To Call or Not To Call on Yom Tov

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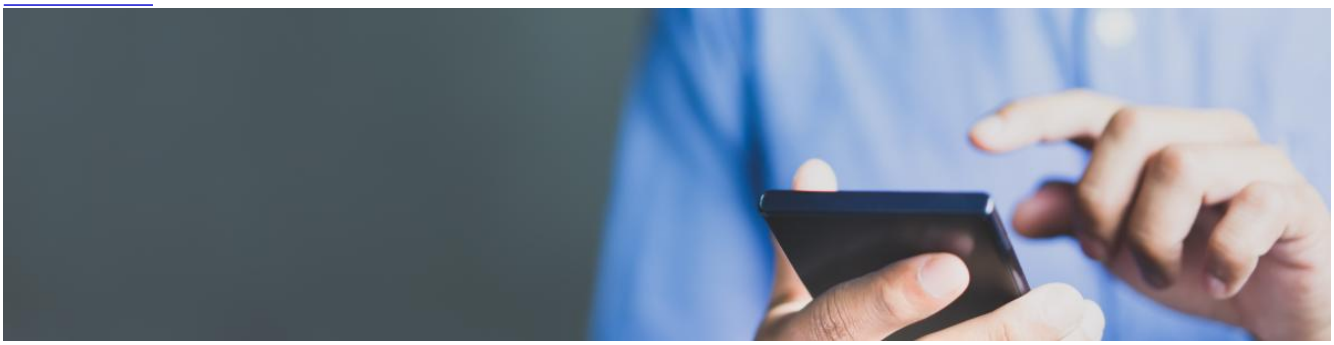

This blog by Rabbi Finkelman, a veteran American Orthodox rabbi, appeared originally in the Times of Israel.

In his study of the killer heat wave that struck Chicago in 1995, Eric Klinenberg found that elderly people died especially when they lacked social networks. The heat was just as deadly, but the old men and women who lived alone survived, in general, if they had someone to look in on them, to call them, or to ask how they were doing. Without that minimal level of social contact, they were much less likely to survive. You can read Klienberg's conclusions in his book, *Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago.*

Like the Chicago heat wave, the coronavirus pandemic seems more deadly for the old than for the young. It seems probable that it will, again like the heat wave, especially strike socially isolated people. The visitor who asks after someone's health could well make the difference between survival and death. But now, faced with the corona virus, we all need to isolate ourselves, to limit our meetings with people. We must not pay physical visits to our neighbors; telecommunications must replace physical visits.

Observant Jews, however, generally will avoid using telecommunications devices for three consecutive days next week: two days of Yom Tov running right into Shabbat (a little easier in Israel, with only one day of Yom Tov). For an old person living alone, those three days might prove deadly. Even for a couple, if one of the two must go the hospital, the other will remain at home, isolated, worried, not expecting to communicate with anyone.

Perhaps, under these circumstances, observant Jews must use telecommunications to keep tabs on isolated neighbors, friends, or relatives. Observant Jews in isolation must decide whether to use devices to call on their support systems.

What guidance can we offer to people facing these decisions?

I trust that your local rabbi has extensive knowledge of the intricacies of halakhah, the rules of Jewish observance. However, this question does not depend on the intricacies of halakhah. It does depend on your assessment of the reality: How frail is Aunt Sadie? Might Uncle Harry remember to take his medicine? What could happen if I get seriously depressed?

No one absolutely knows how to assess this reality. It depends, to some extent, on guesswork. You have to act or not act based on incomplete knowledge. You – whether you are frail and isolated, or whether you know someone in that category, you have to decide. What should you do?

Consider what the Talmud advises in a possibly related case:

If a child gets locked in a room on Shabbat, the Talmud rules that one must chop down the door to free the child. Whoever does this more quickly deserves praise, and one does not need to ask permission from a rabbinic court (Yoma 84b).

Later authorities codify this ruling (Rambam Shabbat 2:17; Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayyim 328:13). R. Yosef Karo adds "whoever asks (for permission in such a situation) spills blood" (Orah Hayyim 328:2). R. Y. M. Epstein goes further: "Whoever is asked spills blood." Why? If the student asks whether to intervene instead of acting at once, that shows that the teacher "should have taught the public that intervening to protect life takes precedence over the laws of Shabbat" (Arukh HaShulhan, Orah Hayyim 328:1).

Do you feel conflicted about whether to call on your neighbor, or to call your neighbor for help? Rabbi Eugene Korn puts the answer to this dilemma succinctly: "In the end, after taking in as much halakhic knowledge as we can, it is a personal decision because only the people directly involved can best assess the gravity of the potential pikuach nefesh (intervention to protect life) status of Aunt Sadie."

Rabbi Korn continues: "I would also add that if we are placed in an existential dilemma like this, it is better to be machmir (strict) on safek pikuach nefesh (a doubtful need to intervene

to protect life) than on lo tivaru aish” (“do not light a fire on Shabbat”.Exodus 35:3 or whatever other prohibition may exist on using telecommunication on Shabbat).

Yoel Finkelman wisely suggests that rabbis do have a role in the determination:

Perhaps the job of rabbis, who know the halakhah but not necessarily the reality, is to guide people who know more about their friends and relatives to be willing to pick up the phone. The prohibition is deeply ingrained and visceral. People will need help to believe that they can and should reach out using electronic devices.

In short, to use a phrase from the Talmud: “Be more strict about danger than about prohibitions.”