

Hundreds of rabbis back NY government in shutdown of Hasidic neighborhoods

by [Yonat Shimron](#) in the [November 4, 2020](#) issue



Members of the Hasidic Jewish community speak with NYPD officers on October 7 in the Borough Park neighborhood of Brooklyn. (AP Photo / John Minchillo)

Some 400 rabbis and other Jewish religious leaders from across the spectrum of Jewish institutions have signed a statement in support of efforts in New York to shut down schools and limit synagogue attendance in Hasidic Jewish neighborhoods hit hard by COVID-19.

The statement comes in response to chaotic protests that have broken out in New York City's Brooklyn borough, driven by Hasidic Jews opposed to Gov. Andrew Cuomo's decision to shut down yeshivas and limit the number of people attending synagogues in ZIP codes with large numbers of Orthodox Jews.

"We are rabbis and other Jewish religious leaders representing every movement of Judaism, who stand in support of Governor Andrew Cuomo and Mayor Bill de Blasio for using data-driven, geographically based efforts to contain the spread of COVID-19," the letter reads.

"Judaism and Jewish texts are filled with vociferous debates and disagreements, however nothing is more universally accepted and agreed upon than the need to protect and preserve human life and dignity."

The statement was organized by the New York Jewish Agenda, a new nonprofit that works on social justice issues.

The new restrictions have outraged members of the Orthodox communities, who say they are being singled out. Videos taken earlier this week showed hundreds of Hasidic Jewish men, most without masks, setting fires and burning masks in Brooklyn's Borough Park neighborhood.

The signers include more than 150 rabbis from the larger New York City area, from all the major Jewish denominations, including Orthodox, Conservative, Reconstructionist, Reform, and others.

The rabbis were especially sharp in rejecting the protesters' tactics, saying: "We are also deeply disturbed by what we have witnessed in the form of mask burnings and large, unsafe, and even violent protests against sensible precautions and regulations."

The nine zip codes identified by the governor and mayor are responsible for about 1,850 new cases in September and October—more than 20 percent of all new infections in the city during that span, the Associated Press reported. Both the mayor and governor are frustrated at ongoing displays of Hasidic Jews flouting mandates to socially distance and wear masks.

On October 7, Cuomo said the virus test positivity rate in those areas was about 5 percent, compared with 1 percent in the rest of the state.

Four Orthodox Jewish lawmakers representing the areas affected by the shutdown denounced the lockdown as “a duplicitous bait-and-switch,” according to the *New York Times*.

Enforcing public health mandates in Hasidic communities has been a challenge for a host of reasons. Community members, who live in close quarters, don’t consume secular sources of information. Most speak Yiddish, and some do not have a good grasp of English. They are not accustomed to trusting secular sources except for those within their communities.

In addition, many Hasidic communities may mistakenly believe the coronavirus crisis has passed.

Hasidic Jews are the most traditional of US Orthodox Jews. Founded in 18th-century Poland, these religious sects prize ecstatic worship and devotion to God. Hasidic Judaism is usually structured around a rebbe, a revered spiritual teacher whose interpretations of Jewish law govern the community. —Religion News Service