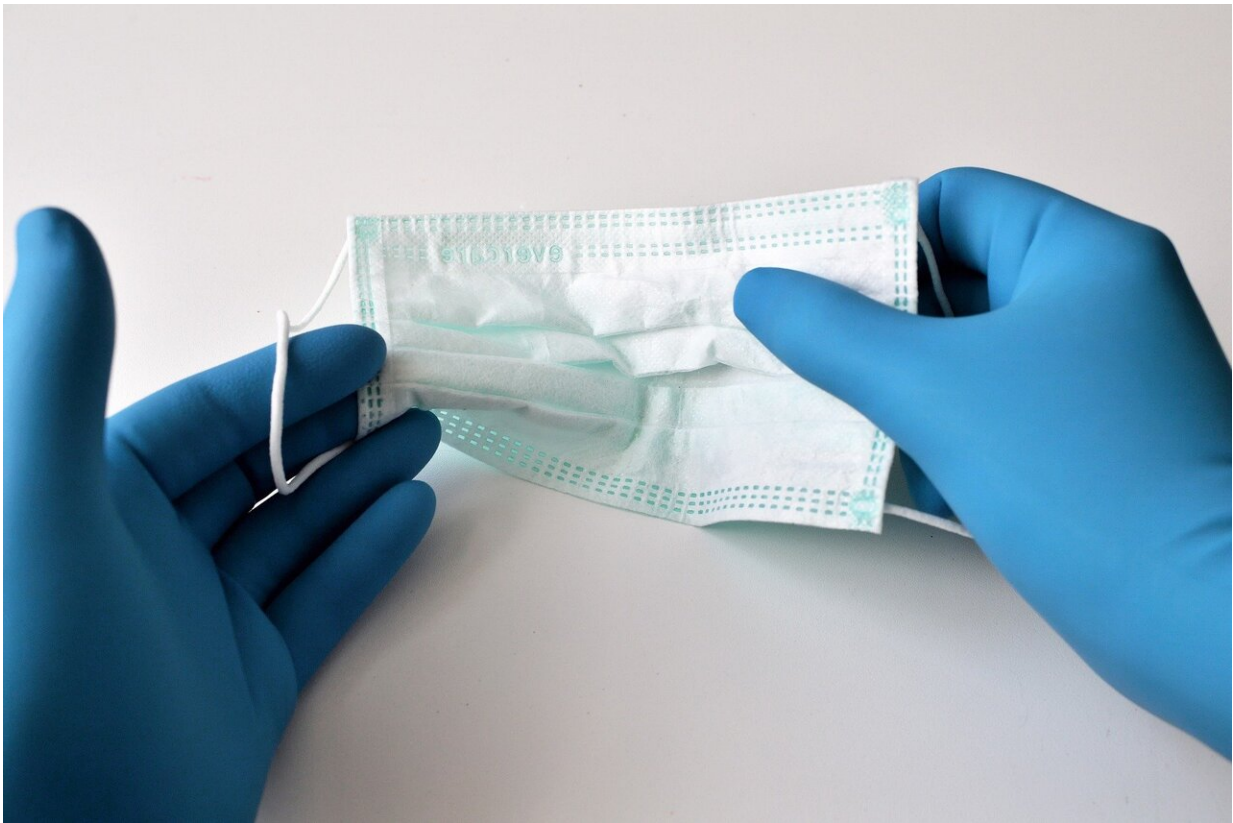


Israel re-opens restaurants, bars with 40% of country fully vaccinated

March 7 2021



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Israel took another step towards post-pandemic normalcy on Sunday, opening restaurants, bars and cafes to vaccinated "green pass" holders, with about 40 percent of the population fully inoculated against the

coronavirus.

"We are coming back to life," Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared, as he cut into a pastry at a Jerusalem cafe, in a video posted on Facebook.

Israel, which launched its [vaccination campaign](#) in December, has given the recommended two jabs of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine to more than 3.7 million of its roughly nine million people.

Nearly five million have received one shot.

The country launched its green pass programme last month, allowing controlled numbers of people with proof of full vaccination—or those who have recovered from COVID-19—to enter gyms, pools and other facilities.

But Sunday's slate of re-openings has been highly anticipated, as it marks the restoration of services that touch the daily lives of many Israelis.

Restaurants are now permitted to resume indoor dining at up to 75 percent capacity, with a cap of 100 people and with tables two metres (6.5 feet) apart.

Green pass holders can also now have a drink at a bar—but cannot yet strike up a chat with a stranger sitting on the stool beside them, with rules requiring an empty seat between patrons, unless they live together.

Eating and drinking on terraces does not require a green pass.

'Show solidarity'

Large numbers of students, many of whom have been out of classrooms

for months, will also start returning to school this week, while hotel event halls, sport venues and places of worship are re-opening to green pass holders, with capacity limits in place.

Israelis stranded abroad amid a weeks-long airport closure will also be allowed to return home in increasing numbers this week, beginning with 1,000 arrivals permitted on Sunday.

Shimon Chasin, who was dining with his wife and friends at the Jerusalem [restaurant](#) Azura, said the re-opening felt as good as the arrival of the warmer weather.

"We hope this momentum will continue, we feel quite safe and comfortable to go out and start celebrating spring," he said.

To him, eating out was also a way of supporting the battered restaurant industry.

"I think it's right to come and show solidarity, now that we are allowed to go out of our homes and be freer," he said.

'We'll be done'

Netanyahu, who faces a tough re-election battle in just over two weeks, has put Israel's robust vaccination drive at the centre of his campaign.

While many countries have struggled to secure vaccine supply, Netanyahu's government has remained well-stocked thanks largely to an arrangement with Pfizer to share medical data on the product's impact.

The [prime minister](#), in power since 2009, has said he wants Israel's entire over-16 population vaccinated by the end of this month, hoping the economy will be almost fully re-opened in time for the Passover holiday,

which begins on March 27.

"Just have to get a few hundred thousand more people... especially the over 50s, and we'll be done," Netanyahu said at the Jerusalem cafe, gesturing as if he were jabbing his arm with a shot.

While happy to finally re-open, some restaurateurs expressed fear that euphoria stemming from the vaccinations would lead to a new outbreak of the virus.

"Our main worry is—without getting into politics—that there will be a fourth and a fifth lockdown, which will be very, very difficult for us to recover from," said Asaf Serri, chef and co-owner of the Tzemah restaurant.

"If we close the restaurant again, we will probably not be able to re-open," he said.

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