

RUTGERS

Miller Center for Community
Protection and Resilience

RESILIENCE: During the High Holy Days of April & May

April 8, 2020



*The Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York will convert into a hospital
Peter Hutchinson/AFP via Getty Images*

*Follow On Guidance from Rutgers' Miller Center for Community
Protection and Resilience*

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Introduction

Innocent suffering. As three of the world's major religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – prepare to observe their High Holy Days in the next few weeks, people all over the world are suffering and dying alone. Families are saying their goodbyes, and clergy administering last rites, via Facetime. Living rooms where neighbors and friends would normally drop by to offer comfort sit empty. Memorial services are postponed, or canceled completely. Never has the comfort offered by a community of shared beliefs been more needed, but rarely has it been more difficult to achieve, than in the current COVID-19 crisis.

Perhaps for this reason, accounts have been multiplying of religious gatherings in defiance of stay at home and social distancing orders. [See relevant articles in: [The Hill](#), [The Washington Post](#), [ABC News](#), and [CNN](#)] These gatherings can prove disastrous from a public health perspective, affording the virus opportunities to spread, and proving lethal to some of those who attend or to people they contact.



*Conducting a virtual church service in Giussano, Italy
Piero Cruciatti/AFP via Getty Images*

At the same time, practitioners of all faiths are adapting their rituals to the harsh new reality, and rediscovering the depth of the message their faith holds for times like these. The Episcopal Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York is being converted for use as a hospital. Family seders are being planned over Webex, Zoom, Facetime or Skype. Good Friday and Easter services are being livestreamed, or broadcast over television.

The successful adaptation of the world's faiths to the reality of the COVID-19 pandemic is not surprising, for in many respects, the issue of innocent suffering is central to each of the world's major faiths, and the triumph over suffering is an essential part of the redemptive message. Buddhism, which observes the Buddha's date of birth on April 8, teaches that suffering ends with enlightenment. In Judaism, the Passover Seder commemorates the suffering of the Jewish community in slavery and its liberation from bondage. For Christians, the crucifixion of Jesus, commemorated on Good Friday is innocent suffering embodied, and Easter celebrates Jesus's – and by extension those who believe in Christ -- triumph over death. The fasting and other acts of physical deprivation undertaken by Muslims during Ramadan are intended to bring the faithful closer to God.



*Observing health protocols at the Kılıç Ali Pasha Mosque in Istanbul
Yaskin Akgul/AFP via Getty Images*

We highlight below some of the best practices we have identified for observing the High Holy Days in a manner that remains mindful of the public health peril that all communities face.

What Should Communities of Faith Do?

Faith communities should maintain their hope and confidence that their faith, whatever that may or may not be, will be a source of strength during this ongoing war with the coronavirus-19. As faith communities endure, and adjust to celebrate the high holy days, they should bear in mind that their actions directly impact life and death for all.

Following CDC guidance and practicing strict social distancing should be seen as an expression of fellowship.

Streaming religious services online and sending special readings and reflections in emails can bridge the physical separation involved in staying at home.

Connecting via video or teleconference for prayer or a meal is another effective way to remain observant as a community.

Faith leaders should reinforce the message that wearing a mask and gloves and practicing social distancing if you must go out to perform essential work, go to a pharmacy or shop at a grocery store, is imperative.

Faith leaders should reinforce the message that all should do what we can to protect those who are protecting and serving us, namely, our health care workers, grocery and delivery staff, first responders and law enforcement, public transit operators and the most vulnerable among us during these challenging times.

What Should We “Not” Do?

As of Monday April 6, seven states have not issued “stay-at-home” orders. Despite the convictions of these states that mandatory restriction of movements and gatherings is not necessary in their individual case, the facts remain that the coronavirus does not respect political boundaries. Every state has the coronavirus and our fellow Americans’ lives are at risk. Communities of faith should not gather as they traditionally do in large numbers, but find ways to adapt their rituals while retaining their beliefs.

There is no valid reason to disregard evidence-based medical guidance for mitigating this life-threatening virus nor to disregard the gift of evolving knowledge for how to mitigate and to end this pandemic.

Avoid the false choice between pious observance and public health; the two are compatible.

Avoid the false claim that the expression of religious liberty, as protected by our U.S. Constitution, counsels resistance to the critical medical and public health steps necessary to mitigate, and ultimately defeat, this global pandemic.

Conclusion

We wish each of you the blessings of your faith as you observe your religious traditions. We are confident that the guidance we have offered today, and in the communications of [March 13, 2020](#) and [March 25, 2020](#) can be practiced in a way that harmonizes the precepts of the world's faith traditions with the imperatives of public health in the service of humanity.

Additional Resources

[New Jersey COVID-19 Information Hub](#)

[NJCCIC Alert: Cyber Threat Actors Capitalize on Coronavirus](#)

[New Jersey Department of Health Communicable Disease Service: COVID-19](#)

[Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: Coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#)

Visit the [COVID-19: Rumor Control and Disinformation Updates](#) webpage

The World Health Organization's (WHO) [Myth busters page](#) is a valuable resource in deciphering fact from fiction.