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Coronavirus takes toll on religious life as rabbis advise against ritual kissing

Chief rabbi urges keeping lips off hands touching mezuzahs; European rabbinical group bans those feeling unwell from synagogue, even to recite the Kaddish prayer for the dead

By **STUART WINER**
Today, 5:15 pm | 1

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Illustrative: An ultra-Orthodox Jewish man kisses the mezuzah as he exits a synagogue in Jerusalem, August 5 2008. (Olivier Fitoussi /FLASH90)

Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Israel David Lau on Wednesday said Israelis should avoid touching and kissing mezuzahs affixed to doorframes, as religious figures took steps to avoid the spread of the novel coronavirus via





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Jewish rites.

At a time when “we are witnesses to the spread of a serious disease, there is no doubt that one should not kiss or touch the mezuzah at all,” Lau wrote in a statement. “It is enough for a person to think about it during his entering and exiting.”

Mezuzahs are slim casings containing Hebrew texts that are affixed to doorframes. There is a Jewish custom to touch the mezuzah when entering or leaving a room, and many also then kiss their fingers afterward.

Lau noted there is no direct commandment to kiss the mezuzah and that in the past the custom was only to touch the mezuzah rather than also kissing one’s fingers.

He did not issue any directive regarding kissing other religious objects, a common display of honor in Jewish tradition

There have so far been 15 confirmed cases in Israel of COVID-19, the disease caused by the new coronavirus, and Israel has taken wide-ranging steps to stem the virus from spreading. Thousands of Israelis have been instructed to self-quarantine at home for 14 days after they returned from trips to countries hit by the virus or potentially came in contact with those who have been diagnosed. On Wednesday, Israel expanded that list to include much of Western Europe.



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At a press conference announcing the rules, Health Minister Yaakov Litzman, who is ultra-Orthodox, said gatherings of more than 5,000 were to be banned and advised against shaking hands. He said the Western Wall, which has hosted mass prayers against the virus, would remain open.



Rabbi David Lau, chief Ashkenazi rabbi of Israel, lights Hanukkah candles in the Sejm, the lower house of Poland's Parliament, on Dec. 5, 2018. (Eli Mandelbaum via JTA)

Lau's instructions came as a major alliance of European rabbis advised congregants to avoid contact with each other or religious objects, and take extra precautions to maintain good hygiene.

Including among the recommendations from the Conference of European



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Rabbis was for those feeling sick to avoid visiting synagogues, even to say Kaddish, the traditional prayer for the dead that can only be recited when there is quorum of men gathered, usually in the synagogue.

Community members were also told to refrain from kissing religious items, such as Torah scrolls.

“It’s advisable not to kiss others, as well as communal *siddurim*, *talleisim*, *mezuzos* and *sifrei Torah*,” the CER wrote in a statement referring to prayer books, prayer shawls, mezuzahs, and Torah scrolls.

“Avoid shaking hands, if not necessary,” the statement advised, along with washing hands “especially after touching surfaces which have come into contact with large crowds.”



A rabbi arrives at a synagogue in Berlin to attend an event commemorating Kristallnacht, Nov. 9, 2018. (AP Photo/Markus Schreiber, file)





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“Put hand sanitizers in public places like entrances to shuls [synagogues], schools, halls etc. Make sure soap is available at hand washing stations.”

Some of the guidelines could have a more serious impact on some of the most sensitive aspects of Jewish tradition.

The European rabbis encouraged increased religious practice as a way to combat spread of the virus.

“At these times, we cannot underestimate the importance of washing hands on all occasions prescribed by halacha,” the statement said referring to a method of washing hands with water poured from a cup that is used before performing certain activities, among them eating bread.

CER also sought to reassure community members.

“Don’t panic,” it wrote. “The probability of catching the virus through the air is extremely low and therefore the wearing of masks is much less important.”

The conference said it consulted a specialist on infectious diseases in public health before drawing up its list.

Following its outbreak in China in December, the coronavirus has infected over 92,000 worldwide and claimed over 3,100 lives, almost all of them in China.

The virus has spread to several European countries, notably Italy and Spain.

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/coronavirus-takes-toll-on-religious-life-as-rabbis-advise-against-ritual-kissing/>

