #9 in previous section).

9. The goal is to work quickly, efficiently, and as separately as possible to minimize the time chevra members are in close proximity.

Your funeral director may require that additional guidelines or protocols be followed. If these practices affect the performance of basic tahara procedure and *kavod hameis,* you may want to discuss it with your rabbinic advisor or *posek*.

MESSAGE FROM RABBI ZOHN:

On a personal note, I must mention that these guidelines are very difficult for me to recommend and distribute. In so many ways, they contradict what I have taught for many years. However, the underlying basis of all we do is *Toras Emes* and *Minhag Yisroel*. Torah requires that we react to special times with special rules: עת לעשות לה' הפרו תורתיך (תהלים קיט:קכו)

I believe it is appropriate to feel pained that we are abbreviating procedures that give *kavod* to the *meis*, even though it has become necessary to do so. The feeling of distress on behalf of the *meis* is a form of *kavod hameis* on its own. Moreover, perhaps that pain will reduce the possibility that these temporary changes will decrease our sensitivity to the holy work we are privileged to perform.

In the *zechus* of our *chesed shel emes* and all the *tefilos* and *zechuyos* of *klal Yisroel*, may we merit the *rachamim* of the *Rofeh Ne'eman,* and the *geulah shleimah b'karov.*

With best wishes,
Rabbi Elchonon Zohn