

Yom Kippur in Times of Covid-19

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The Covid-19 pandemic throws a variety of challenges at all of us. I've received a few questions regarding whether those who have tested positive should fast on Yom Kippur. I refer you to your local rabbi for this, but let me make a few general points about this very serious issue. There are calls for using common sense in applying halakhah to this pandemic, but common sense has been in short supply, and it is not enough. We need well-informed sense to make appropriate halakhic decisions.

The most important issue to remember is that Covid-19 is a deadly disease. This applies even if most people recover from the disease, even so, anyone infected with a deadly disease is considered in a life-threatening situation (*No'am* vol. 6, 240-43.) The general halakhic principle is that those with a life-threatening disease do not fast on Yom Kippur if the fast might possibly make their condition worse.

The complexity arises regarding someone with a confirmed life-threatening disease who is experiencing light symptoms or no symptoms at the moment. The halakhah provides a means of fulfilling a modified fast by drinking less than a specified measure of liquid and eating less than a specified measure of food every nine minutes – this is called “drinking and eating less-than-the-measure.” I will give those measures at the end. The question is when to suspend the fast entirely and encourage someone to drink and eat fully as necessary to maintain health, versus when to apply the modified fast parameters. I follow the position of the Rambam, Rav Alfasi and the Ba'al Halakhot Gedolot, endorsed by the Brisker Rabbis, that someone infected with a life-threatening illness, no matter what the current level symptoms, should not use the modified fasting approach of “drinking and eating less-than-the-measure,” rather, they should eat as necessary to maintain hydration and health.

I see several halakhic authorities in Israel who recommend a tiered set of guidelines for those testing positive, depending on the set of symptoms that appear within a 5-10 day period. Among the most reasonable is from Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi David Lau. He says that:

- Patients with the illness who are in moderate or serious condition should not fast.
- Those with mild symptoms should not fast if they're within five days of the diagnosis.
- Those who have experienced mild symptoms but are not currently symptomatic, and are 5-10 days from the diagnosis, should eat in small portions (27 grams of food, 37 milliliters of drink) in nine-minute intervals. The same is true for recovered moderate or serious cases who were infected within the past three months.
- Those who are asymptomatic, and those who are in quarantine and do not have the virus, should fast.

While these guidelines are reasonable, they assume that the symptoms of Covid-19 a person experiences all show up within 5 to 10 days, and remain stable. Up-to-date studies have shown, however, that serious symptoms can show up after 10 days. Acute Respiratory Distress Syndrome, often fatal, sometimes does not show up until day 12-14. And the symptoms are not stable once they appear,

but can change and shift to various body systems, including respiratory, circulatory, digestive and nervous systems, and can persist for several months.

So with all due respect to the major halakhic authorities, I would suggest to exercise halakhic caution, following the approach of the Brisker Rabbis:

- Someone who has tested positive for Covid-19 within the last 2 weeks and is over 60 years old or has other serious medical conditions should not fast, and should drink and eat as needed to maintain hydration and basic energy level to protect health.
- Someone who is less than 60 years old and has tested positive and has experienced any of the documented symptoms of Covid-19 within two weeks of onset, should not to fast even by the modified “drinking and eating less-than-the-measure” method, but drink and eat as needed to maintain hydration and basic energy level to protect health.
- Someone who has tested positive but has had no symptoms at all after 10-14 days might try the modified fasting method, but if they sense any weakness at all should drink and eat as necessary to maintain hydration and energy.

Needless to say, but I'll say it, children under Bar Mitzvah and Bat Mitzvah age should not fast, not at all.

The method of modified fasting is to drink slightly less than a cheek-full of water or juice every 9 minutes. This is a relative measure, relative to the size of your mouth, so before Yom Kippur fill one cheek full with water and spit it into a cup and mark that measure – and drink slightly less than that amount every 9 minutes. Solid food is a fixed measure: eat less than 30 grams of solid food such as a hard-boiled egg or nutritional cookie every 9 minutes. This can be increased to 38 grams or 48 grams if you feel it is necessary. And you can eat this measure of food and drink the measure of drink together, one after the other, every 9 minutes.

A note on washing hands. Hand washing is one of the important protocols for protecting from the Covid-19 virus. Though washing hands on Yom Kippur is usually restricted to pouring water up to the knuckles on each hand, that applies only to washing for pleasure and does not apply to washing for hygiene. If you have been in possible contact with surfaces affected by the virus, vigorous washing with soap should be done even on Yom Kippur. See *Shulhan Arukh* 613:1.

May HaShem bring healing to all who are ill, and protection and understanding to all of us to follow the reasonable health and halakhic guidelines, and help us find effective treatments to remove this disease, and unify us all together in one common bond to do His Will with a full heart. May we all be sealed for Life.