

The Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis  
Office of the Chief Rabbi  
305 Ballards Lane  
LONDON  
N12 8GB

08 July 2020

Dear Sir,

### **Music and musicians in synagogues**

The Incorporated Society of Musicians (ISM) is the UK's professional body for musicians and a nationally recognised subject association for music. Since 1882, we have been dedicated to promoting the importance of music and protecting the rights of those working in the music profession. We support approximately 10,000 musicians across the UK with legal advice and representation, professional development, and campaigns.

We represent a significant number of musicians working in synagogues across the country. We are writing on their behalf because of the serious crisis now facing professional music in liturgical settings.

We are hearing from our members across the country about redundancies, job cuts and the loss of professional music in places of worship. A crisis is now engulfing them.

The reason given in all these cases is that COVID-19 guidance from government says that choirs and other forms of singing represent an unacceptable risk of COVID-19 transmissions except in the most limited circumstances.

Of course, we must all do as much as we can to limit the spread of this terrible virus.

But we cannot help but consider that actions by faith leaders in dismissing musicians and casting many individuals into unemployment in the middle of a pandemic, appear precipitate. At this stage, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) has still not released guidelines for safer practices for choirs and singing.

Despite this, job losses and the loss of liturgical music in synagogues is happening already. A glorious musical tradition will be lost forever unless there is immediate, practical action to save jobs and support musicians. .



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We ask the Jewish community in the UK to engage its resources to protect and support professional musicians during this stage of the pandemic, and to ensure that their posts will survive. Recorded music is no substitute for cantorial or choral music: this is to deny the huge power of music in Jewish prayer and to fail to serve congregations appropriately. Recorded music, while perhaps a reasonable temporary measure in a crisis, can never be allowed to become the permanent default in our places of worship.

There is an increasing body of research from around the world about COVID-19 and safety in musical performance. We have just completed our own global literature review of the research to date. We believe this research could offer much to the government in terms of practical, imaginative options to help bring back choirs and singing to our places of worship.

We believe that music in synagogues needs a co-ordinated, UK-wide approach from its leadership. We also want to see the government's official advice about music in places of worship take practical account the range of reduced-risk options now being generated in scientific research, and to link this to a scheduled reinstatement of music and musicians in services across the country.

This in turn requires concrete financial support for musicians in synagogues to protect those whose livelihoods and careers have been affected current events.

We call upon you to take immediate action to ensure no more musicians, choristers or music directors are dismissed.

Former Chief Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks summarises eloquently the significance of music in the context of Jewish prayer:

"Music is the pulse of Jewish spirituality – song charts the biorhythms of the Jewish soul."

This precious tradition is in grave danger. There is still a chance retrieve matters, but only if there is action now.

We await your urgent reply.

Yours faithfully,



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