

Dr. Fauci: High Holiday services are possible, but many hurdles remain

May 7, 2020 By Aiden Pink



Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, speaks during the daily briefing of the White House Coronavirus Task Force, at the White House April 17, 2020 in Washington, DC.

Alex Wong/Getty Images

Dr. Anthony Fauci said Thursday that it would be possible for people to gather in synagogues for the Jewish High Holidays in the fall if contact tracing is implemented to avoid a second wave of the pandemic.

Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, made the comments in a conference call organized by the Orthodox Union, an Orthodox umbrella group, and the Rabbinical Council of America, an organization of Orthodox rabbis.

“There will almost certainly be virus around in the fall and winter,” Fauci said. “Whether there’s a second wave or not will depend on our preparedness and our

ability, when infections reappear, if we can put the lid on them by identification, isolation and contact tracing. If we have that in place in September, October, November, even though there could be cases, we should be able to handle it.”

However, he cautioned, “There is a possibility you can get back to some form of normality, but it will be a new normality.” Synagogues will not be able to get back to full functionality until a vaccine is developed, he warned.

Fauci also praised the Orthodox community, which has been particularly hard-hit by the pandemic, for donating their plasma — but he cautioned that while it was likely that people who survived the virus had developed immunity to future infection, it hasn’t yet been proved.

Fauci also answered several questions about how synagogues could transition to opening up safely. Most states have still banned synagogues and other houses of worship from opening, and in states where they are legally allowed to do so, literally no shuls have opened their doors.

OU executive vice president Rabbi Moshe Hauer, who moderated the discussion, said that their synagogues were already planning on having people wear masks, hold multiple services with stagger start times so as to limit attendance to 10, and have people stand eight feet apart — farther than the recommended six feet, because with Jews, “eight feet becomes six feet.”

“The kind of social interaction that is the core of the beauty of your culture has unfortunately led to a situation of higher risk,” Fauci agreed.

He agreed with Hauer’s proposals and also suggested that synagogues slowly open up for minyanim in stages — for example, once a day five days a week, rather than three times a day every day — and that synagogues in hard-hit areas like New York should operate more cautiously than shuls in areas with less infection.

The doctor also recommended that elderly people and others with high-risk factors should be “the last people” allowed to return to synagogues as part of their phased reopenings.

Fauci also thanked the panel organizers for opening the session with a reading from Psalms. “As you’re doing your praying, make sure you include me in that,” Fauci said. Hauer said that they were.

Aiden Pink is the deputy news editor of the Forward. Contact him at pink@forward.com or follow him on Twitter @aidenpink