

Watch: Rav Dovid Cohen's Groundbreaking Psak and Amudim Support Line

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In Groundbreaking Amudim Video, Rav Dovid Cohen, Shlit'a Details Halachically Permissible Use of Technology on Yom Tov/Shabbos for Those in Mental Health Crisis and Recovery

By: Sandy Eller

For decades, the greatest of *poskim* have allowed diabetics to check their blood sugar levels on Shabbos and yom tov, because these matters involve issues of *pikuach nefesh*. The same is true for a myriad of other illnesses because of the concept of "*v'chai bahem*," living by the Torah laws and not dying by them, and even when questions arise, one is permitted reach out —

to professionals on Shabbos. During this COVID-19 crisis, the situation is even more critical, not just for matters of endocrinology and cardiology, but even for issues of mental health.

Acknowledging the current historic crisis and its tremendous effects on those struggling with mental health issues as well as those in recovery, Harav Dovid Cohen Shlit'a issued a *p'sak halacha* that allows certain individuals to use technology under particular guidelines in order to avail themselves of lifesaving mental health services.

Rabbi Cohen said that it is vital for those facing life threatening challenges to have continued access to those who provide them support, even on Shabbos and Yom Tov. With face to face contact prohibited at this juncture in order to limit the spread of COVID-19, the only way for those in crisis to get help is through digital means.

"It is permitted to use all these machineries, so to speak, Zoom and everything else, in order to stay in touch, only *mita'am pikuach nefesh*," said Rabbi Cohen, adding that there is no heter to use Zoom as a platform to connect people for a Pesach seder.

Quoting Rav Chaim Halevi Soloveitchik, Rav Cohen said that for people who meet the relevant criteria, using their phones to call a mental health professional or attending a meeting through a Zoom conference, even as a preventive measure, does not fall under the category of *chilul* Shabbos.

"As Rav Chaim Brisker used to say ... I'm not *maykil* on Shabbos, I'm *machmir* on *pikuach nefesh*," said Rabbi Cohen.

Rabbi Cohen went on to say that any use of technology should be done with a *shinui*. Rabbi Avraham Kahan, Rav of K'hal New City and a dayan at Beis Din Vaad Hadin Vhoraah, further clarified that concept, discussing using one's non-dominant hand or his/her knuckle to dial or log in. He emphasized that the need for a *shinui* is only applicable to those situations falling under the preventive category; anyone who feels that he/she is facing an acute mental health crisis should not hesitate to reach out to a mental health professional or avail themselves of Amudim's hotline.

More than 350 people have already taken advantage of a free anonymous support line set up by Amudim, staffed by a coalition of mental health professionals, seeking support while struggling with staggering losses, devastating illness and mandatory isolation as the deadly coronavirus pandemic rages on. Launched two weeks ago by Amudim in partnership with Child & Adult Psychological Services, Empower Health Center, Madraigos Midwest, Naaleh Cleveland, Nesivos, Relief, Shalom Task Force, The United Task Force, The Living Room, and numerous mental health practitioners in private practice, the support line currently has over 60 volunteers answering phones from 8 AM to 11 PM EST. Calls that come in after-hours or that cannot be answered by available volunteers are transferred to a live 24/7 call center to be returned as quickly as possible. Staff members are monitoring all calls to ensure that urgent matters are replied to without delay, even overnight.

The line is under the joint direction of Dr. David Pelcovitz, chairman of Amudim's clinical advisory board, Dr. Shloime Zimmerman, co-chair of Amudim's clinical advisory board, and Myriam Lankry, Amudim's clinical director, and will be operational over Yom Tov and Shabbos, as per Rabbi Cohen's *psak* halacha. Callers can reach out for help by dialing 888-7-AMUDIM, 888-726-8346 or 718-972-3000, with caller ID disabled on incoming calls to ensure complete confidentiality; and help is also available via email at support@amudim.org.

Even as coronavirus is expected to peak in the New York area and word has begun to emerge of people who have survived life-threatening bouts with the pandemic, the mental health crisis spawned by COVID-19 continues to grow larger.

"All of us are having a difficult time coping with today's realities, with lives tragically cut short and our entire society facing new challenges, but for those with mental health issues and the recovery community, the impact is magnified exponentially," said Amudim's CEO Zvi Gluck. "We want people to know that our support systems are in place and literally just a phone call away to help anyone, anywhere, with concerns large and small, even on Shabbos and Yom Tov."

