

Synagogues in Crisis Mode: Models from the Covid-19 Pandemic

By Marge Wise

Mentor: Rabbi William Lebeau

Dedication

**To my husband,
Rabbi Joseph H. Wise, z”l,
for modeling his abiding appreciation of the pivotal place of the synagogue
in the life of the Jew and in the life of the Jewish community**

Acknowledgments:

I would like to thank the following for providing me invaluable sources of information for the collection and the compilation of my research:

Sources for Position Papers and Decisions on Aspects of Jewish Law:

The Rabbinical Assembly Committee on Jewish Law & Standards, New York City (rabbinicalassembly.org)

The Schechter Institute, Jerusalem (www.schechter.edu)

Rabbinical Council of Bergen County (Organization comprised of Orthodox Rabbis in Bergen County, New Jersey - www.rcbcvaad.org)

Orthodox Union (ou.org)

Rabbinical Council of America (rabbis.org)

Sources for Synagogue Outreach:

Executive Director List-Serv: NAASE (North American Association of Synagogue Executives)

Academy of the Jewish Religion: Student and Alumni List-Serv

I would like to acknowledge, with deep gratitude and appreciation, the invaluable and incredible assistance, guidance and encouragement which I received from my Masters' Project advisor, Rabbi Jeffrey Hoffman, from my mentor, Rabbi William Lebeau and from my writing coach, Ellen Kolba.

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I. Introduction

Health crises, even a pandemic, as well as natural disasters and acts of terrorism, are tragically all part of the fabric of our lives, and have been for the last one hundred and more years. I will attempt to chronicle some of the Jewish responses to several of these past events as they impacted synagogue life and the life of the Jewish community – as we strive to glean strategies for coping and for mitigating the trauma for ourselves, for the communities in which we live, and for the world which we all inhabit. I will begin by describing the nature of a pandemic which unfolded in the early 1900's. It was named the Spanish Flu and its history reads eerily like many of the manifestations of Covid-19.

The major focus and thrust of my thesis is the Covid-19 Pandemic and the immense scope of the efforts of synagogues across the United States to respond. The majority of the synagogues to which I will refer sprang into action and mobilized their outreach resources and efforts from the day that the national lockdown was declared. They have continued to the present time, and are looking beyond the present moment to imagine their synagogues post-Covid. Included will be scores of examples of the scope of the programs which synagogues offered and continue to offer their constituencies - virtually, in most instances and on a daily basis – in order to keep connected and to offer support to their flock. When I refer to a synagogue as small or mid-size or large, or as Reform, Conservative or Orthodox, I do so simply to provide context and as an example for other synagogues as to what is being undertaken with different populations. Creativity, energy and an upbeat approach, combined with working together towards a goal, transcend size and – aside from varying interpretations of Jewish law – they transcend denomination, as well.

The outreach efforts undertaken by synagogue during the weeks preceding the High Holidays were undertaken with the express goal of reinforcing the ties that bind individuals, couples and families to a synagogue which include:

- 1) Connection to the community
- 2) Connection to peers
- 3) Children's connection to their peers (for families with children and teens)
- 4) Connection to Clergy
- 5) Connection to the prayers and the familiar rituals associated - especially those associated with the High Holidays

Aside from the financial imperatives to keeping synagogues functioning in this precarious and unprecedented time, synagogues are sparing no efforts to keep themselves and the surrounding community cohesive and interdependent in order to provide support for all who are served by these communities. Support takes the shape of food banks, mental health services, technology assistance, as well as religious, cultural and social programs for all ages

I've arranged the data I've collected on what synagogues have offered, and are offering, into the following categories:

- 1) Prayer services on Shabbat
- 2) Prayer services on Jewish holidays
- 3) Ritual events related to Jewish holidays
- 4) Adult Education - including classes, lectures, films, book reviews, etc.
- 5) Religious school

- 6) Early childhood programs
- 7) Mental Health and Wellness
- 8) Technology
- 9) Sisterhood and Men's Club programming.

In the Appendix: Outreach, I inserted messages and letters, from the very beginning of the Corona virus, from rabbis and lay leaders of synagogues offering support and encouragement, announcing and explaining the closing of their synagogues and outlining the details of how their institutions are/will be offering multi-pronged ways of connecting during the pandemic. Later, after months of being closed, many Rabbis and lay leaders wrote again – explaining how the High Holidays would “look” this year.

Again, the hope is that these communications will keep the connections alive and will banish any “out of sight, out of mind” thoughts on the part of congregants. Some rabbis recorded inspirational messages and sent them to their constituencies – to shore up support for the synagogue, to encourage a strong ongoing virtual relationship and to send some “virtual love” and caring – commodities which help cement ties and hopefully, loyalty with and to the synagogue. Love, caring and connection is what synagogue-goers are most in need of during this pandemic. They are the intangible but essential ingredients which synagogues need to provide – now far more than ever. Synagogue affiliation and retentions has always been a challenge for even the most active and the most successful shuls. Synagogues rely very heavily on members who are happy and who want, therefore, to continue their membership with the institution.

In this time of Covid-19, that happiness can fade for reasons which have nothing to do with the synagogue. In a “Look to the Future” towards the end of this project, I will cite

the experience of some synagogues in terms of their success rate with affiliation and retention, especially the latter, during the Covid-19 pandemic.

In conjunction with the “menu” outlined above is the question of how prayer services and related programming, so vital to the spiritual life of a synagogue and to its members, fit into the ideology/halakhic (Jewish law) framework of the synagogue. In that context, I will report on new interpretations of *halakha* being offered based on material available from the Reform, Conservative and Orthodox movements. Specifically, I will discuss the following: What is the process for developing any new interpretations – is it internal or movement-generated, or both? What are the compelling reasons to go down this road and to make these efforts? What is the process for accepting/integrating new interpretations of Jewish law into the practices of the individual synagogue? How will synagogue practices be impacted and/or changed as a result of responses to the pandemic?

Since the halakhic issues and their resolution will of course vary with the synagogue and the movement it identifies with, I will attempt to present the data I collect purely as informational reports of how a particular movement is grappling with changes – proposed or adopted - to the extent that the data is available. The entire subject of Zooming religious services engendered much discussion and analysis and resulted in several position papers from the Orthodox movement, as well as *teshuvot* and position papers from the Conservative movement, complete with dissenting opinions.

In some cases, data is still coalescing and I will try to convey that as well. I will include halakhic rulings which have been reached and which are meant, in many instances, to

be used only in the event of an emergency, *b'sha'at ha-d'khak*, the Hebrew phrase which connotes emergency.

To summarize, I will discuss the vast array of prayer services which have been adapted to meet the spiritual needs of a population in isolation. I will also chronicle the smorgasbord of programmatic material which has been developed for the enrichment of an online/Zoom audience. I will catalog the breadth of educational resources which can be, and which have been, made available. I will report on the range of mental health resources – some synagogue-based, some referral-based, which are designed to help people survive emotionally and last, but certainly not least, I will report on the incredibly-talented and innovative IT experts who have brought us Zoom. Zoom offers an exceptionally broad platform of options for keeping the population virtually connected, and who have made possible other platforms, as well, which help people connect throughout the world, one user at a time.

We know that the pandemic upended models of worship as well as basic models of coming together – religiously, educationally, culturally, socially - as a *kehillah kedoshah*, a sacred community – for synagogues across denominational lines. In a nutshell, this is the reason that I chose this subject for my thesis. It is my belief that the synagogue has a seminal role to play in the life of the Jewish people and in the cohesion of the Jewish community and it is my belief that the synagogue will remain strong when the pandemic finally ends, and beyond. I would go so far as to say that, in conjunction with the home, the synagogue is the centerpiece for Jewish survival. In that spirit, I believe that what synagogues have done in the very early days of the unfolding reality of Covid-19 – and what they are doing – across the country - during the pandemic, is having a positive

impact on those of us who are connected to, and look to, our synagogues for spiritual, cultural, educational and emotional sustenance. It is in this context, that I hope that my research and my reporting will re-affirm the pivotal place which the Synagogue occupies in times of great need - and always – and furthermore, that it will continue to occupy.

I would also like this thesis to serve as a hands-on, practical guide for synagogues who may want to augment what they are offering to their constituencies – whether programmatically, religiously, emotionally, technologically - during the Covid-19 pandemic.

With respect to the tragedies which I report on in the beginning of my project, we are overcome with relief when our own lives and our own communities are spared from disaster, but at the same time, we feel a need to respond and to offer help to those who haven't been spared the unthinkable. With Covid-19, none of us have been spared its impact – from the disruption of our lives due to distancing, major schooling changes, employment adjustments and layoffs, economic reversals and more – in terms of struggling with the illness personally, and in terms of mourning the death of loved ones and friends, who didn't survive Covid-19.

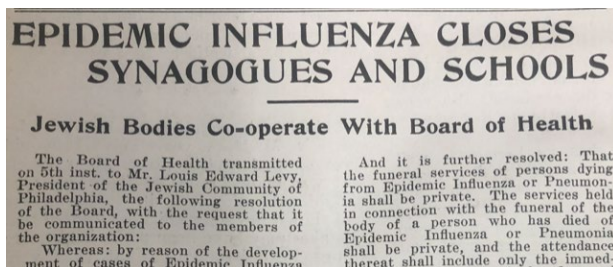
It is in that spirit that I hope this guide will be a resource and a how-to manual for future challenges which may come our way. It is a composite result of what we have learned and how we have responded, specifically in our Jewish communities, and in our synagogues which serve those communities, in a vast number of ways every day.

II. Some Disasters of the 20th-21st Centuries

Spanish Flu

“Schools closed. Synagogues shuttered. Patients in quarantine. Public health officials recommend ... gargling...”

The above quote almost sounds like a description of the 2020 novel corona virus - also known as Covid-19, but it is actually referring to the 1918 influenza outbreak, also known as Spanish flu or H1N1. This deadly disease-turned-epidemic killed 50 million people worldwide and 675,000 people in the United States, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.



According to the Smithsonian Museum, every bed in Philadelphia’s 31 hospitals was full within 72 hours of the parade. Wilmer Krusen, director of public health and charities of Philadelphia, advised the city to ban all assemblies in public spaces and mandate private funerals. Philadelphia’s Army and Navy bases were also quarantined.

Teenagers and young adults working in hospitals faced the death of patients and the threat of contracting the disease themselves. “Young nursing and medical students

were pressed into service as early as possible,” Lowe said. “They were encouraged to take ‘fresh air walks’ in Fairmount Park to cope with the mental strain.¹

Philadelphia’s Jewish community mobilized volunteers and converted hospitals to receive flu patients. Due to the serious shortage of nurses, the Jewish Maternity Hospital pleaded for volunteers in the *Exponent*. Another article noted that the wife of one of the local rabbis was seen at one of the hospitals daily answering the telephone.

Jewish Philadelphians also created the Jewish Emergency Society in response to “the great number of children who have become orphans, due to the influenza epidemic, and the great number of women who were left destitute as a result of the terrible disease.”

According to Lowe, more than 12,000 people died in the six weeks following the Liberty Loans parade. Had officials canceled the gathering, the city’s death toll would have been more similar to that of Boston — which suffered 4,794 deaths in the fall of 1918 — based on data in the University of Michigan’s *Influenza Encyclopedia*.²

St. Louis, by contrast to Philadelphia, opted to cancel its Liberty Loans Parade and faced a flu death toll of only 700. According to CDC, “This deadly example shows the benefit of canceling mass gatherings and of enforcing social distancing measures.

¹) Panzer, Sophie. "1918 Philly Parade Could Prove Instructive on Coronavirus Outbreak." *The Jewish Exponent*, March 18, 2020. (September 14, 2020, 6:30pm) <https://www.jewishexponent.com/2020/03/18/1918>.

² *ibid*

The Bombing of the World Trade Center

Known as “9/11”, September 11, 2001, was a day of infamy. On that Tuesday morning, 19 militants associated with the Islamic extremist group al-Qaida hijacked four airplanes and carried out suicide attacks against targets in the United States. Two of the planes were flown into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City. 2,763 individuals died. That figure includes 343 firefighters and paramedics, 23 New York City police officers and 37 Port Authority police officers who were struggling to complete an evacuation of the building and save the office workers trapped on higher floors. A third plane hit the Pentagon just outside Washington, D.C. A third plane hit the Pentagon just outside Washington, D.C. 189 people were killed, including 64 on American Airlines Flight 77, the airliner that struck the building. The fourth plane crashed in a field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. Almost 3,000 people were killed during the 9/11 terrorist attacks, which triggered major U.S. initiatives to combat terrorism.

Images of the collapsing Twin Towers are indelibly engraved in our minds and in our hearts. In Judaism, it goes without saying that we need to respond in the face of need. That commitment to doing something to make it better for the person who is suffering can be fulfilled through the concept of *tikkun olam*, which means to repair the world³ –

³) Goch, Alan.”Catastrophes affect how we look at life”. *Florida Jewish Journal*. September 5, 2019. (September 24, 2020, 10:30 pm) <https://www.sun-sentinel.com/florida-jewish-journal/opinion/fl-jj-opinion-goch-9-11-dorian-relief-20190911-20190905-yujh4uxl2ja3dludgbpfw2t2pa-story.html>

whatever it takes....That is why so many first responders rushed to the scene, and that is why “ordinary” people felt compelled to be there for the survivors, As well as for the families of the victims in the aftermath in a multitude of ways, and that is why synagogue after synagogue and church after church opened their doors to help – whether it was to help survivors reach loved ones, to offer a cup of coffee or a sandwich, to charge cell phones and other devices, to listen, to hug, to console, to hold another human being in need...

The accessibility of synagogues in the aftermath of this tragedy would seem to correlate with data from an online survey indicated that respondents reported significantly higher levels of spirituality and faith in the two months after 9/11 than respondents who took the survey prior to that date. These respondents also reported higher levels of what the study authors refer to as “theological virtues”—an index of faith, hope, gratitude, kindness, love, leadership, and teamwork—for at least ten months after the attacks. Furthermore, Americans overwhelmingly claim to have used religion and spirituality as methods of coping with the events of 9/11; 90 percent claim to have turned to prayer, religion, or spiritual feelings at some level in order to deal with the tragedy.

Hurricane Sandy

Also known as “Super-Storm Sandy”, Hurricane Sandy affected 24 states and the entire eastern seaboard and was directly responsible for at least 147 deaths in the Northeast United States, Canada and the Caribbean. Tens of thousands of residents across the five boroughs lost heat and electricity after the storm ripped through the city, demolishing trees, homes and power lines. Many residents evacuated to local shelters or, if they were stuck inside their homes, were relying on volunteers to bring them food and supplies.

Uri L'Tzedek, an Orthodox social justice organization, lost no time in mobilizing to distribute food and supplies to people in need.⁴ A few hours after placing an announcement on Twitter and Facebook, 45 volunteers gathered to help give out candles, batteries, flashlights, water and food and to lend a listening ear of support.

In Brooklyn, *Masbia*, a network of kosher soup kitchens which typically provided 500 meals a day, made more than four times that number from the time that the storm did its damage. The organization originally prepared to close its facilities ahead of the storm since many employees live in affected neighborhoods. JTA learned that after receiving several calls from shelters in need of food, *Masbia* gathered a team of volunteers to work around the clock to provide meals to thousands of people in three public shelters in Brooklyn and Queens. Most of the meals were sent to the seniors evacuated to Park Slope Armory as per the government’s evacuation plan.

⁴ Lieber, Chavie. "In wake of Hurricane Sandy disaster, Jewish volunteers step up", *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, November 2, 2012. (August 21, 2020, 6:45 am) <https://www.jta.org/2012/11/02/united-states/in-wake-of-hurricane-sandy-disaster-jewish-volunteers-step-up>.

Meanwhile, on the Lower East Side of New York, students from Yeshiva University went on foot to the area's public housing units, handing out water, flashlights, batteries, fruit and dried snacks. Volunteers were organized by students, and the supplies came from the student government's own budget - including cases of water bottles and other provisions which were brought to the apartments of seniors too ill to provide these basic needs for themselves.

Many Jewish organizations set up relief funds online to funnel money to communities impacted by the hurricane. UJA-Federation of New York collected hundreds of challahs that to distribute Friday of that week, in advance of Shabbat. A kosher bakery in New Jersey, donated over 300 *challot* (Shabbat bread) to the effort. Other organizations including *Chabad* Young Professionals and J-Corps, a Jewish social volunteering group, also sent volunteers to hundreds of apartments in Lower Manhattan with supplies.

A Jewish disaster-response nonprofit located in the mid-west arrived in the New York area with 2 trailers and staff members to help cleanup efforts and utility crews – they were prepared to do whatever was needed including gutting of houses, chainsaw work, tree removal, roof work, debris removal and damage assessments.

The Union for Reform Judaism, in addition to setting up its own relief fund, worked on relocating bar and bat mitzvah services from towns that didn't have power to other Reform synagogues that did, and also provided insurance specialists to help with filing insurance claims. United Synagogue of Conservative synagogues have set up emergency relief funds to aid the victims.

Massacre at the Tree of Life Synagogue

The synagogue is arguably the most important institution in American Jewish life. One measure of its significance is that more Jews belong to a synagogue than to any other Jewish organization. Synagogues, like churches and other places where people gather regularly in large numbers, are potential targets for terrorist attacks because of the ability to inflict casualties, instill fear and cause political impacts.

Synagogues serve the Jewish community and assure the presence of a significant number of American citizens at certain times of the week. Damage or destruction of a house of worship could potentially inflict mass casualties on those who are in the synagogue's building/s and/or grounds; could shut the facility down; and could have widespread psychological impacts.

The above scenario is what tragically and horrifically occurred in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on Shabbat (Saturday) morning, October 27, 2018. Armed with an AR-15-style assault rifle and at least three handguns, a man shouting anti-Semitic slurs opened fire inside the Tree of Life synagogue, killing 11 congregants and wounding four police officers and two others, authorities reported.

In a rampage described as among the deadliest ever against the Jewish community in the United States, the assailant stormed into the Tree of Life Congregation, where worshipers had gathered in separate rooms to celebrate their faith, and shot indiscriminately into the crowd, shattering what had otherwise been a peaceful morning.

Federal officials charged Robert D. Bowers with 29 criminal counts. They included obstructing the free exercise of religious beliefs — a hate crime — and using a firearm to commit murder. He also faces state charges, including 11 counts of criminal homicide, six counts of aggravated assault and 13 counts of ethnic intimidation.⁵

The attack on Saturday morning, October 27, 2018, struck at the heart of the city's vibrant Jewish community, in the residential Squirrel Hill neighborhood that is home to several synagogues, kosher restaurants and bakeries. Hours later, hundreds gathered at three separate interfaith vigils on a cold, rainy evening to mourn the dead and to pray for the wounded.

Synagogues and Jewish organizations across the country – and the world - hosted memorials and prayer vigils following the massacre. Jews, Christians and Muslims prayed side-by-side in solidarity with one another. Police surveillance of synagogues and Jewish organizations as well as additional security protocols, security training of volunteers and practice drills have increased exponentially as the Jewish community responds to yet another threat to its safety and security. Ever aware of their pivotal role in the life of the Jewish community, synagogues prepare themselves, as never before, to be a safe space in the face of unthinkable violence and destruction.

⁵ Robertson, Campbell, Mele Christopher and Tavernise, Sabrina. "11 Killed in Synagogue Massacre; Suspect Charged With 29 Counts," *New York Times*, October 27, 2018. (September 4, 2020, 9:45 pm) <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/27/us/active-shooter-pittsburgh-synagogue-shooting.html>.

III. The Covid-19 Pandemic

In early 2020, after a December 2019 outbreak in China, the World Health Organization identified SARS-CoV-2 as a new type of corona virus.⁶ The outbreak quickly spread around the world. A public health crisis was declared by the World Health Organization on January 30, 2020. The corona virus was next classified by the World Health Organization as a pandemic on March 11, 2020, and a Pause/Lockdown ensued.

As of November 28, 2020: 13.3 million cases have been reported in the United States, with the death toll approaching 266,000.

The Corona virus is primarily spread between people during close contact, most often via small droplets produced by coughing, sneezing, and talking. These aerosolized droplets usually fall to the ground or onto surfaces rather than travelling through air over long distances. Transmission may also occur through smaller droplets that are able to stay suspended in the air for longer periods of time. As of the present time, there is no vaccine and there is no cure. Scientists and labs around the world are working on developing a vaccine which will be subjected to an exhaustive review and trial process to determine its safety and effectiveness before it is made available to the public.

As of November 23, 2020, several drug companies have reported being very close to developing an effective and safe vaccine and are awaiting FDA and CDC approval.⁷

⁶ Chaplin, Steve. "COVID-19: a brief history and treatments in development." *Wiley Online Library*, May 21, 2020. (Oct. 3, '20, 4:30 pm)
https://www.cdc.gov/wtc/administrator_20200504.htm

⁷ <https://www.cnn.com/world/live-news/coronavirus-pandemic-11-23-20>; 11/26/20, 11:30 pm

Both the career scientists at the Center for Disease Control (CDC) as well as the independent organization known as the Vaccines and Related Biological Products Advisory Committee are making the decisions for vaccine approval. The FDA commissioner has given assurance publicly that he will go according to the opinion of the career scientists and the advisory board.⁸

⁸ <https://khn.org/news/podcast-khn-what-the-health-fauci-interview-november-19-2020/>; 11/26/20, 1 am

IV. Effect on the Jewish Community

The pandemic has caused global social and economic disruption including the largest global recession since the Great Depression and global famines affecting 265 million people . Fifty million people are jobless in the United States and the economy is in worse condition than it has been since the Great Depression of 1929. In terms of the impact of the corona virus on the religious life of our communities – local, regional, national and international – it has been beyond measure. Everything was upended - from worship services, to educational programs for babies through boomers and from empty nesters to nonagenarians, from weekly mailings to meetings and lectures, from story hours to budget meetings. Almost overnight, almost everything went online.

Synagogues began incredible outreach efforts – almost instantly – to their constituencies in an effort to stay connected. This inspiring effort is still going on! In a matter of a day - or about that many hours, Zoom was catapulted to fame! It became the word which was spoken more times than any other by more people of all ages. Some people love it, some people hate it, but it is unarguably the way most of us have been living our lives for the last eight months. My Rabbinical school, the Academy of the Jewish Religion, in Yonkers, New York, was fortunately well-equipped to make the transition to all-virtual classes having used the Zoom platform for the last two years to serve a student body which is spread out throughout the United States and Canada.

I will discuss synagogues throughout the United States and how they responded, but first – to set the stage, please read, below, about how a Rabbi reminisces about the Shabbat before the Lockdown.

A Conservative Rabbi on the East Coast, in recording a personal High Holiday video message to his congregation of almost 1,000 members, on September 1, 2020, recalled the last sermon he delivered at the synagogue. In conjunction with thousands of synagogues nation-wide – this synagogue closed its physical doors a few days after that Shabbat. It was on Friday, March 13, 2020, that the nation went into lockdown and houses of worship were part of that lockdown. The Rabbi recalled in his holiday message the words which he said on the Shabbat of March 8: Although we don't know what the next few days, weeks and months will bring if, Gd forbid, we are not able to be together in person, I will hold each and every one of you in my heart. I will miss not being with you in person but we will stay connected because you are very important to me".

It was as timely a sermon as one could have possibly predicted.

Now let us look at the many incredible and varied outreach efforts which synagogues have developed over these months of the pandemic. Many of them are still being used to keep synagogues connected to their constituencies by providing "hands-on" contact, virtually.

My findings are the result of research and data collection from synagogues throughout the United States which shared the information through their list-servs, websites, email blasts and conversations.

The position papers on religious issues in the context of Jewish law, as interpreted by the different movements and denominations, are reprinted (with permission) in the Addendum: Responsa section of this thesis.

Letters in the form of email communication, regarding individual synagogue plans, policies and procedures are reprinted (with permission) in the section entitled Appendix: Outreach.

I urge you to refer to these sections often as they shed considerable light on issues regarding the usage of electronic forms of technology on Shabbat and Yom To. They also serve to illustrate how synagogues and the denominational movements have responded to the issues.

Synagogue Outreach in Lockdown

Barely 48 hours after the lockdown, synagogues sprung into action. Despite the fact that synagogues are sometimes made fun of for the plethora of committees which they spawn – committees were thankfully being formed at a record pace. These committees were comprised of professional (clergy and admin) and lay leadership. Fortunate synagogues had a physician or even an epidemiologist, or access to other medical professionals, to join them in their deliberations for how to best serve their congregants. It was clear from the beginning that effective communication would be the lifeline for the Jewish community.

Written Communication

Synagogues across the country sent emails and/or wrote letters to their members explaining that based on protocols recommended by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), they were closing their physical buildings – many as early as March 12, 2020 and that they were embarking on a virtual platform of offering a wide spectrum of services to their members.

Communication in the form of letters/email blasts from synagogues of varying sizes laying out the big picture of how synagogue life would likely resemble, in the coming weeks and months – to their members across the United States - are found in the Appendix: Outreach.

At the same time, countless emails went out - daily from some synagogues – with the goal of providing members with medical and other information as synagogues strove, and are still striving, to be the connection, and to be the glue that holds it all together, This describes the pivotal role of the synagogue in the life of the Jewish community.

We shall return to this theme – overtly and covertly – many times during the course of my thesis project.

Resources for Covid-19 Information

Synagogues of all denominations began by informing their congregants and communities of a wide range of medical and Covid-related resources.⁹ A synagogue located on the east coast which serves a largely senior population sent out information - both electronically and via hard copy for those without computer access – with detailed tips on how to stay healthy, what to do if one feels ill, a list of Covid-19 symptoms, local

⁹ When to Quarantine: Stay home if you might have been exposed to COVID-19.
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/if-you-are-sick/quarantine.html> Updated October 27, 2020 (November 17, 2020, 3:20 pm)

food and other resources for, ways to stay connected, phone numbers for good contacts if needed.

Another synagogue, also located on the east coast, emailed a list of suggestions dated March 15 and updated on March 17 which included a list of Urgent Care facilities offering drive-through Covid-19 testing, lists of activities for adults and children of all ages including. Virtual classes, concerts and tours including zoos, farms, national parks, free coloring books from museums, online ballet, crafts and other classes for children, free educational magazine subscriptions, and more.

The following is from a large synagogue – serving members of all ages on the East Coast – as it began the first of regular bi-weekly emails. The communications were warm and reassuring, emphasizing that their new motto involves physical distancing but not social isolation. They took their cue from the Torah portion of the upcoming *Shabbat* which recounted how Moses created a Jewish community of Israelites in the wilderness, with a bond of mutual responsibility. In that spirit this synagogue launched its own *network for broadcasting*, for the purpose of offering virtual services, classes, programs, discussion groups and much more.

Mobilizing to Help

In addition, the Caring Committee Chair and a synagogue vice-president spearheaded a phone call outreach to their entire membership, as they sought to become aware of needs, and to engage as many volunteers as possible in extending acts of *hesed* (loving kindness) to meet those needs.

Encouraging donations of food, the Congregation urged its members to drop off bagged (unopened, not expired) food items at the local community Food Pantry and to join the Neighbor Brigade, which in that mid-west community, is a network of volunteers to help area residents in need during a crisis. In response to the need for food on the part of homebound people, food drives proliferated in many communities across the country as volunteers came forward to receive and process the donations and to prepare the food items for distribution to those in need.

Another offering from a large synagogue on the east coast was named “Create for a Cause”, where volunteers lovingly made masks for every member of the synagogue community. These masks, in turn, were distributed by other willing volunteers, including many teens and college students.

Emotional Support During Covid-19

Numerous synagogues have been offering outreach in the form of emotional support to their constituencies. One synagogue on the east coast employs both a nurse and a social worker. Every Friday, the latter leads a discussion on coping with quarantining and the former leads a weekly pre-Shabbat meditation. In addition, another staff member leads a weekly session on Wellness. A congregant co-leads this session along with the staff member.

A synagogue in the mid-west recently offered a Mental Health forum with several therapists giving advice and answering questions, as well as offering a session given by a children’s therapist about parenting your children at this time. Future planning includes different trivia nights covering music from different decades.

Tele-health Help-lines have sprung up in communities across the country initiated by Medicare and other healthcare agencies and providers, to help people cope with stress and anxiety during this difficult time. A Bioethics Initiative took the form of a video posted on another synagogue's website addressing the spread and treatment of Covid-19 and discussing the search for a vaccine.

The Ziegler School, a Rabbinical Seminary on the west coast, which is housed at American Jewish University, has been helping people stay connected to Jewish traditions and learning despite the era of social distancing. They instituted *B'Yachad*, which means "together"¹⁰, whereby faculty presents Jewish values to interested viewers.

Another offering of theirs is called Soul Treatment, learning spiritual practices to ground the mind and body and elevate the soul which some find helpful. A senior rabbinical student skilled in pastoral counseling leads this session.

Program Ideas During Covid-19

The following are some creative ideas for activities which a Conservative synagogue in the mid-west is offering to their members and friends, taught by experts in each field:

As a culinary treat: this synagogue also presented a Virtual Challah workshop complete with a wide range of flavors - not just cinnamon / raisin, but also cherry, orange and

¹⁰ <https://www.aju.edu/byachad-together>. (September 12, 2020, 7:30 pm)

more! They planned to email members a list of ingredients, and then have a three-part zoom class, as follows:

- on the first Thursday evening , a talented member explained how to make the dough (without the flavoring)
- the following Friday morning – a lesson is given on how to braid is given
- On a Friday night before *Kabbalat Shabbat* – a *challah* show and tell.

Other programs include a musical evening/concert with a percussionist; an overview of Jewish music and specifically, Israel's national anthem, *Hatikvah*; quarantine cooking taught by a kosher chef; ballet/exercise taught by a former ballet dancer and company; and a community *havdalah*

Adult Education

A 200-member conservative synagogue on the east coast offers the following classes via live web meet-up – all classes are in English and require no previous background:

Schmooze & Torah – for catch-up and to learn Torah

Kosher Salt - stories from the Torah, from Rabbinic as well as folk and Chasidic

Mitzvah of the Week / Pesach Preparation - explores the 613 *mitzvot* (commandments)

Chevrah Shas - Talmud Study

929 Project - TaNaKh Study Group - The 929 Project is an international TaNaKh study group. – people read on their own and meet to discuss what they read that week

Zohar Class - the group reads the book of the *Zohar*, the book of Jewish mysticism-

Pirkei Avot – involves learning some of the ethical teachings and wisdom from the “Ethics of the Fathers”

Sing with Us – this synagogue believes that singing together as a community is fundamental to connectedness and to getting through a pandemic! Although they are not together in person, they are able to connect in a special way by singing together and by watching each other’s expressions.

A smorgasbord of virtual programs is offered by another large Conservative synagogue on the east coast: including a weekly wellness chat with the synagogue’s Nurse; Meet the Author; Daily Torah study; weekly class on present-day Jewish thinkers, musicians and artists class taught by the Rabbi; Jewish Pop Culture taught by the Education Director;

A mid-size Conservative congregation on the East Coast whose motto is “be a hub for the community”, offered the following via Zoom: Interfaith concert; Trivia Night; Healing Services; Hit Parade for Passover: with some fun, new melodies; Talent Night; *Lag B’Omer* Bonfire; Rabbi’s *Tisch* and a Virtual *Oneg* .

A mid-sized Conservative synagogue on the west coast did a successful film program. They worked with a rental film company and paid for the rights to show "Those Who Remain", a Hungarian film - postwar WWII Hungary. The company put it on vimeo for the congregation with a password for 48 hours. At the end of those 48 hours they had a zoom discussion with about 40 screens.

A Conservative synagogue in the mid-west reported on a very successful program which they recently offered with an actress who is well-known in both the Jewish and non-Jewish world. Partnering with five other synagogues they were able to affordably offer an “up close and personal” program with the entertainer. With 215 views and 350 people, the program was very successful. Some of the partners offered the program at no charge and some made it a fundraiser. The actress very graciously offered to speak with program sponsors before the official program began to either fund-raise for the synagogue or to just speak to them on a more personal level. This synagogue didn't feel the need for her to fund-raise so the sponsors were able to be un-muted during the schmoozing time.

A Question and Answer period followed the program. The entertainer answered all of the questions (done via the chat as everyone was muted). The sponsors covered the cost of the entertainer which enabled the synagogue to charge only \$18 per person. These programs are in addition to prayer services and their regular adult education classes now offered via Zoom

On the subject of prayer, a very helpful nationwide resource took the form of a spread sheet to help people find a virtual *minyan* throughout the United States:

https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1Nmyndg953zD9it_SADauRu2Drz_oGaYUUArlZ1jUNNc/

Kiddush Fund-Raising

In lieu of Kiddush contributions one synagogue offers people the opportunity to make donations to their online "Shabbat Experience."

They manage it the same as their Kiddush contributors. They are listed in the Friday e-blast and recognized by the clergy during the service.

Here is the wording in their communications:

Shabbat Experience Contributors:

J, K, J and S xxx in memory of K's mother, S xxxxx, and Jodi's and Steven's grandma S. Thank you again to everyone for our beautiful Zoom services. You made us all feel a part of your synagogue.

The Sxxxxx family in honor of S's 65th birthday with love from J, A, A and M.

Shabbat Experience Friends

S xxxxx in memory of his father, L F xxxxx, and in gratitude for the tremendous job our Gabbaim did on the High Holidays and all year round.

M xxxx in memory of her mother, L xxxxxxx

In Lieu of Kiddush Contributions...

This synagogue also welcomes donations to cover expenses related to their Zoom services. They are instructed to choose 'Shabbat Experience' from the drop-down.

Another synagogue does something similar. The Rabbi makes a *L'Chaim* after Saturday Shabbat Services and they invite people to sponsor. There is no limit on the number who can sponsor and it's a low entry point of only \$36.

Taking an Upbeat View

We learned that one Rabbi started a Silver Linings blog in which he wrote – in his weekly email blast to his congregation - about positive things that were being done in the community. He invited people to share any silver linings they observed in the hope that this would be a way for folks to better cope during this difficult time.

Humor to Lighten the Mood

And for a touch of “comic relief”, another Rabbi in a rural community in the US noted that he was happily praying and preaching on his own until he said something in a sermon that he didn't agree with and he no longer wanted to set foot in his own home again!

Nursery/Early Childhood Programs

A number of synagogues across the country have re-opened their pre-school programs. Tents have been purchased to facilitate outdoor activities. The children use separate entrances from other parts of the building where people are working. Masks are worn and youngsters' tables have Plexiglas partitions. Any snacks and beverages which are served are individually packaged for each child.

Religious School Classes and Instruction

A religious school on the East Coast is offered classes virtually on Wednesdays and Sunday school is hybrid, for those who wish to come in. They chose a learning program as a core part of curriculum which allows for virtual or in class participation at the same time.

In a synagogue in the northeast, religious school classes are offered in a hybrid format. Most youngsters attend one day in person and Zoom in on the second day of Hebrew during the course of the week.

In another synagogue on the eastern seaboard, both their early childhood program and their religious school instruction has been a hybrid mix, offering in-person which is largely outdoors - weather permitting – or indoors with strict adherence to CDC protocols, as well as virtual. There is also the option of all-virtual.

Sisterhood Programming

Also, on the subject of prayer, despite the pandemic, the Sisterhood of a synagogue in the Northeast region planned their Sisterhood Shabbat with the same level of participation as in previous years – the majority of the participants led services and read Torah and *Haftarah* via Zoom. A few women participated who were part of the outdoor courtyard *minyan* which the synagogue began offering in the late Spring of 2020.

Another Sisterhood on the East Coast sent out statements to its members, stating upfront that although there are no programs being offered at this time, the pandemic is an opportunity to connect to the synagogue which strives to be there for its members and friends – and it urged its readers to help support the synagogue's efforts in yet another way – by supporting Sisterhood.

Men's Club Programming

The Men's Club of a synagogue in the mid-west shared the following ideas: Sports night with a local Sportscaster over zoom; An investment banker over zoom talking about fixed income versus the stock market; the Rabbi-talking about where the Conservative movement is today and where it is going; Social Action- the synagogue organized a

Blood Drive with the Red Cross—with physical distancing and adherence to Red Cross guidelines

Another Men's Club planned some in-person socially distance events: hikes, bike rides, a streamed NBA basketball game outdoors courtesy of a member who donated a large blow-up screen and FM transmitter—using the wi-fi of the synagogue as well as a virtual movie night and virtual poker games, Scotch in the *Sukkah* whose size is going to be enlarged this year to allow for social distancing, is another Men's Club social activity.

Outreach Letters

As a follow-up to the first letter explaining the closing of their respective synagogues, the Clergy and/or the President or the Executive Director – or a combination of these individuals - sent letters to their members in advance of *Rosh Hashanah*. The letters explained, in warm and welcoming language, how synagogue services would look on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and they explained the logistics surrounding attendance protocols, if offered, and zoom/live streaming, where applicable. Service times and a schedule for all related events were included. For the texts of some of these letters, please refer to the Appendix: Outreach.

V. To Zoom or Not to Zoom

The following anecdote I believe will illustrate the concept of learning how to navigate the Zoom platform. It comes from an executive director of a synagogue on the west coast – illustrating the technical support that she and many other synagogue leaders and volunteers offer to congregants:

Regarding Zoom support, one executive director reported doing her fifth tutorial of the day when virtual programming was first getting underway. She undertook to help two people by trouble-shooting by email and two people by zoom chat. For the fifth person, she reported that it took her an hour and half to get her 89-year old friend on. To highlight the human touch in all of this, this executive director was pleased that it gave her an opportunity to eat breakfast with her friend, virtually.

Jewish Law Across the Denominations

The Reform movement doesn't have an issue with the use of electricity on Shabbat and Yom Tov so Zoom and live streaming services did not present a problem.

The Orthodox movement – with the exception of a ruling coming from a Sephardic community in the State of Israel - does not permit virtual services on *Shabbat* or *Yom Tov*, and it doesn't permit streaming of the Passover *sedarim* since the *seder* takes place on the holiday.

To view the Orthodox position, please read the article which appeared in Mosaic magazine, as well as the position expressed in a letter from an Orthodox Rabbinical organization, found in Addendum: Responsa.

To view the complete text of the Conservative movement's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards (CJLS) *Teshuvah* (response) which concludes its deliberations by positing that because of the pandemic and the isolation it causes, that streaming on Shabbat and *Yom Tov*, is to be allowed. The *teshuva* was written by Rabbi Joshua Heller. To view it and to view two dissenting opinions – one written by Rabbi Amy Levin, a *Masorti* Rabbi in Israel and one written by Rabbi Eliot Malomet, Rabbi of the Highland Park Conservative Temple in Highland Park, NJ, please, see Addendum: Responsa.

Several additional Teshuvot were issued by the CJLS related to other aspects of what is permissible in terms of Jewish ritual observance during the pandemic. These position papers present the Conservative Movement Law Committee's distillation of Halakha, Jewish Law, as it applies to the following subjects. The views expressed serve as the basis for decisions which many, if not all, Conservative Rabbis will be confronting, as the calendar year begins to unfold with the new reality of Covid-19, which seems to be here to stay, at least for the foreseeable future. Please see Addendum: Responsa for the texts of some of these position papers:

- Ethics of Gathering When Not All of Us May Attend in Person
- Clergy and Shelihei Tzibbur
- Choirs
- Multiple Recitations of the Same Liturgy
- Counting a Minyan Under One Roof, In Separate Rooms
- Services for Children, Teenagers, and Families
- Abbreviating Prayer Services for the High Holy Days of 5781/2020
- Hoikhe Kedushah on Yamim Noraim
- Torah Reading During COVID-19

- Shofar Blowing for Rosh Hashanah 5781/2020
- Tashlikh - Where and When
- Approved CJLS Teshuvah: Teshuvah Without Communal Prayer
- Washing on Yom Kippur
- Kol Nidrei 5781/2020
- Yizkor for the High Holidays 5781/2020
- On Live Streaming and Competition
- Pastoral Strategies for Leading Through Change
- Sukkot/Shemini Atzeret/Simhat Torah Guidance for Communities Affected by COVID-19
- Tips for Using Mahzor Lev Shalem 5781
- Conversion in a Time of COVID-19
- High Holiday Guidance for Communities Affected by COVID-19
- Conservative Rabbis Rule on Streaming Services on Shabbat and Yom Tov
- Live streaming on Shabbat and Haggim
- Sefirat Haomer
- CJLS Guidance for Remote Minyanim in a time of COVID-19
- Lifecycle
- Mikvah Guidance

Shabbat

Synagogues of all denominations are striving to provide a spiritual connection for their members and for their communities during this unprecedented pandemic.

There are differences of interpretation on the part of Rabbis in the Conservative movement in terms of the use of technology on Shabbat and Yom Tov. The list in the previous section provides the areas where the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Rabbinical Assembly, the organization of Conservative Rabbis world-

wide, has deliberated and reached positions. These positions are meant as a guide for Rabbis and their congregations.

A large Conservative synagogue on the east coast – whose goal is shared by a large swath of Conservative synagogues throughout the United States and beyond - is dedicated to staying connected by creating a *kehillah kedoshah* (a sacred community) – *davaning* (praying), supporting and talking with each other – all through Zoom. They are committed to being a spiritual center of life and learning for their congregation – every single day – albeit virtually for now.

A mid-sized conservative synagogue in the Mid-Atlantic states area is zooming Friday nights, Saturday mornings, and for *havdalah*. They initiated weekly in-person Shabbat services for b'nai mitzvah, permitting only the immediate family of *b'nai mitzvah* to attend. They also use zoom for Sunday *minyan*, Tuesday & Shiva *minyanim*, funerals, *B'nai mitzvah*, Adult Education and Religious School classes.

Many synagogues across the country are offering weekday *minyanim* – morning and/or evening, Shabbat eve (Friday evening) as well as Shabbat morning and afternoon services.

We must again acknowledge that nothing is a perfect solution – not even Zoom! As we've explained above, acceptance of Zoom on Shabbat and acceptance of other aspects of religious observance especially as it relates to the pandemic depends on one's religious inclinations in terms of interpreting Jewish law. Specifically, the three major denominational movements in Judaism – Reform, Conservative and Orthodox have weighed in – with different opinions – on whether one can zoom religious services

as well as what is permissible in other areas of observance as they relate to specific situations, challenges and circumstances in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Please refer to the Addendum: Responsa for a more detailed report on the positions of the Conservative and Orthodox movements and their interpretations of Jewish law.

Holidays: Purim through Shavuot

Megillah Reading

The following is the announcement sent to the members of a large conservative synagogue on the east coast two days before the national lockdown:

The Torah commands us “*v'nishmartem me'od l'nafshoteikhem* - you shall carefully guard your lives.” - Deut 4:15 Health and safety is of the utmost importance. Care for one's health and safety takes precedence over all Jewish customs and even other *mitzvot*. Tonight we are striving to find the right balance of taking appropriate caution for our communal health and safety while still fulfilling our obligation to rejoice on Purim and hear the *Megillah* (the scroll of Esther read on Purim)..

In that spirit, *Megillah* reading is going ahead as planned with some additional precautions and requests...

1. When you arrive at the synagogue, wash your hands with soap and water or use hand sanitizer. Bringing your own hand sanitizer is encouraged and appreciated.
2. If you are ill or choosing to stay away from larger gatherings because you are part of a vulnerable population, we will miss you, but are happy to announce

that you will still be able to hear the reading of the *Megillah!* You can join us on your computer or listen in on the phone.

Moving on to the festival of Passover, the following programs will illustrate the virtually (pun intended!) limitless variety of classes, skills, activities which can be taught and engaged in via Zoom.

Passover Programming

With Passover quickly approaching, it became painfully apparent that this year wasn't going to be anything like the Jewish community has experienced in the past. In the words of the "*Mah Nishtanah*", why is this night different from all other nights"? One answer is: Don't Ask!!

Or, another version of the "4 questions" from a synagogue in Canada:

●THE 4 PASSOVER QUESTIONS, 2020●

Can you hear me?
Can you see me?
Is your video on?
Can you mute?

Seriously, though, not to be caught unprepared, synagogues began to flood the airwaves with Passover Programming ideas. Here is a sampling:

"A Gazillion Things to Do with the *Mah Nishtanah*"

A congregant from a Reform synagogue in the southeast presented a webinar on the Four Questions: their history, worldwide customs and traditions, with input from hundreds of people around the globe. This included Jews from Uganda to Uzbekistan, Eskimo bishops, as well as world experts of ancient languages and sign languages. One gem in the presentation is the actual Egyptian language from the time

of the Exodus. Kids had a blast with Valley Girl, Rap and Hebrew Semaphore. It was both scholarly and fun!

The following is from a Reform synagogue in the southwest: A game and a manual for the First Time *Seder* Leader with our Rabbis and Cantor

What Is Four?

4 Questions, 4 Cups of Wine, 4 Children

Another do-it-yourself Seder:

How to Hold a Passover *Seder* in the Year of Corona virus
Loosely excerpted from a post - reformjudaism.org – March 20, 2020

Follow these 7 steps – they will give you the tools to conduct a virtual seder:

1. A Virtual *Seder* can be, well, virtuous! Take your pick of Skype, Zoom, Google Hangouts and more!
2. Need a *Haggadah* or two – no problem – we'll send them to you digitally.
3. Do you use place cards at your table – they too can be emailed in advance!
4. Passover Songs? – That's easy – guests email the leader the titles they like, in order of preference
5. Hiding the *Afikoman* – “Where's Waldo” anyone?
6. For the main course – the *Seder* leader is eagerly awaiting your recipes
7. Let all who are hungry ...Please remember those who don't have the means to make a *seder* – give *tzedaka* (charity)

Yom Ha-Shoah (Holocaust Commemoration) Programming

Many synagogues composed meaningful commemorations – some replete with footage of the concentration camps, the railroad tracks leading to the camps - often with mournful background music to further set the tone.

Shavuot

This festival, commemorates the giving of the Torah to the Jewish people, lends itself to much creative programming.

A Conservative synagogue in the mid west prepared a community virtual experience to celebrate *Shavuot*, with 10-12 synagogues participating. They taught via zoom over several days leading up to *Shavuot* to get people in the spirit. Zoom teachings on *yom tov* were for those who use zoom on the holiday (not all of the synagogues participate on *yom tov*). They were also planning a "meal" component (virtual cooking class prior, a recipe exchange, etc.), and communal zoom candle lighting at the appropriate hour, which was then be sign-off time for those not using technology on *Yom Tov*. They are hoping to record all sessions so that all can be viewed after *Yom Tov*.

One synagogue has done a live ***Tikkun Leyl Shavuot*** (a late night, or all-night, study session on the evening of Shavuot), for the past several years - generally five geographically-close synagogues participated together, respecting all ways of observing. This year, their plan was to replicate it virtually. The *Tikkun* this year was scheduled to begin at 9:00 p.m., consisting of only one class, because it would be difficult to concentrate on an online meeting for much longer than that and people will have already attended the online service. The Rabbi was going to teach the class. If more than one class was being offered, there would be a different teacher for each one. Another synagogue did a "Tailgate *Tikkun*" in the synagogue parking lot. Clergy were in the lot "broadcasting" both over a loudspeaker and via Zoom so they could be heard on phones via shul (or via other) "wifi" connections, or through cellular data.

VI. Pre-High Holidays

Pre-High Holiday Precautions

As the High Holidays were approaching, one synagogue in the northeast region of the United States required anyone who wished to attend in-person services to return the following “wellness check” questionnaire:

- Temperature recorded on (date & reading): _____
Please note: if your temperature is above 100.4 degrees, you will be denied access to the GRJC building.
- I will properly wear a mask, covering my mouth and nose, for the duration of my time at the GRJC.
- I agree to maintain standard six-foot distancing from others.
- I have not been diagnosed with COVID-19 in the past 14 days.
- I have not been in the presence of anyone who has been diagnosed with COVID-19 in the past 14 days.
- I am not exhibiting cough, shortness of breath or trouble breathing, headache, fever, muscle pain, chills, new loss of taste or smell.
- If I am diagnosed with COVID-19 within the next two weeks, I will contact the synagogue. At that time, the synagogue will give further instructions/information.
- In the last 14 days I have not traveled to a location with a CDC or NJ COVID-19 travel warning/COVID “hot spot”.
- In the last 14 days I have not been with friends or family from any state currently on the NJ quarantine list.
- Signing below or placing a sticker here indicates agreement with all the above.

The following summarizes one synagogue’s response when a family member who had attended a synagogue service tested positive for Covid-19. Since this synagogue insisted on registration at all events, they had contact tracing in place.

They never released the name of the family, but they contacted the people who attended services that day as well as those that went to an event that the attended. The sanctuary was thoroughly cleaned and sanitized which would have been done regardless.

The synagogue also called the department of health and was instructed that they followed protocols correctly and there was no reason to shut down for two weeks. In addition, this synagogue also takes peoples' temperatures – as do other synagogues and members must complete a waiver, similar to the one above, as well as answer 4-5 COVID-related questions. Despite all these protocols and despite the fact that everyone was required to wear masks and observe social distancing and keep conversation at a minimum, this family member tested positive two days after services!

Three weeks later thankfully, no one who attended services or the event, got COVID from this family.

Pre-High Holiday Programming

This pre-High Holiday season synagogues faced a huge challenge in terms of re-enrollment of their members. Following months of an absence of in-person interaction. It was going to be very challenging to “sell” the holidays which would unfortunately – given the pandemic of Covid-19 – be a continuation of no interpersonal interaction. Membership drives typically take place in the months leading up to the High Holidays – with the implicit lure of reconnecting with friends and colleagues, of being inspired by the sermons and the teachings of Rabbis and by the beautiful melodies of Cantors and choirs. None of these “selling points” could be offered to provide that “lure”. Instead,

virtually programming had to be the “lure” but there was concern this it would not be sufficiently satisfying to some members.

To get their members recharged and warmed up for the New Year, holiday-wise and support-wise, synagogues embarked on many targeted strategies. The Rabbis of a large conservative synagogue on the eastern seaboard, pitched support for the synagogue via videos in which they eloquently, warmly and hopefully convincingly asked that their congregants to keep the synagogue in the forefront of their personal priority plans.

The same synagogue had a successful “free challah pick-up” – the cost of the challot was donated by a member and everyone who signed up by a certain day was treated to the gift of a fresh challah for Shabbat. A nice touch was that the rabbis handed the challah through the car window and added a personal spoken greeting to each recipient.

Outreach Bags

Many synagogues prepared bags chock full of essentials for the holy days – one synagogue on the east coast included the following in a lovely reusable tote bag.

Machzor if requested as well as code for digital *machzor*
High Holiday Greeting Card
Book of Remembrance
Mizrach print
Apple, apple chips and honey
Pomegranate fruit strip
Rosh Hashana Seder booklet
Yahrzeit candle
Cookies
Grape Juice

Synagogues realized that they needed to be creative to assure a successful membership return. The variety of initiatives created a most imaginative response to this crisis but time will tell if synagogues hold on to their members, many of whom after weighing the value received, might feel that the synagogue came up short - in view of severe limitations brought on by the corona virus. Other members will clearly be impressed and re-charged by the incredible efforts of their synagogue during the pandemic and will pledge their support in full measure.

The High Holidays Will Come on Time

Although services, as they are usually experienced, will not be happening the usual way, the High Holidays themselves **are** happening! That means a lot of frantic (at times) planning and a lot of uncertainty and a lot of questions, as synagogues try their best to present the "new normal" with some normalcy!

For a vast array of High Holiday resources, check out cjhighholidays.com.. The arms of the Conservative movement are responsible for this. The entries are numerous including a section of practical suggestions under Education/Programming.

Ticket Costs

A synagogue in the eastern part of the US used a virtual conference platform, Whova.com. With this system, the synagogue can "give" free tickets to members and charge for other tickets (or offer them for free with donation) -- Tickets give a person a single sign-in to the platform and then people have access to whatever

they are entitled to with their ticket, for example, member-only access to a Yom Kippur study session with the Rabbi. It is not a streaming platform – but you can incorporate different types of streams into it -- Zoom, Vimeo, which is a video hosting, sharing, and services platform, YouTube, etc --- which enable people to access with a direct link to the online platform. The average cost is about \$2000 but it depends on the number of "tickets" needed.

Several synagogues in the northeast reported holding to last year's pricing of tickets.

A synagogue in Michigan responded: that "tickets" for their main High Holy Day services would be provided to all members in good standing and to those who purchase or receive guest tickets. The pricing had not changed much from past years. As an example, at this mid-sized Conservative synagogue, Guest tickets were \$350 for non-members. Members could purchase tickets for their extended family members at \$180. Members of other USCJ synagogues continued to receive free reciprocal tickets.

As in the past, youth and family services and High Holidays adult education carried no charge. Other than the main services, all of their other holiday services (e.g., *minchah* on *Rosh Hashanah*, *Sukkot* services) were open.

A Conservative synagogue on the Atlantic seaboard: asked for voluntary donations in lieu of seat revenue and tickets. Password protection was discussed. This synagogue rejected the idea in favor of asking for donations which was for them much more acceptable way of approaching a sensitive subject.

A large conservative congregation in the northeast adhered to its usual membership requirements for access – in other words, paying whatever portion of dues is required -

but not charging for extra tickets this year. They are also including the option for anyone to make a voluntary donation. A Conservative synagogue in the mid-west said that they froze dues and school fees at last year's levels, which was only the third time they did that in the last 30 years.

VII. The High Holidays and Sukkot

Selichot

It is customary to begin reciting penitential prayers at the end of *Shabbat* in what is often an all-night session and every morning thereafter in the week preceding *Rosh Hashanah*. Some synagogues held Virtual all-night study sessions. Others presented virtual concerts. There was a Conservative movement-wide all-night learning with multiple concurrent sessions and tons of speakers on many different topics

Rosh Hashanah

One synagogue in the south reported that all High Holiday services would be via zoom, a video conferencing platform, and that only the Rabbi and his assistant would be present in the Sanctuary. Many other synagogues followed this model with some permitting a maximum of 10 people in-person – by prior sign-up or lottery -to be socially distanced and wearing masks.

A synagogue in the mid-west says they were using live-stream, which transmits live events, for the High Holidays – via remote-control, operated by a company, not by the synagogue.

Another synagogue convened a *minyan* of ten people in the sanctuary with live-stream. They invited people to sign up for private moments in the sanctuary, from the beginning of the month of *Elul*, through *Yom Kippur*. Some synagogues posted a close-up image of the open Ark on Zoom and invited attendees to offer their own private prayers in that virtual way.

This synagogue was considering an in-person only service just for Rosh Hashanah *Minchah* (the afternoon service) when typically the attendance is low to begin with. This would be one of the rare times that they would have a service – or any other event - without an online option.

A Conservative synagogue on the eastern seaboard is happy to share a video which they made with their rabbi to let their congregation know what the plans were for the High Holidays. They reported that they enjoyed making it:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K-qHFq_nAM&feature=youtu.be

A mid-Atlantic conservative synagogue wasn't offering an in-person option for services except for those individuals who were designated to constitute a *minyan* to fulfill what the Rabbi felt was required to be said/done in the presence of a *minyan*. The in-person option was also available to those who would not use a computer on *Yom Tov /Shabbat*). They were considering allowing in, as well, those who lost close relatives, especially for *Yizkor*. All of this had to be pre-arranged. Their plan was also to have multiple *Tashlikh* locations that afforded social distancing. They opened the building during *Elul* and between *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur* to members who wanted to come and sit in the sanctuary and recite prayers privately – for 20 minutes, with social distancing, and by appointment only.

A small traditional synagogue with a largely senior population on the East coast did not offer Zoom services. They follow Orthodox practice. They sent a survey to their members to determine what level of participation their members were willing to engage in. After compiling the responses, they sent a letter to their membership explaining how

services would be conducted. To view a copy of both documents, please see Appendix: Outreach.

Shofar Blowing

A ram's horn is blown daily (except on Shabbat) from the beginning of the month preceding *Rosh Hashanah (Elul)*. The daily *shofar* blast serves as a wake-up call reminding people to review their deeds of the past year and to pledge to improve, where needed. The *shofar* is also blown on *Rosh Hashanah* according to a prescribed number of blasts. Many synagogues planned to follow a pattern of a reduced number of blasts this year to minimize any possible transmission of Covid droplets. Please see the Addendum: Responsa for the Conservative movement's position paper on reducing the number of *shofar* blasts. Other synagogues scheduled drive-in options this year – in another effort to reduce congregants' exposure to the dangers of droplets resulting from blowing the *shofar* indoors. Many Cantors and other *shofar* blowers covered the end of the *shofar* with a mask or similar covering. Synagogues organized – by prior sign-up - limited number groups which met and heard *shofar* blown outdoors at a park or at a congregant's home. One synagogue arranged socially distanced *shofar* blowing in local, neighborhood parks for small groups.

A synagogue on the west coast organized a Call to Action, to encourage widespread *shofar* blowing. They sent a request to their members to fill in where they planned to blow *shofar* so that a map could be created of all the *shofar*-blowing locations. They also created an original graphic design to convey their message and encouraged synagogues across the country to make the same appeal, with the following text:

*Join wherever you are, blow the Shofar!
Reverberating throughout the US
Rosh Hashanah Day 2 (September 20, 2020)*

Tashlikh

From the Hebrew root *shin, lamed, chet*, to toss, *Tashlikh* is the symbolic act of casting away the behaviors and actions which we've committed and which we want to improve on in the future. It is typically done by casting bits of bread into a body water to symbolize ridding ourselves of those behaviors which we want to change. A majority of Conservative synagogues, we learned, either arranged virtual – drive-up – or limited-attendance events, sometimes combining them with limited-attendance *shofar* blowing.

A Rosh Hashanah Seder for Families with School-Age Children

The Rosh Hashanah seder is a long-standing tradition in Sephardic Jewish communities. A JCC in a large city, in conjunction with area synagogues, was determined to replicate this custom by holding a special ceremony during which they would recite blessings over a variety of foods that symbolized their wishes for the year ahead. They sent all participants a shopping list of foods to gather to bring to this seder so their families could fully participate. They shared meaningful reflections on the year that passed and also for the year to come. Their goal was for their families to experience a new—actually an old!—way to celebrate the Jewish New Year with their family and friends – in compliance with safety protocols.

Kol Nidre/Yom Kippur

Differences in the Service

One of the moving highlights of the *Kol Nidre* service every year, for a congregation in the mid-west, is that during the service, all those who have lost a parent, a sibling or a child are invited to hold a Torah during the recitation of the *Kol Nidre* prayer. Family members hand the Torah to one another during the *Kol Nidre* prayer which makes it especially moving.

In order to preserve the meaning and the dignity of this act in the age of “virtual”, the synagogue decided that they would invite each individual or family to come to the Sanctuary in the weeks before the High Holidays to be photographed holding a Torah and then project the photos on the screen as the Cantor chants *Kol Nidre*.

This synagogue has also invited people to sign up for private moments in the sanctuary from *Elul* through *Yom Kippur*. Other synagogues posted a close-up image of the open Ark on Zoom and invited attendees to offer their own private prayers in that virtual way.

The custom of a Conservative synagogue in the North is to invite families to form a queue during *Neilah*, the closing service on Yom Kippur, and for each family to come forward for about 2 minutes for private prayer before the open *aron* (ark).

Another synagogue invited people to sign up for private moments in the sanctuary from *Elul* through *Yom Kippur*. This year, with their services online, many synagogues are planning to schedule families to come, to the *shul*, by appointment, during the ten days of penitence between *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*. The process would take place

over several days and there would be appropriate background music to accompany the individual prayers.

Another synagogue has asked their families to provide a photo of their loved one/s that could also be part of a prerecorded montage.

Another Conservative synagogue in the east invited each family to offer brief, meaningful readings as they stood before the Torahs in the ark with the Rabbi behind them, offering a few words of comfort to them over their loss. An added touch would be the Cantor singing in the background.

Yizkor

Yizkor is the memorial service recited on 4 holidays during the year, remembering our loved ones and friends and community members who have passed away:

A Conservative synagogue on the eastern seaboard scrolled photos. during the *Yizkor* Service, of loved ones who passed away, regardless of how many years ago – and also scrolled photos of famous people who've passed while the rabbi read their names, as is their custom every year at *Yizkor*.

A small-medium Conservative synagogue on the west coast produced a virtual Book of Remembrance which was very popular. Instead of a *Yizkor* book they did an online *Yizkor* board. It can be viewed as a slideshow, the cost was under \$25(!) and everyone uploaded their own photos and did most of the work on their own. The synagogue played it for 40 minutes on zoom before *Yizkor* on Yom Kippur.

Sukkot

Many synagogues planned staggered *Sukkah* visits. Several synagogues in the northeast invited small groups of its early childhood families – for example, 4 families at a time by prior sign-up – to meet in the *sukkah* at 15-minute intervals with the Religious School director

A synagogue on the west coast used their courtyard as an extension of the pre-school courtyard and had children attend in small groups with their classroom pods. They did not build a congregation *sukkah* because of distancing issues involved in actual construction, and for other Covid-related reasons

A synagogue in the northwest section of the country encouraged their members to build their own *sukkot* this year.

Another synagogue bought a portable *sukkah* big enough for one family and requested that people reserve it for a brief visit, individually, or with their families.

A Reform Temple posted the following nightly *Sukkah* Hosting schedule for Zoom get-together in the *Sukkah* which were held/hosted by the clergy “and...”, with a different group as “guests” each night, as follows:

Sunday was hosted by the clergy and the President – for the officers and Board
Monday was hosted by the clergy and Brotherhood President - for all the men
Tuesday was hosted by the clergy and Sisterhood President - for all the women
Wednesday Education Director and the PTO president for Families/Students
Thursday the Clergy and *Havurah* (communities/groups of folks with similar interests. Usually, a representative of the synagogue community would serve as coordinator to host a synagogue’s *havurot*

S'hmini Atzeret/Simchat Torah

Virtual *hakafot* and dancing were the order of the day at many synagogues! A large Conservative synagogue in the northeast was fortunate that one of their member couples, who teach Israeli dancing, was willing to put on a “show” – on *Simchat Torah* night – via Zoom. They took requests and they danced many old as well as new Israeli dances, inviting viewers to dance along with them, in their respective living rooms. They combined the Israeli dancing with a Judaica “show and tell” which made for a participatory celebration of the holiday.

VIII. Look to the Future

As the months of the Covid-19 pandemic wore on, conversations began, and are continuing to explore, whether to open synagogues, to what extent to open synagogues, how to open synagogue, what protocols to follow if/when synagogues are opened. A very helpful 26-page document has been published which discusses in great detail the ramifications of re-opening.

Please see Reopening Resources:

[file:///C:/Users/Offsite/Downloads/Cross-](file:///C:/Users/Offsite/Downloads/Cross-Movement%20Reopening%20Resources%20for%20Synagogues%202.pdf)

[Movement Reopening Resources for Synagogues 2.pdf](file:///C:/Users/Offsite/Downloads/Cross-Movement%20Reopening%20Resources%20for%20Synagogues%202.pdf)

and also the SCN Guide to Reopening:

file:///C:/Users/Offsite/Downloads/Back_to_Business_SCN_07-01-2020.pdf

Guidelines given in these documents include examples of what other synagogues are doing and the steps and the protocols they are following.

What have Synagogues Learned?

With the vantage point of looking back at High Holiday services – what was successful, what could be improved, etc., are among the questions which synagogues are discussing and evaluating as they try to learn from the once in a lifetime(?) experience of the High Holidays in the age of Covid-19.

Post-High Holidays Services

Executive Directors provided valuable insights into how their synagogues are handling technology now that the High Holidays have passed – and how that looks in terms of tech-assistance staff - and others relate how they are offering limited in-person options.

Zoom/In-Person: Outdoors/Indoors

A Conservative synagogue in the southeast responded that they are still holding everything on Zoom – Zoom Webinar was used for Saturday mornings.

The report from a Conservative synagogue in the southeast is that they were doing Friday night *Kabbalat Shabbat* entirely on zoom with at least 8-10 people on any given week leading, different parts of the service. In-person Saturday morning services (with a maximum attendance of 30 people) have been started at this synagogue as well as B'nai Mitzvah services with the immediate family only. The High Holidays were done as zoom webinar. They used two high-quality cameras that they installed in their sanctuary over the summer, one trained on the rabbi's podium, one trained on their reader's table.

Since March, a Reform synagogue in the South has offered a Friday night drive -in service in their parking lot, using an FM transmitter (cost \$150). They did this in with Zoom at the same time. They usually get upwards of 25 cars in their lot and another 15 people typically log in to zoom from their devices at home.

Saturday services are held in person with a limit of 30 people. For the holidays they allowed service participants to come in at a maximum of 50 individuals, and they also streamed the High Holiday services. They use Zoom daily for *minyanim* except that on

Mondays and Thursdays they allow an-person *minyán* for reading the Torah. They have set many protocols for their in-person services which are strictly adhered to.

An executive director of a small synagogue on the west coast reported a robust attendance at their Zoom services, but more recently, they've started seeing a slight drop in numbers due to some people experiencing "Zoom fatigue". When the weather is nice, people want to be outdoors. By having a drive-in service, people can wave to one another, chat over the hoods of their cars and feel a little less isolated. They are trying very hard to keep things fresh and different there and not fall into a rut. In the end, every congregation has to assess its own culture and provide opportunities for their constituencies to connect accordingly.

A Conservative synagogue in the mid-west had 10-20 live-streaming viewers on Shabbat mornings, before the Covid-19 shutdown. Since the synagogue closed they've had more than 200 live viewers every Saturday. Even when their website crashed for a half-hour on Shabbat morning, they had 160 live viewers. In addition, they have 40 to 50 live Zoom viewers. After services they open the microphones and invite their people to chat and "visit" with each other for a few minutes. The numbers are way, way up for both daily and Shabbat services.¹¹ Another executive director reports an increase in attendance but attributes it to the fact that the service is shorter on Zoom!

Synagogues - one in the northeast, one in the mid-west and one in the south - permit in-person gatherings with a very limited number of family members present – the

¹¹ <https://www.ipost.com/diaspora/with-services-online-many-synagogues-are-seeing-greater-attendance-625296>
(November 24, 2020, 5:15 pm)

maximum numbers from the above synagogues range from 6 to 10 to 20, depending on the size of the sanctuary and on the location of the bimah, etc.

Synagogues across the country reported a boost in synagogue attendance with Zoom. The goal is keeping people engaged, getting people out of their houses, offering the ability for people to attend a service that's not on a television screen or on a computer or on a phone screen. In addition, their virtual Summer Shabbat Series has been a draw for them, since social distancing protocols wouldn't allow them to have a gathering of that size (never under 100-200), that wouldn't put vulnerable folks at risk.

The executive director of another synagogue weighs the advantages and disadvantages of congregants being in cars for drive-in services which some synagogues reported success with - as opposed to being on screens. With the former, there is still no personal interaction, and each person (or family) is still in their own cocoon, but for some it's a welcome change from looking at a screen for hours. Again, it comes back to the culture of the synagogue and every synagogue needs to assess what works for their members' and for their culture.

Another executive director reported good results with outdoor services and endorsed the use of an FM, saying that it worked beautifully in all weather.

A plethora of programs continue to be offered with great creativity and seemingly endless variety in synagogues across the country. Thanks to "virtually" inexhaustible energy on the part of clergy, professional staff, lay leaders and volunteers of all ages, these programs include topics appropriate to the season. These programs are in

addition, of course, to the wide scope of religious services offered. Here is a sampling of offerings which synagogues are planning for the winter months:

Virtual Concerts, Interfaith Thanksgiving Services, Holocaust Commemorations, *Kristalnacht* Commemorations, *Hanukah* Cooking Demonstrations, a Virtual/Live Interactive Tour of European Cities, A Scholar Stream Series which is run by the arms of the Conservative movement: The Rabbinical Assembly, The Jewish Theological Seminary, United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism and Ziegler, the Conservative Rabbinical School in Los Angeles. Among the subjects addressed include: Jewish History, Equity, Forgiveness and Racial Justice (Race, Gender, Equality), *Chumash* (the Five Books of Torah), Intermediate Hebrew, the Book of Esther and other *Megillot*, Torah Study: A Critical View; Contemporary, Israel, the Book of Psalms and the Book of Proverbs, to name a few.

IX. Conclusion

Although it is impossible to predict when the Covid-19 pandemic will end and when synagogues will be able to once again open their doors to welcome their members - without limitation and without restrictions - at religious services, and at all the many other activities they offer. However, the virtual lifestyle, Zoom, which is the way most synagogues have maintained connections with their members for the past 9 months will likely remain as a means of connecting long after the pandemic.

As I write this, the pandemic is in its ninth month and the only possible “birth” in sight is the development of a reliable, safe and effective vaccine. It seems clear that synagogues, while not being resigned to “live by Zoom alone” are not going to give up some reliance on Zoom in at least several areas. Whether for communal prayer, for lectures, for educational and cultural offerings and for a host of other ways in which synagogues have reached out to those who – without a pandemic limiting them - were heretofore unable to participate nearly as fully in what the synagogue had to offer, zoom is here to stay. The consensus seems to be that this is the silver lining.

Zoom doesn't work for transmitting religious services on Shabbat and Yom Tovim for synagogues who don't use technology on those days but these communities have been very creative in reaching their populations with individual, limited-size in-person *minyanim* – daily and on Shabbat and on Yom Tov. Large backyards have been enlisted with tents erected for the High Holidays and beyond. Plexiglas partitions are often used to protect against the spread of aerosolized particles and of course the standards of masks and distancing are enforced.

It is too early to compile actual numbers in terms of how successful synagogues have been, and will be, in maintaining their membership rosters, or in growing their ranks, or, hopefully not, in reporting a shrinkage in their figures, during the pandemic. What has been reported in many communities is that the number of people who “attend” religious services on a daily and on a weekly basis has increased – significantly for some synagogues. Another benefit is that for some families, the availability of having the synagogue in your living room is that families who are geographically separated – even aside from the current restrictions – can pray together. And for those families where gathering in person wasn’t possible due to the logistics of travel, in the best of times, in some cases, these families are reporting that they are able to come together more, now.

The number of people who are attending adult education classes and other programs is also growing – though it can ebb and flow, as it can in-person – due to many factors, including what is being offered. Some people experience “Zoom fatigue”, others are energized and relieved by the very fact of not to have get “dressed up” to attend something entertaining or educational.

The same circumstances apply to sad events, namely, attendance at funerals and unveilings. The heightened bonding and the experience of greater connectedness both in times of joy and in times of sadness are reported by many individuals to be a positive by-product of Zoom technology. What is also a sign of positive community-building is the fact that many folks with computer skills are more than willing to help others who are just getting started.

Many rabbis have weighed in to predict that although Zoom is not a replacement for in-person prayer and for other forms of communal coming-together, it has been a powerful platform for keeping the synagogue community connected and cohesive. It will likely supplement and enhance connectivity even when our synagogues are back to offering in-person services and programs, classes and lectures, films and trips, recreation opportunities and outings.

The key word is connection, and with connection comes maintaining the ties that bind people and communities together. Synagogues get this – each of the denominations is dedicated – and has been for decades – to training lay leaders how to be good at providing the connection, the glue that holds a community together. But never before has the need been so great – I’m not overstating it when I say that the key to Jewish survival is how well our synagogue fulfill their jobs. From everything I’ve experienced, read, heard, watched, and listened to, our synagogues have risen to the challenge of achieving *achdut*, unity, in the face of a heretofore unheard of – in our day – medical plague.

With Gd’s help and with continued determination and with steadfast adherence to the safety protocols which our medical experts instruct us to follow, we will come out of this fraught time. We will emerge intact from this pandemic - ourselves, our families and our Jewish communities - because we are survivors. We will emerge intact because we have something that is worth preserving and worth surviving for – the future of our Jewish community - and the institution which is the great unifier of that Jewish community is the synagogue. So may it come to pass, speedily, in our day. Amen.

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ADDENDUM: RESPONSA

Introduction

In this section, I am presenting position papers and guidance based on Jewish law as it is interpreted by the Conservative movement's, Committee on Jewish Law and Standards (CJLS) and the Schechter Institute which represents part of the Conservative movement, based in Jerusalem, but which reaches its own positions regarding Jewish law. I've also provided the positions and guidance of various organs of the Orthodox movement.

My purpose in providing the information is to offer the reader the opportunity to understand the issues and to understand the divergent views on these issues as interpreted by the movements.

It is not my intention to leave out any Reform viewpoints but I haven't found any documentation to indicate that the Reform movement has taken a position/s that would conflict with its reliance on Zoom and/or Live stream and/or any other virtual platform for transmitting services on Shabbat or on Holidays.

Each of the movements clearly takes very seriously the threat that Covid-19 poses to the health of all ages of the population with a particular emphasis on the need to protect those over 65 and those with underlying medical conditions that could be exacerbated by exposure to the Corona virus.

Strict protocols are in place across the denominational spectrum to keep exposure to the barest minimum for all involved. We are living in unprecedented times and the Reform, Conservative and Orthodox movements' top priority is to keep their populations safe.

The following teshuvot (literally, the word means answers) and position papers have been published by the Conservative Movement's Law Committee:

The Conservative Movement's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards (CJLS), at the beginning of the Pause (Lockdown), issued the following position paper:

Posted on: Friday March 13, 2020

Please find information below from Rabbi Elliot Dorff, CJLS chair, Rabbi Pamela Barmash, CJLS co-chair, Rabbi Joshua Heller, chair of the Rites and Rituals Subcommittee, Rabbi Jacob Blumenthal, Chief Executive, and Rabbi Ashira Konigsburg, Chief Operating Officer, providing guidance for individuals and communities affected by Corona virus. Please note that this is not an official responsum of the CJLS. We expect the CJLS to have conversations on the needs of this crisis and offer additional guidance in the near future.

In response to further queries posed to the CJLS and the Rabbinical Assembly about quarantines and closures of synagogues, schools, and organizations due to the COVID-19 (known as Corona virus), we urge those whom civil and medical authorities have recommended for closure to follow civil and medical advice. *Pikuah nefesh*, protecting human life, overrides almost every other Jewish value. Those synagogues that are still having services in person should follow guidelines offered to us by the CDC, including having participants sit at 6 feet apart, sanitizing frequently, and eliminating handshaking, kissing of ritual objects, and other activities that might lead to transmission.

1. As we are now moving from live streaming services that have a minyan to a period where many buildings are being closed for all gatherings, our precedent states that a minyan requires 10 Jews gathering in person, and it is preferred for people to join a live stream of such a service if they cannot be present themselves.
2. There is joy and comfort that comes from being together (hevrah). Since many in our communities are looking for ways to connect their community together during this period, we recommend that communities gather a minimal number of people to constitute a minyan in person with a live streaming link. For communities that cannot meet in person, we recommend that they gather virtually to daven on weekdays, even if they do not technically constitute a minyan.
 - o These virtual gatherings for shaharit, minhah, and ma'ariv may include the regular liturgy without devarim shebakedushah (no barkhu, kedushah, or kaddish). While there is not technically a repetition of the Amidah in the absence of a minyan, the "leader" may choose to recite the Amidah loud enough for others to hear, omitting kedushah, but encouraging congregational singing. This will be helpful to those who may not have ready access to a siddur.

- We recommend an alternative to the recitation of kaddish yatom (Prayers adapted from Lev Shalem and from Masorti Israel - <https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/mourning%20prayer%20when%20there%20is%20no%20minyan%20edited.pdf>)
 - The Torah may be read from a printed text, such as a Humash or Bible, without aliyot. The *berakhah la'asok b'divrei Torah* may be recited before the Torah reading.
 - Since many are now at home, separated from their usual school, work, or social communities, communities should offer regular Torah study and/or davening activities besides the ones at regular minyan times.
3. For communities that cannot meet in person on Shabbat and holidays, congregational leadership should provide guidance for home davening and Torah study.
 4. Some may not have access to a siddur (or to the siddur that the linked virtual community is using) and may [request a pdf](#). Every attempt should be made to reduce potential violations of Shabbat. Ideally, a PDF could be printed out before shabbat. If this is not possible, a tablet or laptop should be put on airplane mode (before Shabbat starts), and the pdf should not be edited. For halakhah on the use of electrical devices on Shabbat, please see Rabbi Daniel Nevins' teshuvah:

<https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/public/halakhah/teshuvot/2011-2020/electrical-electronic-devices-shabbat.pdf>
 5. Mourners during shivah will feel the lack of visitors, and communities are urged to extend special care via telephone calls and virtual visits to mourners.
 6. We should be very mindful of the mitzvah of hesed (loving-kindness) and be especially concerned to assist the elderly and infirm in our communities.
 7. Weddings should be postponed, if at all possible. Calligraphed ketubot with the previous intended date of the wedding can be present and on display, but a ketubah with the correct date should be used for the wedding itself.

We pray for healing for those who are ill and for health and wellness for us, our communities, and all people.

As the pandemic has upended our lives in so many ways, religiously, it has necessitated the close examination of aspects of Jewish law, *Halakha*, to determine what, if any accommodations might be made. The following is the position posted by

the Conservative movement's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards (CJLS):

Further guidance followed: CJLS Guidance for Remote Minyanim in a time of COVID-19 - Tuesday March 17, 2020

Please find below a letter from Rabbi Elliot Dorff, CJLS Chair, and Rabbi Pamela Barmash, CJLS Co-Chair, providing guidance for communities affected by COVID-19. Thanks to Rabbis Joshua Heller, Daniel Nevins, and Avram Reisner for contributing to earlier drafts and the CJLS as a whole for giving input. Please note that this is not an official responsum of the CJLS.

The CJLS-approved position of Rabbi Avram Reisner that permits remote participants to join on weekdays through electronic means to a minyan (ten adult Jews) gathering in person remains the standard practice. The majority of us on the CJLS firmly believe that this should remain the rule even in this she'at hadehak (crisis situation).

Individuals are obligated to pray, and they may do so on their own without a minyan. Congregations may also establish a link to communal prayer without a minyan gathering in person and omit the recitation of *devarim shebikdushah* (no *barkhu*, *kedushah*, or *kaddish*). While there is not technically a repetition of the Amidah in the absence of a minyan, the "leader" may choose to recite the Amidah loud enough for others to hear, omitting *kedushah*, but encouraging congregational singing. This will be helpful to those who may not have ready access to a siddur. Jewish leaders are advised to provide interactive online Torah study opportunities as well so as to facilitate a sense of communal connection during this time when so many of us are staying at home.

Kaddish yatom (Mourner's Kaddish) has a special resonance. Our movement has created several prayers that are acceptable in lieu of *kaddish yatom* (Mourner's Kaddish) and those who are mourners or observing *yahrzeit* may find spiritual and emotional sustenance in these alternatives to *kaddish yatom* (Mourner's Kaddish). Please go to: <https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/story/cjls-guidance-remote-minyanim-time-covid-19>.

Some of them may feel distress at not being able to recite *kaddish yatom* in the absence of a minyan, particularly for a prolonged period, and rabbis must reassure mourners that they are fulfilling their Jewish legal obligations under the circumstances and should feel no guilt whatsoever in remembering and honoring the deceased in this way. There are also other alternatives to saying *kaddish yatom* with a minyan when that is impossible, such as studying a text or dedicating some other mitzvah to the memory of the loved one.

However, a number of the members of the CJLS believe that in the current dire circumstances a more lenient position on constituting a minyan remotely may be acceptable, especially since there have been significant advances in technology. The classic sources (Shulhan Arukh Orah Hayyim 55:13, and others cited by Rabbi Reisner) require that a minyan be located in one physical space. However, Shulhan Arukh Orah Hayyim 55:14 does open the possibility that there may be an exception by joining in to constitute a minyan if one can see the faces of the other participants: "One who is standing behind the synagogue, with a window between that person and the congregation, even if it is several stories up and less than four cubits wide, and who shows his face to them, may combine with them to form a minyan of ten." The possibility

of a minyan being constituted by people who are not physically near each other is further expanded by Rabbi Yitzhak Zilberstein in Hashukei Hemed on Berakhot 21b (p. 135), where he permits constituting a minyan for *kaddish yatom* (Mourner's Kaddish) where people are scattered in a field but can see each other. Recently Rabbi Haim Ovadia called attention to this source, arguing in favor of constituting a minyan by means of real-time video and audio connection between ten Jews. Therefore, in this crisis situation, a number of us are of the opinion that a ruling relying on these precedents should be issued:

In this crisis situation in an area in which civil and/or medical authorities decree that it is unsafe for people to gather in person and recommend or order the closure of houses of worship, it is permitted to constitute a *minyan* whose constitutive participants (ten adult Jews) are not located in one physical place.

Some of us hold that in an emergency situation such as the one we are now experiencing, people participating in a *minyan* that is only online may recite *devarim shebikdushah*, prayers that require a *minyan*, with their community. The participants counted for the *minyan* must be able to see and hear each other through virtual means and be able to respond "amen" and other liturgical replies to the prayer leader. Because reading from a Torah scroll is permitted for private study, the Torah reading may be read from a scroll without *aliyot*. Alternatively, the Torah may be read from a printed text, such as a *Chumash* or Hebrew Bible, without *aliyot*. The *berakhah la'asok b'divrei Torah* may be recited before the Torah reading.

Others hold that it is permitted to constitute a *minyan* exclusively online only for the sake of reciting *kaddish yatom*. The source in *Hashukei Hemed* sets a precedent in that it refers specifically to *Kaddish* (in a cemetery), rather than to a *minyan* generally. The requirement for a *minyan* for *Kaddish* is not mentioned in the list of *devarim shebikdushah* in *Mishnah Megillah* 4:3. The requirement for a *minyan* for *Kaddish* is first mentioned in *Masekhet Sofrim* 10:7, not in the Babylonian Talmud or the Talmud of the Land of Israel. The participants counted for the remote *minyan* must be able to see and hear each other through virtual means and be able to respond “amen” and other liturgical replies to the prayer leader. They do not recite *devarim shebikdushah*, and they read Torah from a printed text, such as a Humash or Hebrew Bible, without *aliyot*. The *berakhah la'asok b'divrei* Torah may be recited before the Torah reading. *Kaddish derabbanan* may also be recited after Torah study with a remote *minyan*.

Those who would permit constituting a *minyan* solely online, whether for all prayers requiring a *minyan* or only for Mourner's *Kaddish*, limit this permission to this “*she'at hadehak*” (crisis situation), when it is forbidden or unsafe for ten adult Jews to gather in person for weeks at a time. This permission is also limited to an area where most of the synagogues have been ordered, or recommended, to close for the crisis. This does not apply to those in an area where the civil and/or medical authorities have not recommended or ordered that the houses of worship close for public gatherings.

Importantly, the permission to constitute a *minyan* remotely is still subject to concerns as to how this might be accomplished on Shabbat. There are complicated issues with using video technology to participate in services on Shabbat and Yom Tov, and we mention them here to advise rabbis and congregations of these obstacles. The CJLS is

currently working on them, but even those who permit it would require that the stream not be activated by a Jew on Shabbat. The stream would have to be already activated at the synagogue before Shabbat or activate automatically at a specific time. Individuals linking to the stream should activate their equipment before Shabbat or have it activate automatically because a “many-to-many” video connection, such as Zoom, often requires each participant to log in, a problematic practice on Shabbat. Furthermore, there remain additional special concerns for Shabbat and holidays that must be taken into account: Jews must avoid taking active steps to permanently record data or fix the equipment on Shabbat if it malfunctions. These complicated issues should not be ignored, and congregations can bypass these challenges by offering a live streaming option at a time that is not Shabbat or Yom Tov (for example, Friday night before sundown, motza’ei Shabbat for Havdalah)

The Conservative Movement’s Position Paper on Streaming Seder:

Posted on: Wednesday March 25, 2020

Please find below a letter from Rabbi Joshua Heller, chair of the CJLS rites and ritual subcommittee providing guidance for communities affected by COVID-19. Thanks to Rabbis Aaron Alexander, Pamela Barmash and Ashira Konigsburg for contributions. Please note that this is not an official responsum of the CJLS.

In many communities, medical professionals advise or public authorities have mandated that different households not join together for seder this year. We urge all Jews to follow this advice. As a result, many Jews will be

separated from family and close friends with whom they usually celebrate Passover, and many congregations that normally invoke the principle of "*Kol Dichfin*" to host community seders or make matches will be unable to do so. The nature of COVID-19 this Passover means that some will be tempted to risk their lives or the lives of others by travelling or gathering, or will face psychological harm by being isolated for seder and multiple days of Yom Tov. We expect that many families and communities will try to minimize these risks by connecting to seders via videoconferencing.

Our committee has already addressed the issue of virtual presence in the *teshuvah* on remote minyanim (page 70 of this document) to constitute a quorum for weekday services, opening the door for participation via video in many weekday rituals, including the pre-passover siyyum. However, this year many observant Jews who would normally not consider using electronic means of communication on Shabbat or Yom Tov are trying to figure out how to respect those important prohibitions in the face of a truly unprecedented and dangerous situation. While this guidance is focused on seder, it will also be useful for those who are wrestling with the question of video access to Yom Tov and Shabbat communal prayer, including Yizkor (while some have suggested offering Yizkor-like service over Hol Hamoed as another option, this does not solve the larger issue of Yom Tov davening).

The questions of electronics on Shabbat and Yom Tov are extremely complex, but we offer this guidance, specific to this year, when multi-family in-person seder gatherings are truly unsafe, and may be forbidden by local law, and many individuals will be isolated from family and community. Furthermore, there are specific leniencies in the laws of Shabbat and yom tov related to one who may be at risk of a life-threatening illness, and many in our community fall into that category this year. As such, this guidance only applies to the current situation and may not apply in future years.

Ideally, the video option should be accessed in a way that does not involve direct interaction with an electronic device, either by leaving the conference active for the duration of use, or using the equivalent of a timer to activate the conference in each location. In a later update we will list different videoconferencing options and their known capabilities to do so. Doing so is permitted within the bounds of previous decisions of the CJLS, and is certainly viable for first seder.

If this is not possible, ways to minimize, but not eliminate, violations of Shabbat and Yom Tov include (in order of decreasing preference)

1. Arranging in advance for a non-Jewish person to activate the conference (practical in an institutional setting where there are non-Jewish workers or a household with non-Jewish members already present).
2. Using a virtual assistant, like Siri or Alexa, to activate the stream.

3. Logging in through a simple press of a button on an app, or clicking a link, on a device which is already activated, rather than by typing, and without having to “wake up” or turn on the device.
4. Doing so only after dark of 2nd day Yom Tov, when the first day of Yom Tov has ended

There is more leniency to activate the stream in one of these ways for a person who is known to be ill, or has a heightened risk for harm from infection, or suffers from a disability.

Activating a recording device on Yom Tov or Shabbat is a violation of Shabbat or Yom Tov. Therefore, if a stream is initiated on Yom Tov or Shabbat, it should absolutely be with recording disabled. Typing on a device is a violation of Shabbat, so participants should be encouraged to interact via speech and video, rather than typed messages/text chat. In general, on Shabbat or Yom Tov, we prohibit activities where one might be tempted to perform forbidden labor if something goes wrong. We are aware that that strong temptation exists to do so here if technology fails, and we urge people to be mindful of ways to limit any violations that might result if that happens.

We understand that even if a stream or videoconference is set up in a way that is in compliance with, or respectful of, the letter of the law, it may also be accessed by those who choose to do so in a way that is not. This fact

does not prohibit offering the connection, but we encourage those who offer a stream to do so in a way that minimizes the types of violations that might be committed by accessing it. This is similar to the real-life situation where one might invite people to seder who will drive or violate other prohibitions in order to attend.

Ideally, there would be a seder plate at each location, but at the very minimum, every participating location should have access to wine or grape juice, three matzahs, carpas (any green vegetable), maror (any bitter vegetable, such as horseradish, endive, other bitter greens), and salt water. If a Haggadah is not physically available, one can follow the seder without one, or a number of haggadot are available that can be downloaded and printed before the start of the holiday. Communities should do what they can to supply these basic items to everyone, if it can be done safely.

There are two main types of video presence: two/multi-way (zoom, facetime google hangouts) and one-way (facebook live, streamspot). It is possible to fulfill the requirements of the seder alone, or by hearing the liturgy read live by others, so therefore a one-way (streamed) option would suffice, but it would clearly provide more comfort for all participants to be able to interact.

There are [specific times set for the seder to take place](#). If participants are in multiple time zones, the seder should ideally begin so that it is late enough

for all involved to fulfill their obligation, or else those for whom it is too early should make sure to perform the key rituals after dark.

These guidelines are specific to this year when there is significant risk to human life. May we celebrate seder next year, in good health and safety, and, G-d willing, in Jerusalem.

<https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/story/streaming-seder>

The Conservative movement's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards (CJLS) issued a Teshuva which decided by a vote of 19 to 3 with 3 abstentions in favor of Streaming on Shabbat and Yom Tov. The *teshuva* was written by Rabbi Joshua Heller and it can be found here:

<https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/2020-05/Streaming%20on%20Shabbat%20and%20Yom%20Tov%20Heller.pdf>

Rabbi Amy Levin, a Conservative Rabbi living in Israel, issued a dissenting opinion on the subject of Streaming on Shabbat/Yom Tov. Her dissenting opinion can be found here:

<https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/2020-05/Streaming%20Services%20on%20Shabbat%20and%20Yom%20Tov%20Dissent-%20Levin.pdf>

For a position paper by Rabbi Eliot Malomet, a Conservative rabbi in in the United States, who is not in favor of streaming on Shabbat and Yom Tov, please see:

<file:///C:/Users/Offsite/Downloads/Ten%20Reasons%20For%20Not%20Streaming.pdf> – Rabbi Malomet

Ten Brief Responsa/Halakhic Reactions to the Corona Crisis Responsa in a April, 2020 - Pesach Responsa by Rabbi David Golinkin, Director, Schechter Institute, in Jerusalem. The Schechter Institute is part of the Conservative movement but is independent of the CJLS:

I want to thank Rabbis Phil Scheim, Avi Novis Deutsch, Irina Gritzevskaya, David Arias and Josh Heller and Dr. Peri Sinclair who sent me some responsa related to some of these issues or who discussed these issues with me.

David Golinkin

The Questions:

1. **Virtual minyanim on weekdays (Orah Hayyim 55:20; 90:9)**
2. **Virtual minyanim on Shabbat or right before and after Shabbat (Orah Hayyim 261:4)**
3. **Selling Hametz via telephone, fax, or the internet (Orah Hayyim 448:3)**
4. **Holding an online Seder (Orah Hayyim 495, 496, 502, 511, 514)**
5. **Holding a Seder this year on Pesah Sheni (not in the Shulhan Arukh)**
6. **Hearing the Megilla** *Hearing the Megillah via radio, television, telephone or the internet (Orah Hayyim 587:1)*
7. **Immersing in a Mikveh (Yoreh Deah 183ff., 195, 198, 201)**

According to Biblical Law, a couple cannot have sexual relations until the woman immerses in a Mikveh. According to Rabbinic law, the husband and wife cannot touch each other until the wife goes to the Mikveh (Yoreh Deah 195).

Rabbis and States have had different reactions to the virus regarding this issue. In Israel, the Ministry of Health has not closed the Mikvaot. They say that women should do the preparations at home, keep a distance of two meters between the woman and the Mikveh attendant, use the usual amount of chlorine, and there must be a break of ten minutes between the women using the Mikveh. Women in quarantine or who have the virus may not go to the Mikveh. Some religious women and doctors in Israel have issued strong statements urging women **not** to go to the Mikveh because of *pikuah nefesh*.

Outside of Israel, there have been various reactions. I was informed that in Strasbourg the rabbis have closed the Mikvaot, while in Paris they have not. In Argentina, the government seems to have closed the Mikvaot. In the U.S., the rabbis in specific cities have closed the Mikvaot.

A woman may also immerse in a loose-fitting garment in a lake, river or ocean if that is possible.

The Va'ad Halakhah of the Rabbinical Assembly of Israel suggested (Rosh Hodesh Nisan 5780) that when women cannot go to the Mikveh because of the current crisis, the couple can relax the rabbinic laws regarding touching, hugging and kissing.

Bibliography

1. The Hebrew and English websites of “Nishmat”: yoatzot.org which is updated every few days.
2. gov.il/he/Departments/news/mikve_seker
3. A letter from the Ministry of Health, 19/3/20 at www.health.gov.il
4. Dina Halutz, Ynet, March 24, 2020
5. Josefin Dolsten, JTA, March 20, 2020

8. Pidyon Haben ceremony for a firstborn son on the 31st day (Yoreh Deah 305)

Question from Rabbi Andy Sacks, Jerusalem: According to halakhah, one must perform the *pidyon haben* ceremony after 30 days, on the 31st day of the boy’s life. Can the ceremony be postponed until the corona crisis ends?

Responsum: In general, it’s forbidden to delay the ceremony.

Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, as usual, summarizes most of the opinions. Many poskim say that if you delay the ceremony you are transgressing a positive commandment, while many others say that one may not delay because of the principal that “the zealous do their religious duty as early as possible” (Pesachim 4a).

However, after the fact, if the ceremony was not performed on time, it can be performed later on. (Rabbi Feinstein, *ibid.*; Rabbi Vernon Kurtz, *Responsa 1991-2000*, pp. 166-170, also available at the RA/CJLS website). Indeed, if a father did not redeem his son, the son must redeem himself when he grows up (Yoreh Deah 305:15).

Is it required to have a minyan for the ceremony?

Responsa of Rav Natronai Goan (Sura, ca. 850), ed. Brody, Vol. 2, No. 278, pp. 417-418: one only needs a Kohen. Rabbi Avraham ben Yitzhak Av Bet Din (Narbonne, d. 1179), Sefer Haeshkol, ed. Albeck, Part 1, p. 241: one only needs a Kohen; if the father wants to gather a minyan, he is allowed to do so.

Rabbi Menahem Hameiri (Provence, d. 1315), Bet Habehira to Pesachim 121b, ed. Klein, p. 257: "This ceremony does not need ten [= a minyan], but for the sake of *hiddur mitzvah*, it's customary to have ten". This ruling was followed in our day by Rabbi Yitzhak Yosef, p. 315 and Rabbi Cohen, pp. 101-102. In other words, one can hold a modest ceremony consisting of the parents, the baby and the Kohen.

Is it required to make a *seudat mitzvah* (a mitzvah feast)?

There is a disagreement about this, but according to some major poskim, the seudah is optional:

Responsa Rashba (Barcelona, d. 1310), No. 199 presents it as optional, if the father The Meiri (loc. cit.) writes: "and if the father wants to make a seudah, then it's a *seudat mitzvah*". The Rema (Cracow, d. 1572) says in Yoreh Deah 305:10: "And some wrote that they were accustomed to make a seudah at the time of pidyon".

On the other hand, other poskim, mostly in Ashkenaz (Germany) maintained that it is a *seudat mitzvah* (see the summary in Yalkut Yosef, pp. 342-344).

However, in the current *she'at hadhak* we can rely on those who say that it's optional.

May the money be paid to the Kohen via Paypal, thus eliminating the need for physical contact?

This is forbidden. Pidyon haben is not a business transaction like selling the hametz (see above). It's a religious ceremony. The father needs to give the Kohen five Selaim or its equivalent in silver.

Therefore, as of this writing in Israel, in general one is required to do the pidyon haben ceremony on the 31st day in a modest ceremony for the parents, the baby and the Kohen. People should wear gloves and face masks. The ceremony takes 5-10 minutes, less time than a visit to the supermarket. If people live in an area where there is a full quarantine, then the ceremony should be put off until people are allowed to leave their homes.

9. Performing the Tohorah (cleansing the body) for a person who died (Yoreh Deah 352:4 in the Rema)

Question from Rabbi Yonny Szewkis, Chile: Is it permissible/required at the current time to do Tohorah for a person who died?

Responsum: In general, Tohorah is a custom. (See my responsum in *Responsa of the Vaad Halakhah*, Vol. 5, pp. 125-136, also available at Responsafortoday.com)

Pikuah Nefesh takes precedence over most mitzvot, including this custom.

A) What does the State or city government say? If they prohibit Tohorah now for health reasons, then it's forbidden. In Israel, the State does not allow Tohorah for highly

infectious diseases, and this was decided before the corona crisis (see the circular of the Ministry of Health 1/2019, January 23, 2019).

B) What do the doctors in Chile say?

It's worth noting that there were times in the past when Tohorah was not performed due to a plague. In 1852, Rabbi Eliyahu Guttmacher of Greidetz/Gratz ruled that since there were so many dead bodies due to a cholera epidemic, the Hevra Kadisha could put symbolic tachrichim over plain clothes without performing a Tohorah (Rabbi Elie Fischer, "Rov in a Time of Cholera", *Jewish Review of Books*, March 19, 2020).

If the city and the doctors allow Tohorah, then you can do it as follows:

The people doing Tohorah should wear: Rubber gloves; a gown; a face mask; and goggles to protect the eyes.

You should clean all the equipment very thoroughly after the Tohorah.

You should wash your hands very thoroughly with soap and hot water for at least 20 seconds after you take off the gloves.

This is what Rabbi Simcha Roth z"l wrote in his responsum re doing Tohorah for a person who died of AIDS (*Responsa of the Vaad Halakhah*, Vol. 5, pp. 137-142, also available at Responsafortoday.com)

10. Sitting shivah when one is in quarantine (Yoreh Deah 374:11 in the Rema)

Question: How should one observe shiva when the mourner is in quarantine?

Responsum:

- a. According to the Rambam (Avel 1:1), the first day of mourning for a relative is a biblical commandment, while shivah has the status of a rabbinic takkanah. This was similar to the opinion of the Geonim, the Rif and Ramban (see Kesef Mishnah and Radbaz *ad loc.*).
- b. One can sit shivah without a minyan and observe all of the restrictions, such as sitting on the floor or a low stool, not bathing, not studying Torah, not having sexual relations etc.
- c. comforting the mourner, if it's allowed by the authorities, friends can take turns, one at a time.
- d. a minyan, it depends on the local situation:
 1. They can hold a minyan in the courtyard or outside with two meters between the participants
 2. The mourner can join a virtual minyan as I explained above in the paragraph above.
- e. There is, however, one sentence in the Shulhan Arukh which appears to say that in a time of plague, mourners do not mourn i.e. do not sit shivah. I have now discovered that this sentence is based on a defective version of a certain responsum.

The Rema says (Yoreh Deah 374:11): “some say that in time of plague one does not mourn because of fright (Responsa Maharil No. 3), and I heard that some did this.” This sentence doesn't mourner because of the plague; he says that *one does not mourn!* This

passage is not in the Responsa of the Maharil *No. 3*.

In his *Darkei Moshe* (to Tur YD 374, end of paragraph 6) the Rema makes a similar statement but the Tur Hashalem refers to Responsa of the Maharil, *No. 50*.

In the new edition of the Responsa of the Maharil, ed. Satz, Jerusalem, 1980, this is No. 41:1. Since Rava says in Bava Kamma 60b that in time of plague one should stay inside and close the windows, the Maharil (Rabbi Yaakov Moellin, d. 1423) had to justify the fact that many Jews in the Middle Ages did not follow Rava but ran away. After quoting a number of sources, he writes:...and for this reason it's found in a responsum *that one does need to mourn in time of plague*, and so is their custom in the land of Lombardia...

Apparently the Maharil understood this responsum to mean that you don't have to mourn during a plague – because you can or should run away. While running away, you don't have the time or place to sit shiva at all.

However, Rabbi Satz refers in a note to Rabbi Shlomo Luria (Cracow, d. 1573), *Yam Shel Shlomo* to Bava Batra 60b, paragraph 26 without any comment. That source clears up the mystery because it contains five words – placed in brackets below — that are missing from the Maharil...and for this reason it's found in a responsum *that mourners do not need to mourn [and sit on the ground with a change in the air]*, and so is their custom in the land of Lombardia...

In other words, the anonymous author of this responsum did not say that a mourner does not need to mourn or can run away in time of plague; rather, he said that mourners – perhaps during a time of plague – do not need to sit on the ground because the air

there is not healthy. Thus, this responsum has nothing to do with our current crisis. In any case, the Maharil's ruling is not relevant to our current situation. The doctors today have ruled according to Rava and not according to the Maharil – one should “close the windows” and stay home. Therefore, mourners should observe all the usual laws of Shivah at home. May we soon see the fulfillment of the verse: “all of the illness that I brought upon the Egyptians, I will not bring upon you, for I the Lord am your healer” (Exodus 15:26).

David Golinkin Jerusalem 8 Nisan 5780

The Orthodox movement's position on Zooming the Passover Seder:

In Rejecting the Zoom Seder, What Did Orthodox Jews Affirm?

<https://mosaicmagazine.com/essay/religion-holidays/2020/05/in-rejecting-the-zoom-seder-what-did-orthodox-judaism-affirm/>

What the headline-making rabbinic showdown over online seders reveals about Jewish law and its limits by the chair in Jewish law at the Charles Widger School of Law at Villanova University and the author of *Halakhah: The Rabbinic Idea of Law* (Princeton 2018).

Since cases of the novel corona virus began appearing in Western countries a few months ago, life has changed in a very short span of time. Rising national economies have fallen. Political fortunes have turned. Once thriving sectors of the global economy, from energy production to entertainment, have shuttered.

For observant Jews, whose lives are governed by the complex web of regulations known as *halakhah*, the disease has presented its own unique problems. What, for instance, was to become of communal prayer given the necessity of social distancing? Could ritual baths (*mikvahs*), another essential part of religious life, remain open without becoming dangerous incubators of infection? And what of the classes, celebrations, and other public events that play such an important role in the social lives of these communities?

An added challenge came shortly thereafter in the form of Passover, which began on April 8—just after lockdowns went into effect in many places. With shortages in grocery stores and movement outside the home restricted, how would the holiday’s numerous dietary restrictions be observed? And then there was Passover’s central ritual, the seder, which by its nature and liturgy is oriented around a family meal. For most Jews, the solution was relatively simple: the telecommunication technology of the 21st century enabled family and friends to join together for the seder without leaving their homes. Thousands of Jews used the now-ubiquitous videoconferencing platform Zoom, which allows many more people to meet up virtually than was readily possible with earlier applications. So widespread was the “Zoom-seder” phenomenon that it was the subject of a *Wall Street Journal* article, and a screenshot from a Zoom seder casually found its way into a *New York Times* op-ed about the pandemic and the First Amendment. The topic even came up on the talk-show host Conan O’Brien’s podcast.

But for those Jews who refrain from using electronic devices on Sabbaths and holy days, the Zoom seder offered no solution at all. Or so it appeared until March 24, when a group of Orthodox rabbis known as the Association of Scholars of the Maghreb in the

Land of Israel issued a ruling permitting those elderly who were in isolation to join their families for the seder via videoconference. The ruling traveled quickly across the Internet, and was soon picked up by the both the Hebrew- and English-language press. “Senior Orthodox Rabbis Allow Zoom for Passover Seder Due to Corona virus,” blared one characteristic headline. Shared widely over social media, the story even inspired a parody skit on Israeli television, and was eventually reported by international news outlets ranging from the *Agence-France Presse* to Indonesia’s *Jakarta Post*. To many reporting on the story for the mainstream press, it appeared that not only was the pandemic having an effect on politics and economics, but it was even changing the very structures of religious life. Major halakhic reform usually proceeds through gradual shifts over the course of decades; the ruling from the Maghrebi rabbis appeared to draw back the curtain on halakhic reform rapidly taking place before the public eye.

But it wasn’t. The episode, as I’ll explain, indeed reveals much about the way that Jewish law evolves and its role in the totality of Jewish life—although not quite in the way it has been presented by outside observers. Most of all, the case of the Zoom seder demonstrates that rabbinic law doesn’t operate merely through the mechanical application of legal principles, but draws on more fundamental religious beliefs and on communal practices. Thus, while there might very well be technical legal reasons to permit the use of Zoom on holidays, most Orthodox rabbis rejected those reasons, not necessarily because they found their logic wanting, but because they sought to protect and strengthen an ideal of the Sabbath’s holiness in the digital age.

Another Position on Streaming the Seder from a group of Sephardic Rabbis

Founded in 2018, the Association of Scholars of the Maghreb in the Land of Israel is a group of rabbis, mostly of Moroccan origin, who seek to counterbalance contemporary Orthodoxy's apparent tendency toward increasing stringency by drawing upon the presumably more lenient traditions of northwest-African Jewry. The ruling, as we shall see, is in keeping with that mission. Initially bearing the signatures of fourteen rabbis, this one-page Hebrew [document](#) swiftly addressed the plight of the elderly who would be unable to join their families for the seder because of the corona virus, so long as the equipment is set up, and the video call begins, before the arrival of the holiday at sunset.

The ruling immediately received wall-to-wall condemnation from prominent Ashkenazi and Sephardi rabbis in Israel and the United States. One critic labeled it "erroneous" and called for its retraction. Others declared that it was a "warning sign" about the dangers of permitting certain technologies on the Sabbath and holidays. Contrary to their intent, perhaps the Maghrebi sages' most notable accomplishment has been to unite rabbis in Israel and America, ranging from the firmly ultra-Orthodox to the liberal edge of Orthodoxy, and even the "traditional egalitarian" (but decidedly not Orthodox) Yeshivat Hadar—who all spoke out in opposition.

Perhaps the truest accomplishment of the ruling allowing Zoom seders has been to unite in opposition Orthodox rabbis of all stripes and persuasions.

In the face of such pressure, at least two of the signatories to the ruling issued retractions within days. Other signatories responded publicly and defiantly, asserting

that their critics failed to raise halakhically compelling counterarguments and lacked understanding of North African halakhic traditions; moreover, they claimed that the retractions were the result of rabbinic strong-arming rather than sober halakhic analysis.

And what of the laypeople? In the end, from the admittedly anecdotal evidence available to me, it seems that few people who would not have otherwise used Zoom on the holiday took advantage of the lenient ruling, regardless of ancestry.

The intense nature of these public reactions—both far beyond anything spurred by other corona virus-related halakhic decisions—suggests that the statement issued by the “Rabbis of the Maghreb” touched a nerve, and for that reason alone it deserves careful analysis. But first we must understand the legal issue under debate, which will require us to understand how halakhah relates to electricity and the devices it powers.

In its enumeration of the annual holidays, the Torah names certain days on which, as on the Sabbath, “no work may be done”—among them the first day of Passover. The Talmud interprets this statement by applying the complex system of Sabbath prohibitions to these holy days, albeit with some important exceptions, mainly connected to cooking and lighting flames. As on the Sabbath, observant Jews do not drive cars, kindle fires, write, sew, launder clothing, or use electricity on the first day of Passover. (In the Diaspora, this extends to the second day as well.) Since the Jewish “day” begins in the evening at sunset, halakhah prohibits using Zoom, Skype, Facetime, or any other method of digital connection for the seders.

To those only reading the headlines, the logic of the now-famous Zoom ruling seemed to go something like this: “due to the extraordinary circumstances stemming from COVID-19, the prohibition on using electronics can be waived to allow extended families to gather for seders.” But anyone familiar with the process of halakhic decision making knows that more precise reasoning is generally at work.

For behind the Zoom-seder controversy lies an older debate, predating the Internet, about whether using electricity on Jewish holidays is different than using it on Shabbat. While those who forbade electricity’s use on holidays won out—a subject I’ll return to presently—a number of 20th-century North African halakhists expressly permitted it. Since this position deviates from the current Orthodox rabbinic consensus, and even most otherwise-observant Maghrebi Jews refrain from using electricity, our Moroccan rabbis did not advocate completely jettisoning the prohibition on electricity. They instead employed a classical tactic in rabbinic reasoning: in cases where a halakhic debate has been resolved in favor of a stringent opinion, one may still rely on the rejected lenient opinion under extenuating circumstances. Furthermore, the pro-Zoom rabbis didn’t go so far as to allow initiating a video call on the holiday: their ruling applies only when the *seder* participants have set up the equipment prior to sunset, so that no violations need occur once the holiday commences.

The lenient ruling rests on at least three mitigating factors: (1) since there is a recognized, minority holding to the effect that electricity may be used on the holiday, the rabbis are willing to make an exception in this particular case, (2) since the call would begin before the holiday, the Zoom-*seder* participants would not be actively using

electricity during the hours of its prohibition, and (3) even if there is a risk that the participants might fiddle with the software, screen, or sound on the holiday itself, this derivative concern can be overridden given the circumstances brought about by a global pandemic.

After addressing several technical objections, the ruling turns to the positive goods afforded by a Zoom *seder*, explaining that, in the absence of their grandparents, younger generations might not participate in a *seder* at all. The absence of the young is a blow to the heart of the ritual, which is designed as a dialogue between parents and children: hence the four questions asked by the youngest present and the Torah's repeated emphasis on parents discussing the Passover service with their children. While a one-generational Passover *seder* is technically possible, it goes against both the biblical vision of the holiday and centuries of lived practice.

The Moroccan rabbis' document concludes by citing, "the need to remove the sadness from the aged and elderly, and to give them a motivation to carry on in their struggle for life, and to protect them from depression and spiritual distress, which could cause them to despair of life itself."

Additional Pesach Halakhot (Laws) during Covid-19

The Zoom-seder controversy is by far the most discussed halakhic ruling arising out of the corona virus pandemic, but it's by no means obvious why this should be. Rabbis from across the Orthodox spectrum have taken lenient and sometimes surprising positions on a variety of matters, such as what items may be included in the ritualized sale of non-kosher-for-Passover goods to non-Jews before the holiday. Likewise, many expressly forbade the ritual burning of any remaining leaven on the eve of the holiday, since doing it publicly could risk infection and public outcry, and doing it on a porch or balcony, or indoors, posed obvious dangers of its own.

The Rabbinical Council of Bergen County (Orthodox) issues new pandemic guidance – and calls for "patience" in May 13 letter

Dear Friends,

As the numbers of confirmed new cases of COVID-19 in our community continue to drop, we are writing to update you on our thought process as we begin to plan for the future. While that future is still very uncertain and everything is subject to change, what follows are the positions of the RCBC as things currently stand.

Patience. We all desire to see the end of this difficult period of lockdown, especially as we see the decline of new COVID cases in our area. Nevertheless, we must maintain our patience and remain steadfast in our responsibility to refrain from acting

prematurely. We must realize that the current religious mission with which we have been charged is to focus on our communal health and to worship Hashem from home.

We are indeed hopeful that we will be able to resume gatherings in the near future.

While we will do so just as soon as it is deemed prudent in consultation with halachic authorities and health experts, we cannot predict the exact time or date and we will not compromise on the integrity of our decision making process. We must all therefore try to be as patient as possible.

Their letters, as recently as one dated December 2, 2020 with further guidance and updates, appear on their website: <https://www.rcbcvaad.org/>

OU-RCA Guidance. A letter was recently written jointly by the OU, the Orthodox Union (www.ou.org) and the Rabbinical Council of America (rabbis.org) setting out some key

points of guidance regarding the resumption of public davening. This was prepared following halachic consultation with Rav Hershel Schachter, Rav Mordechai Willig, Rav Dovid Cohen and Rav Asher Weiss, shlit'a. The RCBC is fundamentally aligned with the principles set out in this letter. Below are some of the salient points that we would like to highlight:

1. **Unity:** We continue to strive for a unified approach and communication as we move forward because we feel that it is critical to communal well-being. We are committed to working together to continue to navigate this situation with a uniform approach.
2. **Controlled, Planned Outdoor Minyanim:** It is possible that the first minyanim to convene will be arranged outdoors because of the medical benefits of ventilation. Nevertheless, these minyanim will need to be organized and sanctioned in a controlled fashion and absolutely cannot take place now. We appreciate that this is especially difficult for *bnai mitzvah*, *chiyuvim* and *chagim*, but we must all act responsibly in the face of this unprecedented crisis.
3. **Timing:** It is hard to predict the exact moment for us to begin to reconvene. Given the high level of interaction that our communal life entails, as well as the enormous responsibility that the Torah places on all of us to maintain safety, we will continue to be cautious. We are inclined to follow the recommendation of the OU/RCA and wait some time after gatherings become legal in order to be sure that the opening does not contribute to another surge.

Shavuot: The government has not yet announced the beginning of stage one and we remain in a mandated lockdown. As such, minyanim in our community on Shavuot,

inside or outside, remain prohibited. Likewise, as of now, all other restrictions, such as gathering for meals (indoor or outdoor) with friends and family who are not currently living together similarly remain in place. Talking to others should be done only at a safe distance **and** while wearing a mask.

Masks: We encourage everyone to follow the recommendation of the CDC to wear a mask when appropriate, especially when walking outside on Shabbos or Yom Tov in an area when one is likely to see and speak to others. You can find more information about the CDC recommendations regarding masks

Plasma Donation and Antibody Testing: Anyone who thinks that he or she might be able to donate plasma, is urged to get tested. There is information about a local testing site here: <https://www.covidplasmasavealife.com/>. In addition, Holy Name Hospital is starting to test the public for antibodies. Please fill out this form to be contacted by the hospital for the simple test: <https://forms.gle/fmsrPgbWnh15s8uMA>. It seems that widespread testing can help us get a better handle on the spread of this disease. Any of the various testing programs are good as long as you get your own results. (Please note that positive antibody testing may enable the donation of plasma but we do not yet know if it confers true immunity. Therefore, people who test positive for antibodies should continue to practice social distancing as before.)

Non-COVID Medical Attention: There is currently a widespread fear of going to doctors' offices or hospitals because of the possibility of contracting COVID there. We are assured by the medical professionals, however, that all necessary precautions are being taken to assure patient safety on those locations. There may therefore be much

more to lose by staying home and neglecting necessary medical attention. We therefore encourage anyone who needs medical attention to be sure to get it.

While the ongoing departure from the normal rhythm of our spiritual and communal lives is challenging at many levels, we take deep pride and comfort in continuing to fulfill the mandates of the Torah as they exist to safeguard life, and thereby to sanctify His Name. In so doing, we uniquely reaffirm the spirit expressed by our ancestors when the Torah was first given, *na'aseh v'nishma*, indicating that our singular objective is to fulfill the Will of Hashem, whatever that requires at a given moment. We are also inspired by the support and commitment of our community through this difficult time and by the ongoing opportunities for spiritual growth that it has presented. We look forward to celebrating this Shavuot like the very first Shavuot, "as one person, with one heart".

Sincerely,

The Vaad HaRabbanim – Rabbinical Council of Bergen County

Guidance for Shuls for Yamim Noraim (High Holidays) Presented by the Orthodox Union (www.ou.org) and the Rabbinical Council of America (www.rabbis.org)

August 13, 2020 – 23 Menachem Av, 5780

As we approach and plan for the upcoming Yamim Noraim, we do so with the recognition that this season provides us all with a critical anchor for the rest of the year, in several ways.

First, during this time G-d decides our fate, as individuals, as communities, and as a world. We therefore flock to the synagogue during this season, knowing the critical importance of our approaching G-d with prayer and teshuva.

Second, the season's focus on prayer and teshuva renews and recharges our connection to G-d and Torah, and provides us with the framework to define our most meaningful ambitions for the coming year.

And third, it is during this period that the synagogue truly serves as the rallying point for the community, bringing us all together more than at any other time in the year. Men and women, young and old, come together in the synagogue for prayer and inspiration, to cry and to sing. Due to the pandemic, this year we must plan for a Yamim Noraim that will be very different than usual. The requirements of social distancing will limit the capacity of our shul facilities and – in many cases – require us to subdivide into smaller groups. Distancing and masking will challenge the feeling of community among the assembled. Time limitations and other constraints may force the elimination of inspiring parts of the service. And – most difficult of all – many members of our communities may

not be able to come to the synagogue at all. But while the Yamim Noraim will be different, they can be profoundly meaningful. Challenges should drive us to work creatively to overcome. Each of us – as rabbis, communal leaders, and community members – can and must work resourcefully to make this season memorable for its opportunities and not only for its limitations. The myriad technical details involved in pandemic shul planning must not distract us from the true focus of coming to shul, and our material efforts to accomplish things safely must not divert us from putting our hearts and souls into the spiritual efforts of prayer and growth, and from extending ourselves to others with genuine warmth.

This year, more than ever, we need our prayers to be meaningful.

This year, more than ever, we need the spiritual renewal that this season provides.

This year, more than ever, we need to strengthen the bonds and the embrace of community.

What follows are principles to guide the decisions and planning of our shuls and communities throughout the country. This guidance is predicated on the principles shared in our earlier guidance on reopening, issued on May 8, 2020

https://www.ou.org/assets/OU-Guidance-To-Shuls-And-Communities-5-8-2020_F-1.pdf).

The situation continues to evolve and varies significantly from region to region. As such, these recommendations and guidelines are formulated based solely on information and advice available as of August 2020. As always, shuls and communities should follow, at

a minimum, the guidelines provided by local and national authorities, including the CDC and local health departments.

1. Compliance: By-and-large, our shuls have been models of compliance with public health recommendations during this crisis. This is profoundly inspiring and represents a true kiddush Hashem and affirmation of our choosing life, a value cherished by the Melech Chafetz BaChayim, the King Who desires life.

2. Seating Plans: In addition to masking, we continue to urge social distancing, leaving six feet between seats occupied by non-family members. As such, the Yamim Noraim assigned seating model will be very helpful for maximizing usage of space by seating family members together.

3. Outreach to Members: Shuls should reach out as soon as possible to each of their members to ascertain their plans for the Yamim Noraim. While surveys may be effective in getting a general view of what to expect, proper planning for this season will require advance knowledge of every person's plans. Wherever possible there should be personal and individual outreach to all members and past seat-holders. This outreach should not be simply formal and technical, but inviting and caring. All men and women who are coming to shul will need to be accommodated, and those who are unable to come should be addressed and cared for.

4. Adding Minyanim: Shuls may consider providing additional minyanim for several reasons. Buildings will have capacity issues due to distancing requirements. Many people will require or prefer an outdoor option and/or a brief service for health reasons. And as many shuls will be unable to provide childcare services, parents of

young children may require different minyan times to allow each parent to daven in shul while the other watches the children. Proper shul planning will weigh using multiple spaces versus reusing the same space with early and late minyanim. The latter option allows more of the community to daven in the beit kneset (sanctuary) space and will address the needs of parents of young children to alternate their davening times, but it will also necessitate a significantly shorter service and a sanitizing between services.

5. Difficult Choices: There is significant Halachic and tangible value to davening in a beit kneset, a facility designated and maintained as a House of G-d; to davening “b’rov am,” within a large group; and to following the prescribed and customary order of prayers. In addition, communal singing and words of Torah enhance our shul experience immensely. The unfortunate realities of the pandemic may require communities to make difficult choices, foregoing some of these valuable components for the coming Yamim Noraim.

6. Ventilation & Duration: Efforts, including consultation with HVAC experts, should be made to ensure proper ventilation of the space. As noted in our earlier guidance, masking, distancing, and ventilation reduce risk but do not eliminate it, and duration of exposure may increase risk. That said, there is no meaningful universal recommendation we can provide regarding a proper length of the service, given regional variations in disease and the quality of ventilation in the particular davening space.

7. Shortening the Davening: Halachic guidance regarding whether and how to shorten the time together in shul has been provided by many poskim, and local rabbis should decide the Halachic solution that is most fitting for their community. Options may include

eliminating Mi Shebeirachs; saying the first sections of davening at home and beginning the public minyan at Nishmat Kol Chai; reducing the amount of singing and length of speeches; and possibly eliminating certain customary piyyutim. Care should be taken to ensure that these changes not be so extreme as to empty the shul experience of its soul. A shul should be a makom rinah, a place of song, and a makom Torah, a place of learning. Communal singing, words of Torah inspiration, and familiar piyyutim are very valuable components of the Yamim Noraim experience. If deemed safe and practical, they may be reduced but not eliminated.

8. Planning & Preparation: Planning for multiple minyanim needs to begin early. Considerations may include identifying additional neighborhood facilities, indoor or outdoor; ordering tents; and critically, preparing to staff these minyanim with adequately prepared baalei tefillah, keriah, and tekiah. To assist shuls in meeting the increased need for Baalei Tefillah, we have developed - with the support of the New York Jewish Federation - a Yamim Noraim Baal Tefillah training program, which can be found at <https://www.ou.org/Chazzan/>.

9. Shofar: An appropriate precaution during shofar blowing would be to place a surgical mask over the wider end of the shofar, as this does not appear to alter the sound of the shofar blast. Some may point the shofar out an open window or door, or near and towards the front wall or aron kodesh, facing away from the congregation. A single shofar should not be used by multiple people, and no barrier should be placed between the shofar and the mouth of the one blowing the shofar. Poskim have addressed when and how much to sound the shofar where the time in shul is seriously limited.

10. Torah Reading: In order to maintain safety during the Torah reading, options include having the baal koreh take all the aliyot, having those called up standing at a significant distance during the reading, or using a Plexiglas shield separating the baal koreh from the one called up to the Torah.

11. Avoiding Crowding: While in shul, as well as while entering and exiting, congregants should maintain social distance. Where entry is monitored by security, systems must be established to avoid crowding as lines form.

12. Mikvah: While it is customary for men to use the mikvah during this season, this cannot be done without the implementation of a proper and safe men's mikvah protocol.

13. Caring for Those at Home: A critical concern is providing for those who will be unable to attend shul. As noted above, shuls are encouraged to reach out personally and individually to all members and past seat-holders. Those who will be unable to come to shul must be supported, addressing both their social and practical needs. Community members should ensure that they have Yom Tov food (including simanim), a Machzor, guidance for davening at home, and additional helpful reading material. Most important, where possible they can have someone regularly checking in with them, safely distanced visitors, as well as someone to blow the shofar outside their home.

14. Including Singles: Communities and individuals should make meaningful efforts to include singles of all ages who live without family. These months of isolation have been especially trying for this population, and efforts should be made to safely welcome them to the homes of others in a responsible manner.

15. Children's Programming: Shuls will have to consider if there is a safe way – consistent with local regulations and guidance - to provide childcare and programming during the davening on Yamim Noraim. Where this cannot be done, shuls should nevertheless design some form of age-appropriate outdoor programming during the afternoon to ensure that they too have a Yamim Noraim shul experience.

16. Divrei Torah: As noted above, words of Torah inspiration and guidance are an essential part of the Yamim Noraim experience. While there is an outstanding array of quality Torah content that is available online and in print, there is no substitute to the messages of Torah that are communicated by our personal, local mentors. Every effort should be made to provide opportunities for sharing those messages directly. While speeches during morning davening may be limited, other times – both during the Yomim Tovim and preceding it – should also be utilized, as well as the written word. Shuls will do well to provide nationally produced and shared learning materials for individuals and families to use at home to enhance their Yamim Noraim, but they would do better to include and highlight the local rabbi's voice, where he shares the personal and direct messages tailored to his community.

A closing thought. During the month of Elul and the Yamim Noraim we recite the 27th Psalm twice daily, where we express the following: "There is one thing that I ask of G-d, it is that which I seek: that I dwell in the house of God all the days of my life...."

Jewish communities are built around the house of G-d, the synagogue. Yes, much of Orthodox Jewish life can be conducted without a synagogue, and all the technical elements of a service can be accomplished in a backyard minyan. For months we

prayed and studied at home, supported by outstanding online content. But there is no substitute for physical community, for the relationships that are nurtured by the social framework of that community, for a room full of voices raised together in prayer and song, for being in a House of G-d, and for a nurturing personal connection to religious mentors. Yes, we as individuals have made it without some of these for months, but we would be mistaken to dismiss their value for the long term.

Your shul needs you. It needs your presence and it needs your support. Our rabbis have been working incredibly hard during this pandemic, tending to issues of health and safety, finances, pastoral counseling, planning for a radically different Yamim Noraim, and multiple other areas of unprecedented communal challenge – all while tending to their usual and expected responsibilities. They have acted heroically to benefit us all. Please support them during this important season so that they will be there for us now and for the long term.

We need each other. We have all been through a challenging year. As a result of COVID, many of us have suffered the loss of loved ones and have experienced serious illness, financial difficulty, isolation, and profound uncertainty and stress. Let us all look out for each other and reach out to each other with understanding and support.

We look forward to getting past the many technical and practical issues addressed here so that we may arrive at the Yamim Noraim prepared to pour out our hearts to G-d in genuine and sincere prayer, beseeching Him to bring an end to this pandemic and its many challenges, and that He help us to emerge from it with health, strength and renewed commitment.

An Alternative to Zoom and Live Stream:

This High Holidays, Make Minyanim! A Counter-Proposal to Live-Streaming for

[https://medium.com > @yehudakurtzer](https://medium.com/@yehudakurtzer)

Last week, the Conservative Movement approved a responsum permitting the live streaming of religious services on Shabbat and holidays (with several caveats and constraints, and with the acknowledgement that the COVID-19 crisis accelerated the urgency of a question that was already being studied.) The press release and subsequent news coverage acknowledged that the responsum was oriented towards the High Holidays, just four months away. With the growing likelihood that synagogues will not be able to accommodate their usual crowds — if reopen for services at all — it makes sense that the Movement is thinking ahead about how to care for its constituents, and to create wide access for these religious experiences that for most American Jews represent the pinnacle of the liturgical year.

I am both sympathetic to this decision and all that motivates it; and I am extremely wary of its consequences. I am sympathetic because the decision is fundamentally rooted in a moral commitment to accessibility: a large number of regular synagogue-goers in the liberal American movements are older and most vulnerable to the spread of COVID-19. Zoom and other such streaming technologies create access, if imperfectly, to the religious experience. The decision is also rooted in adaptability, in that this crisis is accelerating all of our own evolutions into not just adapting to aspects of life online but thriving in it. When religion is dragged kicking and screaming into technological innovation, it inevitably loses adherents. I am also sympathetic because I know the value

of the High Holidays to the American liberal denominations; and whereas the Passover Seder, a domestic ritual, could find easy adaptation, it is scary to think of the future of the American synagogue without the 2–3 days per year on the High Holidays when it is full. And it is worth noting that in an open market for religious affiliation, it is reasonable for the Conservative Movement to fear that if they do not offer venues for accessing their own High Holiday services online, their members will look to other denominations for online offerings. This is one of the fundamental challenges faced by a movement that is ideologically committed to the halakhic process, with a membership that is more ambivalent about its constraints. In this regard, I admire my rabbinic colleagues for thinking inside the halakhic system to come up with these solutions.

But I am mostly wary of this decision. For me personally this is less about halakhic concerns — I do not consider myself expert on the ins-and-outs of the specific issues at play, even as our family does not use these technologies on Shabbat and holidays — but because I think what will be offered online will be so vastly inferior to the in-person experience. Worse, I believe this solution misses a once-in-a-generation opportunity to do something else, far more creative, requiring a lot more work, that could productively reshape the meaning of prayer and commitment for the Movement for decades to come.

My proposal: Conservative synagogues should subdivide their congregations into networks of home-based micro-minyanim. It is reasonable to assume that by the fall, large gatherings will continue to be prohibited and considered dangerous, but small gatherings that follow social-distancing protocols will be permitted. In egalitarian communities, this can mean constituting minyanim of ten individuals with as few as just 2–3 families that live near one another, together with some support from the

congregation to make sure that members or attendees who are less socially connected to others can get linked in to join these *havurot*. (I wonder as well whether getting most of the membership out of the building and into micro-minyanim could enable the synagogue to host a much smaller gathering for the members who need the kind of space and disability-access that the synagogue building can provide. And of course, the synagogues can stream services to all who are immuno-compromised or otherwise need to stay home during this prolonged crisis. And it goes without saying—but I'll say it—that all that I am proposing must be governed by the recommendations of public health officials.)

For the synagogue to take the lead and to orchestrate these minyanim would have the effect of consolidating the sense of community across its proprietary network, as opposed to the odd effect that Zoom creates of feeling both part of something and very much disconnected. Minyanim in homes are prayer communities: they are rooted in intimacy, which is a critical element to a great prayer experience; they are empowering, in creating obligations on all in attendance to participate actively (as opposed to the “mute all” function of Zoom); and in the context of a home, even 10 people singing will actually sound like group singing. Streaming services, in contrast, will cement the weakest feature of the American liberal synagogue, which is the feeling that the congregant is witness to a performance rather than an essential participant in and contributor to a collective religious experience.

The biggest challenge in this plan would appear to be the necessary literacy and talent needed to have prayer leaders in so many Jewish households. This, again, is an extraordinary opportunity. The Conservative Movement is about to have thousands of

high school and college students who will be home, alone, and bored for the summer; and a laity that is not challenged enough by the Movement to turn its passively-acquired knowledge of the services, accumulated over time, into the competency to lead services. How remarkable could it be if the Movement spent the next four months training up its teens, young adults, and enthusiastic lay leaders to become leaders of tefillot? Rather than these High Holiday minyanim disempowering the cantorate, our cantors would become the educators-at-large for the Movement — solidifying relationships with their local communities, and building an expansive network of competent prayer leaders. We cannot underestimate how transformational this could be for the culture of prayer in our communities. Any prayer leader knows that it is a gift to lead services in a community of other people who also know how to lead. No one wants to stand in a room singing alone for others. When we go back to synagogue, wouldn't it be amazing to have 50 or 100 individuals in the room who will have led these services for the first time during this impossible time? Imagine if the success story of this period of time for the Conservative Movement was a far more learned, synagogue-competent laity. It could have an effect that could redound with significance for generations.

There are two other challenges — one easily solvable, and one not. I do not know what to do about Torah reading, though I am reminded of the indefatigable Chabad emissaries who read Megillah on porches throughout New Rochelle during the early days of the pandemic; and maybe there's a way to create a roving reader, Torah in hand? Or maybe this is just something that is lost — or a sacrifice that can be as easily accommodated by creative responsa as the streaming solution.

The other challenge is an opportunity. Our rabbis can still give their sermons on the evenings before the holidays via live stream; and perhaps they can provide resources for the micro-minyanim to continue studying and discussing the themes of their teaching in

the minyanim themselves. This, too, could be transformational. Rabbis would have the most receptive sermon audience in history — only be who opt-in would be there! But more importantly, the educational opportunity offered by this framework is unprecedented. For all the joys that the sermon offers the rabbi — the chance to say one's piece to a full crowd, once or twice a year — the framework of the micro-minyan could create a networked community of learning whose value would long outlive this experience.

Meantime, embarking on this approach also catches up the flailing American synagogue movement to one of the most important trends in successful American religious behavior — the construction of the mega-church on the model of a convener of many sub-communities, built on affinities and activities. The central institution is strengthened, not diminished, by these small groups: it is like an institutional equivalent of majestic vaulted architecture, held up by its constituent parts. I am not sure most American synagogues can hold the diversity of American Jewish identities, or accommodate the many implicit micro-communities that already exist. Many are already buckling under the pressure. But if the synagogue owns these communities, designs them, empowers them — then they *are* the synagogue, not just in a time of crisis but as a framework for new opportunity.

Fifteen years ago, Stephanie and I joined with a group of friends in Brookline, MA to found an independent minyan. We did so in part because we felt personally un-compelled by the local Orthodox and Conservative options; but more affirmatively what emerged for us was a deep sense of compulsion by the work of creating and sustaining community, and by the thrill of creating lay-led, collaborative, communal and religious experiences. The intimacy of the minyan context connected many people to spirituality and community — especially during the High Holidays — that they couldn't access in the large

synagogue framework. We are now proud members of a Conservative synagogue in the New York area; but every year we drive back to Boston to be part of the minyan community there. We have thrived, as Jews, through direct access to both of these forms of belonging.

This is the moment for observant American liberal Judaism to unify the synagogue and the minyan. The synagogue is ultimately at its best when it is a framework for expansive community; the minyan provides intimacy, obligation, and participation at a level that the big synagogue can never fully offer. We will go back to the big synagogue experience at some point in the future. But the big take-away from the strange High Holidays of 2020 **could be** that we will go back emboldened and empowered: instead of streaming services in which we were observers, we led our way through — together, if temporarily apart.

Safety Precautions: Conservative Rabbis Get Advice on High Holiday Services

New guidelines urge at-risk clergy to recuse themselves from in-person services.

Jewish Week/Times of Israel May 27, 2020 www.jewishweek.timesofisrael.com

The Conservative movement is urging rabbis, cantors and other prayer leaders to “consider recusing themselves from officiating” at High Holiday services if they are in a high-risk category for Covid-19.

In addition, new guidance from the movement suggests that “choral singing should not take place for this High Holiday season” unless certain conditions are met to prevent the spread of the corona virus.

The guidance states that all Conservative synagogues should reopen once “governmental and medical authorities allow and where the architecture of our prayer spaces permit.”

The guidance was written by Rabbi Pamela Barmash and Toby Schonfeld, executive director of the National Center for Ethics in Health Care, and released by the Rabbinical Assembly today. It comes as some synagogues are considering returning come September to buildings that have been closed since the start of the corona virus epidemic.

States have been easing limits on public gatherings, although rabbis across the denominational spectrum have been cautious about reopening their buildings to group worship

“Our need for community is even greater during this time of pandemic and physical distancing,” it said, “and even though holding davening [prayer] in person as a community poses a significant challenge, our role as klei kodesh [rabbis, hazzanim, and teachers helping other to experience holiness] and the needs of our communities for being together, even with physical distancing, call for us to rise to the occasion...”

Among the preventive measures synagogues should consider are: physical distancing, requiring everyone to wear a mask, hand sanitizer for everyone, physical barriers around professional and semi-professional singers and speakers, curtailing Torah processions, and reducing the proximity to one another of those who are officiating.

It suggests that the use of a microphone — standard in most although not all Conservative synagogues — might obviate or reduce muffling from a mask and says that a physical barrier such as a Plexiglas or plastic shield be placed around the amud, or lectern.

The guidance says the number of choir members should be held to a minimum, that each member of the choir should be behind a physical barrier like a Plexiglas or plastic shield, and that they should be separated from the choir director. Choir members must also wear a mask when outside the barrier, and a medical doctor should be consulted to determine whether the mask must be worn even behind the barrier, depending on the layout of the prayer space.

Singing and loud speech has been shown to aerosolize droplets that can spread the corona virus.

In addition, all choir rehearsals must be done in a video-conferencing modality. The guidance stresses that this “is the only safe way to prepare repertoire prior to the High Holiday season.”

It said also that there is no need for the clergy to wear gloves because everything on the *amud* (reader’s table) should be disinfected between services. But it suggests that gloves might be appropriate should there be multiple Torah readers.

“Someone who is going to read Torah could put on a fresh pair of gloves, touch the yad [pointer] and the Torah, and then discard those gloves immediately when s/he is done reading and sanitize his/her hands (in case s/he has not removed the gloves properly),” the guidance reads. “And the wearer should still be very careful not to touch one’s face

while wearing gloves, as the wearer can still transfer the virus from gloves into the body through the eyes, nose and mouth.”

In an interview, Rabbi Barmash, co-chair of the RA’s Committee on Jewish Law and Standards, said the Conservative movement is giving congregations different choices for services on Shabbat and the High Holidays: not hold services in order to keep Shabbat and Yom Tov technology/screen free, but conduct virtual Torah study and classes with an emphasis on the season of repentance and spiritual enhancement in the month before Rosh Hashanah and during the seven days between Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur; conduct services virtually using live-stream and Zoom; hold services in-person with a minyan, at the same time live streaming them and using Zoom for the rest of the congregation; or just hold services in-person either indoors or outdoors while maintaining social distancing, requiring everyone to wear a mask and surrounding the rabbi, cantor and Torah reader with Plexiglas.

How to Celebrate Sukkot Safely During the Pandemic: CJLS Position Paper

Advice for Sukkah Use and Sukkah Building in the Time of COVID-19

Posted on: Thursday September 3, 2020

Rabbi Joshua Heller

Please note that this is not an official responsum of the CJLS. O.H. 630:1

Sukkah is one of the most beautiful and meaningful mitzvot in our tradition. Under normal circumstances, we are encouraged to eat and sleep in the sukkah, and in particular invite guests. However, it is unlikely that the COVID pandemic will be behind us by Sukkot 5781. We offer the following advice for how to maximize fulfillment of this Mitzvah while minimizing potential risk. It is widely assumed that outdoor activities are safer than indoors. However, there is also the risk that being “outdoors” in a sukkah will lead to a false sense of security. In fact, a sukkah is meant to be an enclosed space (albeit temporarily) and as such may not have better airflow than a well-ventilated indoor space. Furthermore, one of the primary uses of a sukkah is eating, which means that mask use would not be practical. **Therefore, competent medical experts familiar with local conditions must be consulted to determine what uses are safe for a given sukkah structure.**

1. We have always encouraged Jews to build and enjoy their own sukkot. This year in particular, if possible, it is preferable for a household to have use of its own sukkah rather than rely on a shared or community sukkah, but there may be a wide range of circumstances where this may be impractical.

2. Sukkah construction may require several people working together. Care should be taken to reduce the possibility of transmitting the disease among those engaged in construction.

3. There is a general principle that we do not risk life to fulfill any positive mitzvah. As such, the obligation to use a sukkah does not apply if doing so would lead to a danger of illness. In addition, there is an even more specific and lenient precedent with sukkah, in Shulhan Arukh OH 640:4 , where one who is merely distressed is exempt from sukkah. Furthermore the Rema adds that a person who uses a sukkah where there is a concern for one's physical wellbeing (in that case, due to criminal activity) has not fulfilled the mitzvah by doing so, even if they wish to.

4. One who is ill is exempt from the sukkah, so anyone experiencing possible COVID symptoms or awaiting clearance following an exposure may be considered exempt from sukkah, and certainly should not enter a sukkah that will be used by others.

5. While ideally, one would also sleep and partake in the majority of one's activities in the sukkah, the most minimal observance of the mitzvah of sukkah is to eat an olive's worth of bread in it the first night of the holiday.^[2] At other times it would be considered obligatory to eat in the sukkah if one were eating bread, or other grain products, but not if one were consuming other foods. So, under normal circumstances, if a sukkah is not available, the practice would be to only engage in *achilat arai*, food that is not considered a meal. However, under the current circumstances, if there is any concern about the availability of a safe sukkah experience, one is actually exempt from the mitzvah, and may eat one's meals indoors.

6. Some communities will seek ways for people to have safe access to a sukkah, either by having a sukkah available to the community, or having individuals offer access to their own sukkot. **Clearly it is not safe to have members of multiple households share a sukkah at the densities that we might experience in other years. Competent medical advice should be consulted as to whether a particular sukkah is large enough to accommodate multiple families at the same time. A reservation system should be used to ensure that this density is not exceeded, and those who are showing symptoms or have been exposed should not attend. Care should also be taken that those who might be waiting to use the sukkah do not congregate and are able to maintain distance from each other.**

7. Some communities may be advised that a sukkah may be used safely by different households one after the other. Even if multiple households are not in the sukkah at the same time, it is preferable to have an opportunity for air to clear, and to sanitize high-touch surfaces between households occupying the same space

8 There are some individuals and communities who have developed the practice of beginning a meal in the sukkah with bread (and kiddush if it is Yom Tov/Shabbat) so that one may recite the blessings, and then leaving the sukkah to continue the meal elsewhere. Some object to this practice under normal circumstances but in the current time it could be helpful in ensuring that there is sufficient time for more members of a community to have the opportunity to fulfill the mitzvah safely.

9. We offer the following advice to increase airflow in a sukkah, whether one intended for a household that allows others to “borrow” its sukkah, or for communal use. This is not an attempt at a systematic review of all of the laws of sukkah construction, so the assumption is that one is familiar with the general principles. Using any or all of these techniques does not make it safe to fill the sukkah to regular capacity, but may reduce the risk level of less dense uses or decrease the time between uses.

The measurements for a Sukkah are based on a “tefach”- a handbreadth. Estimates of the dimensions of a tefach range between 3 and 4 inches. In the measurements below, we use the most conservative calculations.

A. The Sukkah walls may be made of any material. The sukkah walls must reach down to within 3 tefachim of the ground (9 inches by the strictest measure)

B. The sukkah walls must reach at least 10 tefachim off the ground (40 inches by the most strict measure)

C. The walls must be sturdy enough to withstand a common wind (which is an issue with some fabric walls under the best of circumstances.

D. There is a principle called “Levud” which means that gaps of less than 3 tefachim may be considered to be filled.

E If there is the appearance of a doorframe, and 16 inches of kosher wall on either side, a gap of up to 10 amot (15 feet) would be permitted in a wall.

F. The sukkah must have at least three walls. Two must be “full” (though they may be interrupted by doorways, so long as those doorways are not at the corner) The third may be partial, and need not be wider than 4 inches, but only certain configurations of such a short wall are permitted:



10. Based on these principles, those building a sukkah that is to be used by multiple households should consider the following techniques to create walls which are technically kosher but would allow for significantly increased airflow.

A. Use a fencing material (for example poultry netting or hardware mesh ^[5]) at least 4 feet in height, which reaches close to the ground. Mesh which provides more privacy may still reduce airflow.

B. Have horizontal strings tied at intervals of less than nine inches surrounding the sukkah horizontally (leaving room for doors) starting with a height below 9 inches, and continuing to a minimum height of 40 inches. You will need a minimum of 5 such strings). Caution: It may be difficult to keep the strings from sagging or falling over the course of the holiday.

3. Have the walls (or sections thereof) be made of vertical boards, or strings that are connected tightly to the outside roof beam and the floor, with a horizontal space of less than 9 inches between them

4. Use wooden latticework at least 40 inches tall.

It is possible to combine these techniques and materials with more traditional walls (for example, a sukkah where one wall is the wall of a building and the remainder follow this approach.

In all cases, the s'khach should be placed after the walls are in place.

Summary:

It is always encouraged to have a sukkah for one's household, and that practice is particularly encouraged this year. One is exempt from using the sukkah if one is ill or distressed, and in fact one is forbidden from being in a sukkah, and does not fulfill the mitzvah by doing so, if conditions in the sukkah are unsafe or being in a sukkah would make it unsafe for others. There are ways to construct a sukkah that may improve airflow, but even with these precautions, the number of different households present in a sukkah at the same time, or even one after the other, will be less than in ordinary times, and should be determined in consultation with medical experts based on the configuration of the sukkah and local circumstances.

Position Papers on: Lulav/Etrog During COVID-19 -- 5781

Posted on: Thursday September 3, 2020 O.H. 651:7

By Rabbi Aaron Alexander and Rabbi Joshua Heller

Please note that this is not an official responsum of the CJLS.

During the COVID pandemic, are there changes as to how Lulav and Etrog should be taken? Is it appropriate to “share” a set?

Taking “four species” (Lulav, Etrog, Myrtle and Willow) is one of the distinctive mitzvot of Sukkot. This has not always been an easy mitzvah to fulfill, and often communities have had to pool resources and share sets. The Talmud (Sukkah 41b) describes an incident where Rabban Gamliel had to spend 1000 zuzim to acquire a set which is an amount equivalent to over \$3,000 in today’s dollars! He then shared it with his travel companions. There are many descriptions of medieval communities struggling to attain even one kosher set. Today, the four species are generally widely available for individual purchase, though there is always the possibility of unexpected shortages.

It is certainly preferable for each household (or perhaps, each individual) to own their own set.

The text of Leviticus 23:40, says “you shall take for yourself”, which is read by the sages to imply that each individual own their own set of four species. However, it is common practice for congregations to purchase sets that will be shared, or for individuals to lend out their set, often using the legal fiction of intentionally making it a “gift that will be returned/*matana al manat le-hahzir*” so that the user can have the benefit of owning the Lulav. In a time where we are concerned about the spread of a dangerous virus, is it appropriate to share a lulav when this means that one will be touching a lulav that has been touched by others?

First of all, we would note that the *Mitzvah De-oraita* (Biblical obligation) of lulav is only on the first day. This year, since the first two days of Sukkot fall on Shabbat and Sunday, the general obligation is fulfilled beginning on the 2nd day of Yom Tov, or the first day of *Hol Ha-moed* in Israel. Also, while it is considered meritorious to hold the Four Species during *Hallel* and *Hoshanot*, one fulfills the obligation by holding them at any time during daylight hours.

The consensus among health experts is that the primary mode of spread of the virus that causes COVID-19 is between people who are in close contact with one another (within about 6 feet) through respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs, sneezes or talks. Therefore, the greatest risk involved in using a lulav and etrog set that has been used by another person is coming near them to transfer it, or in

people lining up in close proximity to use it. If using a lulav or etrog involves entering a crowded indoor environment, one should not risk one's health to do so.

If one is going to share one of these sets, it is important that best medical advice regarding physical distance, and mask wearing be observed. The first user should place it down, move out of the vicinity (at least 6 feet away or farther) and then allow it to be taken up by the next user. This should be done in a well-ventilated area (preferably outdoors) and all should be wearing appropriate face coverings. It is important that distancing of at least 6 feet be kept between persons, even with wearing a face covering since it is still possible that droplets could exit the mask and remain in the area when the next person approaches. So, as many layers of care and caution should be used when employing this method.

It is important to note that the risk of transmission through touching shared objects or surfaces is lower than once thought, but not zero. One cannot get COVID merely by touching a contaminated surface- one must touch that contaminated surface and then touch one's nose, eyes or mouth.

Some have suggested sanitizing the lulav and etrog themselves with an alcohol wipe or UV radiation, and while these methods may reduce risk, they should not be considered to be sufficient on their own, in particular for the lulav, myrtle and willow which have crevices and absorbent surfaces.

One option that has been suggested would be to use gloves or a disposable clear plastic holder (a "bouquet sleeve" used for flowers) around the lulav while handling the Lulav and Etrog. In usual times, we make an effort to avoid any *hatzifah*--barrier between the hand of the holder and the lulav and etrog itself (the only exception being the holder, which must be made of lulav material). In fact, the Mishnah Berurah O.H. 651:33 forbids wearing gloves while taking the lulav, but there are other views in the tradition worth considering in the current situation. In fact, there is a debate in the sources as to whether one may have a barrier between one's hands and the lulav. The Talmud (Sukkah 37a and 42a) describes two disputes between Rabba and Rava. Rabba argues that any barrier invalidates one's observance of the Mitzvah. Rava argues that anything that beautifies the lulav is not considered a barrier. This dispute on the status of barriers is continued amongst the Rishonim. Though Tosafot (Sukkah 37a s.v. "Ki") argues that any barrier is unacceptable, the Ran feels that the only concern is that whatever is used to hold the lulav is dignified. Similarly, Rabbi Joel Sirkes (Baḥ, O.H. 651:12), connects the case to the case of a Cohen who uses gloves while making a sacrifice, to suggest that a barrier is prohibited specifically when it reflects disdain for the lulav, or a concern about getting dirty. Certainly in the current situation, gloves or a "bouquet sleeve" which provide safety to the user, and are being used out of love for the Mitzvah in the face of potential danger, would be considered dignified. We would therefore argue that under the current circumstances, one could use either of these as an additional measure of protection while handling a borrowed lulav. The bouquet sleeve would be less practical for the etrog, but the etrog is easier to sanitize if need be.

When we consulted infectious disease experts, a few of them recommended using gloves but noted that there is a danger with gloves, in that they can convey a false sense of security. Those without training might literally wipe one's nose on the glove, or touch a contaminated part of the glove while removing it, which defeats the whole purpose, so hand washing would still be required. Bare hands would not be greater risk so long as appropriate handwashing or use of hand sanitizer is performed immediately before and after using the lulav. **In fact hand hygiene should be performed before and after using the lulav, whether or not gloves or a sanitary holder are used.**

Conclusions:

It is preferable to own one's own lulav and etrog. If this is not possible, one should not seek out a lulav and etrog if it will mean being in a crowded space or potential exposure. However, if one does have the opportunity to use a shared lulav and etrog, one should sanitize their hands before and after handling the lulav, and gloves or a may be used as an extra precaution.

One possibility would be to set timed appointments (beginning on Sunday, the 2nd day of the holiday), for individuals to come use the lulav and etrog in the sukkah one at a time, with sufficient time for the air to clear between visits. A human guide present at a distance, or clear posted instructions which do not have to be handled by the users, should make it clear that sanitizing before and after use is a must, whether or not gloves or a plastic sleeve are used, and a dispenser of hand sanitizer and/or washing facilities and soap must be immediately available.

A number of additional Teshuvot and position papers were issued by the CJLS (rabbinicalassembly.org) regarding what is permissible in terms of Jewish ritual observance during the pandemic. These position papers present the Conservative Movement Law Committee's distillation of Halakha, Jewish Law, as it applies to the following subjects. The views expressed serve as the basis for decisions which many, if

not all, Conservative Rabbis will be confronting, as the calendar year begins to unfold with the new reality of Covid-19, which seems to be here to stay, at least for the foreseeable future.

- Ethics of Gathering When Not All of Us May Attend in Person
- Clergy and Shelihei Tzibbur
- Choirs
- Multiple Recitations of the Same Liturgy
- Counting a Minyan Under One Roof, In Separate Rooms
- Services for Children, Teenagers, and Families
- Abbreviating Prayer Services for the High Holy Days of 5781/2020
 - Hoikhe Kedushah on Yamim Noraim
- Torah Reading During COVID-19
- Shofar Blowing for Rosh Hashanah 5781/2020
- Tashlikh - Where and When
- Approved CJLS Teshuvah: Teshuvah Without Communal Prayer
- Washing on Yom Kippur
- Kol Nidrei 5781/2020
- Yizkor for the High Holidays 5781/2020
- On Live Streaming and Competition
- Pastoral Strategies for Leading Through Change
- Sukkot/Shemini Atzeret/Simhat Torah Guidance for Communities Affected by COVID-19
- Tips for Using Mahzor Lev Shalem 5781
- Conversion in a Time of COVID-19
- High Holiday Guidance for Communities Affected by COVID-19
- Conservative Rabbis Rule on Streaming Services on Shabbat and Yom Tov
- Livestreaming on Shabbat and Haggim
- Sefirat Haomer
- CJLS Guidance for Remote Minyanim in a time of COVID-19
- Lifecycle
- Mikvah Guidance

APPENDIX: OUTREACH

Introduction:

This section contains examples of communication - letters/emails - to congregants from their Rabbis, professional staff and/or lay leadership. Expressions of support, explanations for how a given synagogue proposes to function religiously, educationally, socially - in every way that impacts its congregants during the pandemic— are shared in great detail. Clergy and synagogue leadership believe that being prepared, being educated and feeling cared for are keys to helping synagogue communities, and the individuals who comprise them, get through this extremely difficult time.

Following the letters from rabbis and lay leaders regarding plans and procedures for how their synagogues will function in the coming months, I've included letters from clergy and from synagogue presidents encouraging members to continue their support of the synagogue as well as a sample of a letter requesting members to renew their financial commitments to the synagogue for the coming year.

I've also included letters of information pertinent to the questions of when and how re-open Synagogues, communications from national Jewish organizations to their constituencies and a section of Program Resources which have been made available.

Finally, I've included an overview of what synagogues did for the High Holidays and I've also included the observations of Rabbis and lay leaders regarding what worked and, in some cases, what presented challenges. Finally, I conclude with some reviews of Zoom, live streaming and other virtual platforms, from the many synagogues who used them.

The following email/letter was sent to synagogue members of a Conservative synagogue in the mid-west, announcing synagogue closures and providing other information:

Dear Members & Community,

The religious, administrative, and lay leadership of the synagogue has been in a state of heightened concern since the outbreak of the novel corona virus. The precautionary measures we will take as a community to protect ourselves from this outbreak will evolve as we consult with experts. This short letter will give you a sense of where things stand now, and how Jewish values frame this matter.

Firstly, all places of gathering have an obligation at this time to slow the spread of this outbreak so that the healthcare system can keep up with increased demand. For us, that means the frequency of our gatherings should be reduced as much as possible. Thus, effective tomorrow, March 13th, all in-person synagogue events, meetings and programs are cancelled, and will remain cancelled for the foreseeable future. We are going to try and move many of these events to an online/virtual space, and we will let you know as we are able to do so. The office will take care of refunds for those who have pre-paid for programs.

We will still conduct worship services on weekdays and on Shabbat. They will be abbreviated and there will be no kiddushim, seudot, *or breakfasts*. No youth or childcare programs will be available. As we have stated elsewhere, if you are in a category of “elevated risk,” you should think carefully before deciding to attend. Those who exhibit any symptoms of illness, who have knowingly been in contact with someone with the virus, or who have recently traveled internationally, should please stay home.

The following letter was signed by the Senior Rabbi, Executive Director and President of an Orthodox synagogue in the North:

Communal prayer, while important, is not halakhically mandated (Orech Hayim 90:9). The *Shulhan Arukh* rules that a person should make an effort to pray in a minyan, but may pray alone if there are “compelling circumstances.” *Pikuah nefesh*, saving a life, is a compelling circumstance. In our tradition it is permitted to refrain from communal prayer to protect oneself from great risk to one’s health.

Furthermore, the Rema writes:

וכן יזהר מכל דברים המביאים לידי סכנה כי סכנתא חמירא מאיסורא ויש לחוש יותר לספק סכנה מלספק איסור

Similarly, one should be careful of all things that cause danger, because danger is stricter than transgressions, and one should be more careful with an uncertain danger than with an uncertain transgression. (Yoreh Deah 116:5)

For anyone who needs to say *kaddish*, or has a *yahrzeit*, the clergy is willing to ensure that someone will say the appropriate prayers for your loved one at synagogue; all you have to do is contact them to make them aware. Additionally, while we as of yet do not have live-streaming available, we are happy to suggest other sources for those who wish to view synagogue services through the Internet.

Medical professionals have advised the clergy to take extra personal precautions because of the role they play in the community. At this time, the clergy are avoiding visiting people in the hospital or retirement homes, and at *shiva*. They are still available by phone or e-mail. When it comes to larger gatherings, please keep in mind our responsibilities towards each other. *Simchah* celebrations should be abbreviated and attendance limited. For those, G-d forbid, who are dealing with a death, all funerals should be conducted at the graveside, and *shiva* observance private.

With these measures, we are hoping to seriously curb the impact and the spread of this illness. We deeply appreciate your help and patience as we continue to assess. May the Holy One give us the wisdom to respond appropriately to this disease and heal those who have been affected.

This letter was from the Clergy of a large Conservative synagogue located in the northeast part of the US - outlining the plan for serving the needs of its members – spiritual, educational, emotional, social...during the pandemic:

Dear Synagogue Community,

As we try to balance our daily lives and obligations with the reality of an uncertain environment, the safety and well-being of our community remain at the core of our synagogue mission. It is our focus to continue to be a *Beit Kneset* (House of Gathering), *Beit Midrash* (House of Learning) and a *Beit Tefillah* (House of Prayer) for our community during these unprecedented times, whether in person or virtually.

Our leadership team has been meeting regularly to make prudent adjustments to our program and protocols based on current information as the situation unfolds. We are guided by the recommendations of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and in an effort to preserve our ability to gather for our most sacred spiritual services, we believe it is important to mitigate the opportunities for potential exposure at other communal activities. As many of our members have been given the option to work from home by their employers, we also want to give that same opportunity to our dedicated staff. Additionally, some of the children in our community are heading into their secular school spring break over the next two weeks.

Therefore, starting tomorrow, March 12 through March 29 (and we will continue to reassess as the situation evolves), we are closing our physical campus for all but daily minyan, Bnei Mitzvah rehearsals and Shabbat services and are asking that all other synagogue matters be done remotely. Our staff has been preparing and training for

online offerings (Live stream, Zoom, Face-Time, etc.) for the past week and will continue to do so the next few days. Specifically, this is how the following will be affected, by category of synagogue functioning:

Beit Midrash (Education)

- **Family Early Childhood Center** – Today will be our last day of formal classes in the building. Beginning Monday, March 16, the early childhood department will offer age appropriate daily virtual programming. **Young Family Education** – Today will be our last day of formal classes in the building. Beginning Monday, March 16, age-appropriate classes and programming will be offered online.
- **Congregational School** – We will begin our Spring Break a few days early and today will be our last day of formal classes on our campus. Beginning Monday, March 23, the Congregational School team will be offering remote learning for each age cohort
- **B’nei Mitzvah Tutoring** – Beginning Thursday, March 12, all tutors, rabbis, and cantors will engage in family meetings and tutoring via Face-Time, Skype, or Zoom.
- **Youth and Teens** – some of their upcoming programs will be turned into e-learning and engagement opportunities. Starting today through March 29, the Food Pantry is closed.
- **Adult Education** – Beginning Wednesday, March 11, all classes will be offered via Zoom. **Study Circles** – Please contact the Rabbi to transition your Study Circle to an online Zoom gathering during this time.

Beit Knesset (Communal Gathering)

- **Pastoral Care** – As always, if you or a loved one are in need of pastoral care because of a birth, illness, or loss, please email the Rabbi
- **Caring Network** – As always, if you need help during this time, whether that be picking up medication at the pharmacy or delivering groceries, please reach out to the Rabbi so that he can coordinate with our *Bikkur Cholim* (caring for the sick) Committee. We will be reaching out to members of the community to assist with these *Tikkun Olam* mitzvot as needed.
- **Kiddush** – We are working with our caterer to provide self-contained “kiddush-to-go packages” and will be transitioning any other food service to individually packaged and/or professionally served items.
- **Committee and Arms Meetings** – Beginning Thursday, March 12, all essential Committee and Arms meetings should be done via Zoom or conference call. Please coordinate with your staff or officer liaison.

- **Cleaning** – Our maintenance team continues to follow our enhanced cleaning protocols. Please help us support their efforts by washing your hands upon entering the building and staying home if you feel even the slightest bit sick.

Beit Tefillah (Worship)

- **Daily *Minyan*** – Morning and Evening *Minyan* are being held in the Daily Chapel and will be available via Live stream.
- **Shabbat Services**
 - As of now, *Kabbalat Shabbat* and Shabbat Morning services will continue as planned. At least until March 29, *Hashkama*, *Havurah*, and early *Shachrit* services are cancelled. Our clergy will be in touch with all near-term *Bnei Mitzvah*, *aufruf* and baby naming families personally to answer any questions or handle concerns.
 - For those who attended synagogue last week, you experienced “elbow bump” Shabbat Shaloms, the availability of hand sanitizer, a shortened Torah procession and new *aliyah* protocols of not kissing the prayer books or the Torah. These protocols will continue in addition to others as advised.

- **Live stream – Important Note for all Services**

The CDC recommendation is that older adults and people who have serious chronic medical conditions avoid crowds. Similarly, the Conservative Movement’s Committee on Jewish Law and Standards (CJLS) has advised members whose health may be at risk, or whose presence may be a risk to others, to stay home and make use of connecting virtually (through audio or video). For this reason, we strongly encourage PAS members in these categories and anyone else uncomfortable in a public setting at this time use our Live stream for both daily *minyan* and Shabbat services.

Letter from the Clergy of a large conservative synagogue explaining that Shabbat Services would now be offered via Zoom:

Starting this Shabbat, May 1-2, our synagogue will be running Shabbat services over Zoom.

“Oh! Why hadn’t you done this before? Why now?”

We didn’t know a Shabbat-compatible way to use the computer till just now. But we just learned that our contract with Zoom lets us set up meetings that can last 24 hours. We also will hire a non-Jewish tech person to handle any difficulties that might arise. Please note, this is precisely what we do when we have our custodians set the microphones before Shabbat and adjust them when problems arise.

Therefore, as an example, the Cantor plans to click into a meeting called “Shabbat Davening” at, say, 6 pm on Friday night, well before candlelighting. Then he’ll just leave his computer on through Shabbat, without touching it – just like he leaves certain lights on in their house all through Shabbat. When he wants to see you all, he’ll just step in front of the computer screen.

“Haven’t we already done other services, classes, discussions, etc. using Zoom?”

You bet. We’ve been holding “virtual minyans” on weekday mornings and evenings, for weeks.

Plus the Sunday late-morning “Renewal” service with our educational director and a congregant, co-leading

Plus Friday night services (just before Shabbat) and Saturday evening services (just after Shabbat)

Plus making pre-recorded Shabbat and *Yom Tov* videos with sermons from the Rabbis and Torah/Haftarah readings, which you can click on anytime

Plus lots of classes and other meetings...

But not during Shabbat itself. That’s why this is new.

“Well, why not just keep doing what we’ve been doing?”

First, because Shabbat day and Yom Tov is our main community gathering-time. Now that we know a way to meet then, let’s do it. We will start the Saturday or Yom Tov morning service at 9:30 am each week.

“Are we talking about Shabbat morning only?”

No. Also Friday night Maariv [following the 6 pm Minchah and Kabbalat Shabbat services, as well as Shabbat afternoon Minchah, and special Mincha Bar/Bat Mitzvah services as needed. With Zoom’s 24-hour limit, we’ll hold congregational Minchah at 4 pm each Saturday afternoon. Then Maariv later, at 8:45 pm on Saturday night, as we have been doing.

“Shabbat morning services are normally a few hours. That’s a long time to look at a computer screen...”

Yes. But hey, no one has to be there the entire time! (Just like in our Sanctuary.)

Even so, we do plan to shorten the Shabbat morning service somewhat.

For example, we won’t be repeating the Amidah, because we won’t be in a minyan physically together.

We will be able to say Mourner’s Kaddish, per the Rabbi’s ruling. We’ve been doing that in our weekday Virtual Minyanim.

We will be able to read from the Torah, chant the Haftarah, present sermons, and recite the fundamental prayers of Shabbat and Yom Tov.

We will be able to honor yahrzeits, anniversaries, Bnai Mitzvah milestones, and other simchas.

In sum, we are pleased that we can do this! Looking forward to having you join us!

More Clergy Outreach Letters to their Members:

The rabbis of 2 large synagogues in the northeast sent letters to their families emphasizing their mutual bond even in the absence of physical closeness. The letter mentioned that there are more people at *minyan* on zoom than there were when services were in-person. I've heard this from many synagogues – across the country.

The letter continued, saying that the rabbis and the synagogue are there for their congregants even though the doors are physically closed. From the zoomed Passover Seder to the outreach phone calls, to the Caring committee offering to shop for congregants who are unable to leave their apartments to Adult Education and zoom Religious School and the Early Childhood Center, congregants are connecting, even as they learn new skills and make new friends.

The following letter was sent by the clergy team of a large Conservative synagogue in the northeast part of the country, announcing, among other things, the start of Zoom services on Shabbat.

From Your Rabbis:

First, and most importantly, we hope that you are well. We miss being together and we miss the normal rhythms that define our personal lives and the life of the community.

The value of protecting human life (*Pikuach Nefesh*) is of paramount concern in Jewish thought. It was with that value in mind and in accord with state law that we closed our building and have continued to encourage members of our community to observe the social distancing guidelines recommended by health professionals in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. We hope you will reach out to a member of our clergy when there is an additional way we can support you – prayers for healing, spiritual or emotional support, or practical needs like shopping or groceries. We're here for you.

When we first decided to close the building and recreated our community online, we immediately sought to produce online opportunities for our members to continue to pray, learn, and stay connected to one another. Our motto was and remains “social distancing – yes; social isolation – never.”

At the time, we didn't know how long this period would last and so we made the determination that we would provide weekday prayer services (morning and evening) via Zoom and pre-record Shabbat and Yom Tov services, but not offer live online services at those sacred times.

One of the hallmarks of Shabbat and Yom Tov observance is refraining from certain kinds of technology that define our otherwise task-oriented lives. As we now realize that this period will persist for some while longer, we felt it necessary to reconsider our approach. **Beginning this Shabbat, we will now offer live Zoom Shabbat and Yom Tov services, even while striving to do this in the most sensitive way possible.**

In recent weeks, the Jewish community has had to contend with questions of ritual observance and Jewish life in a whole new way. For example, prior to Covid-19, the Conservative movement has upheld the principle that a minyan (quorum) cannot be established online to say Mourners' Kaddish, but that ten Jewish adults need to be physically present in the same space. Others could join an established minyan by calling in or using video conferencing technologies, but physical presence was required for a group of 10.

However, the exigencies of the moment have demanded that we make accommodations especially as we wish to provide a way for mourners to grieve and heal when some of the "normal" ways in which we extend comfort are not available. So we have permitted the recitation of mourners' kaddish with a group of ten online for this time.

Similarly, in preparation for Passover, leniencies in the law were highlighted as a way to enable people to observe the holiday in a time when certain food may not be as readily available. The main Jewish legal principle that has guided our thinking around these issues is called "*sha'at hadehaq*" – literally, "an urgent hour." This principle allows for rare exceptions to general practice when the situation demands. Throughout, we have consulted among our clergy and made determinations that we felt are appropriate for the spiritual needs of our community under the present circumstances.

While Jewish law is generally slow to change and shows deference to tradition, it is also compassionate and responsive to the needs of people's lives in adverse times. We believe it is essential to strengthen our communal ties at this time. We don't know how long this "urgent hour" will persist, but for however long, we are committed to serving the needs of our community and providing spiritual and social connection.

We hope you'll join us for Zoom services this Shabbat and future Shabbatot and Yom Tov during the COVID-19 period of health restrictions. Below are some guidelines that can help you navigate this issue in the most Shabbat and Yom Tov sensitive manner possible.

With friendship,

Your Rabbis

The following is another letter sent to congregants prior to the High Holydays by the Rabbis of a large synagogue on the east coast:

Dear Synagogue Family,

The High Holy Days are a highlight of our synagogue calendar. When our building is filled to capacity, we feel the fullness, strength, and diversity of our community. It gives

expression to the verse from Proverbs “*B’rov am hadrat melekh* the Sovereign is glorified amidst the multitudes of the people.” (Prov. 14:28). This year, gathering in large crowds poses a significant health risk. As such, we will not be able to gather as we normally do, but we are committed to helping our community connect, pray, reflect, and feel Gd’s glory through a variety of offerings. The purpose of this email is to share our current plans for the High Holy Days, as we imagine many of you are wondering what is in store this year. We will continue to update you throughout the summer.

We have developed the following plan with extensive conversations with our senior staff and top lay leadership, approval by our synagogue ritual committee, and consultation with medical and legal advisors. As we communicated previously, we are guided by Jewish values to prioritize safety and human life, *halakhah* (Jewish law), and our commitment to serve this community’s spiritual needs. Recognizing that these plans are subject to change, the following represents our current plan for the 5781 High Holy Day Season:

- **Platform:** Our High Holy Day services will be conducted online via a combination of Zoom conference and prerecorded segments.

Tentative Schedule:

Traditional Service – 7:30-11 am

President’s Message and Rabbinic Sermon – 11-11:35 am

Family Service – 11:35 am-12:45 pm

Our synagogue nurse presents a service – 1:30-2:45 pm

The Education Department is in the process of providing timing for the ECC Service, as well as for the Family Service.

- **Mahzor** Each adult member (not adult children) will receive a *mahzor* (High Holy Day prayer book) delivered to the homes of families who live in the area as part of a larger High Holy Day “care package” of enhancement material. You can keep the *mahzor* with you at home for the duration of the season and return it to the synagogue when it is safe to do so.
- **Minyan (quorum):** A small committee of 10-15 people will join the Cantor in the sanctuary to enable us to Zoom the parts of the service that require a *minyan* (quorum) by Jewish law specifically, the repetition of the *Amidah* for *Shaharit* and *Musaf*. These volunteers will be required to wear masks and observe social distancing and abide by other health guidelines in order to enter and be present in the synagogue. A forthcoming email will provide a questionnaire for folks interested in volunteering for this committee.

Pre-recordings:

- A few parts of the service which do not require a response from the congregation (e.g. rabbis' sermons and president's message), will be prerecorded and shown for the first time at the live service. These prerecorded segments will also be available afterwards to watch at your convenience.
- **Shofar and Tashlikh:** On the second day of Rosh Ha-shanah (the first day of Rosh Hashanah is Shabbat and thus, the shofar is not sounded), the Cantor will sound the Shofar at our services over Zoom. Given the urgent health circumstances, this is an acceptable way for people to fulfill their obligation to hear the Shofar for this year. For those who also wish to hear the Shofar in person, we will coordinate some opportunities for people to gather outdoors in small groups, socially distanced, to hear the Shofar during the week prior to Rosh Hashanah. These opportunities will be augmented by several different locations at which people can participate in Tashlikh, the symbolic casting away of sins by throwing pieces of bread into a body of water and hear the Shofar in person there.

We miss you, our congregational family, and we look forward to a time when we can gather again safely together. Until then, we remain committed to finding ways for our community to connect and observe Jewish life meaningfully □ as our traditions and rituals feel especially relevant during times of crisis. While we love our building and the physical space of the sanctuary, our synagogue is not a building. It's the people and relationships that define our community. We have seen those relationships strengthen during this time and we believe those connections will help sustain us and guide us through these difficult times.

With Blessings,

The following is a letter sent to congregants from the lay leadership of a small Conservative synagogue on the west coast:

When Virtual Becomes Spiritual

Dear Friends:

Our Synagogue is not a building. It is not a collection of traditions and celebrations, nor is it a catalog of classes and clubs.

While these are beautiful and necessary to a community, they are not the essence of it. The essence of our community is you. It is me. It is all of us joining together to fulfill the *mitzvot*, to learn with and to pray for and to serve one another, far beyond the capacity of any single building, holiday, or class.

Our Synagogue is *us*, our traditions, and our enduring values and beliefs which throughout history have always united us as a people to overcome temporary hardship.

Our synagogue continues just as our commitment to Judaism does, whether in person or virtually. We have been here for you, and we will continue to be here for you.

We invite you to continue learning, praying, and serving with us, that we may be wiser and stronger through our common bonds.

We look forward to gathering in our beloved building soon, but until then, we will continue gathering virtually as a *kehila kedosha*.

Please stay safe, stay healthy, and stay connected.

B'shalom,

From a Conservative synagogue on the eastern seaboard, announcing to its members how High Holiday services would “look” this year:

Dear Friends,

We hope that you are all having a safe and healthy summer as we continue to live through the uncertainty and chaos of this moment.

Our Temple community has shown its compassion, support, and commitment during these tumultuous times. We are inspired by your robust participation in our online services, study, and programs. You have shown that a synagogue is not a building, but the web of sacred relationships we forge with each other.

As the High Holy Days approach, we'd like to give you a brief overview of what to expect. **After serious consideration, we have made the difficult decision to hold High Holy Day services online this year.** Just as we continue to strive to create engaging Shabbat worship, we are working to create meaningful and inspiring High Holy Day experiences. Our clergy, staff, and lay leaders are seeking to thoughtfully address this unique moment and take advantage of the opportunity given to us to re-imagine and re-create what worship in community can be.

We draw upon our Temple's commitment to innovation, striving for bold creativity. We are following in our long tradition to "break" what is not yet broken, and we are excited to experiment with new modalities and mediums.

We will have interactive components, videos featuring our own artists and musicians, opportunities for study and reflection, online gatherings for families, and more that we haven't even thought of yet. "Ask the Rabbi" will strain the use of the chat box.

At the same time we feel profound loss of not being able to join together in person, we are proud of the resilience, care, and open-heartedness our community has shown these last few months. Together, we will work to make the start of 5781 meaningful, even as we know that among our deepest prayers, we hope to be together in person for 5782.

Shalom,
Your Rabbis

A Rabbi's Message of April 30, 2020 to a large Conservative congregation on the East coast:

This will be the 8th Shabbat that we will not gather together in shul. That's eight Shabbatot worth of Bar/Bat Mitzvahs, baby namings, birthdays, anniversaries, prayers, *divrei Torah*, *kibbutzing*, and *kiddushes* that we have missed. In the absence of being together physically, we have begun to offer Shabbat services virtually, like we have done for nearly every other experience that TBS offers. Normally, *halakhah* (Jewish law) prohibits the use of electronics on Shabbat. This is for technical reasons (for example, we don't write on Shabbat and most agree that typing is a form of writing) as well as reasons that have to do with creating a Shabbat atmosphere. We are enslaved to our devices six days a week, and Shabbat comes and allows to unplug and to focus on those closest to us. This is one of the main things that I have always appreciated about Shabbat. We know, however, that the physical distancing we have been observing prevents us from being with friends and family. So we are faced with questions: how do we continue to observe Shabbat in a time of physical distancing? How much should we compromise on *halakhah* to achieve the spirit of the law? What will the decisions we make now mean for future observance of Shabbat?

I want to assure you that these questions were not taken lightly, and we thought long and hard about them. One of the teachings from our tradition that guided us in responding to them is from the first of the two Torah portions for this Shabbat – *Aharei Mot*. In Leviticus 18:5, we read “You shall keep My laws and My rules, by the pursuit of which a person *shall live by them...*” Those last words, “*shall live by them,*” are a translation of the Hebrew words *v'hai bahem*. In the Talmud, these words are the source of the ruling that, except for the most extreme cases, a person may violate any commandment for the sake of *pikkuah nefesh*, saving a life. *Pikkuah nefesh* is a pretty specific term in Jewish law. It refers to someone whose physical health is in immediate danger. Still, the Talmud also interprets *v'hai bahem* to mean that the *mitzvot* were given for the sake of life (Sanhedrin 74a). Maimonides drives this point home in the *Mishneh Torah* when he writes: “You see then that the laws of the Torah are not meant to bring vengeance to the world, but rather mercy, loving kindness and peace (*Mishneh Torah Hilkhoh Shabbat 2:3*).

It is with this bigger picture of the purpose of the *mitzvot* in mind that we, following the guidance of the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of our Conservative Movement, decided to offer virtual *minyanim* and services on Shabbat and holidays during this extraordinary time. It is clear to us that having this virtual connection is so important for our emotional and spiritual health right now. Having the technology to be alone together is truly a blessing. All this being said, it is still too early to know whether these changes in practice should continue once life returns to a new normal, whatever and whenever that might be. One decision we have made is that we will be live streaming our congregational and family services in the sanctuary and in the Beit *Midrash* once we are able to return to our synagogue. We will, however, do our best to minimize the use of technology on Shabbat by setting up before Shabbat, putting the filming on a timer, and not moving the camera once Shabbat has begun. Since this can be done within the bounds of *halakhah*, and there will certainly be those who will not be able to come to synagogue out because of health concerns or distance, it is an important way to help people connect with our synagogue family. Shabbat is the centerpiece of our week. It is the day when people of all ages come together to celebrate, comfort, schmooze and experience the blessing of community. While we can't do all of that virtually, live streaming will allow more people to be present on this most important day of the week.

I'd like to conclude on a personal note. Until a couple of weeks ago, I had not used technology on Shabbat or holidays, except in the case of emergency, for almost 20 years. And I admit that, using my computer to join our virtual Shabbat and holiday *minyanim* has been difficult for me. I don't feel right using my computer on Shabbat, nor do I like that my children, growing up in a Shabbat observant home, know that their father the rabbi is doing this. On the other hand, I believe strongly that, in these times *v'hai bahem* takes precedence over the usual laws of Shabbat. And this too is an important lesson that I teach my children. Rabbi Leo Baeck, a great 20th century German rabbi and Holocaust survivor, wrote, "The Jew knows that the greatest commandment is to live." Our tradition recognizes that there are situations where life needs to take precedence. This, I believe, is such a moment. Still, we should recognize and understand why we are living differently by the *mitzvot* today, and continue to consider what sort of long term impact they should and should not have on how we live our Jewish lives. This is an important conversation that we will continue as we move through and ultimately past this challenging time. Until then, I look forward to living by our laws together, in our virtual shul, this Shabbat.

A small synagogue on the East coast does not offer Zoom services. This was their letter to their membership explaining how services would be conducted:

Dear Members and Friends,

After many weeks of deliberations, and exploring different options for synagogue services over the High Holidays - and of course taking into consideration the feedback we have received from so many of you, we have settled on a plan. We realize that no plan is perfect and that it is impossible to accommodate everyone's preferences. We are also very keenly aware that many will have chosen to stay at home this year and avoid exposure in any way - we truly respect everyone's personal choice. In an effort to accommodate everyone who does want to attend some or all of the High Holiday services in person, we have decided on the following.

Our High Holiday Services will take place INDOORS, with optional seating OUTDOORS under an open tent. We have reconfigured the seating arrangement in the sanctuary and set up the room in a way which will allow those seated outside to hear the Service, as well as the Torah reading, *shofar* blowing and rabbi's sermon - through open windows and doors. Seating indoors is extremely limited - and for those of you who have indicated that you will be joining us - we urge you to please call the office and confirm:

A:) That you will be attending.

B:) What day/s you will be attending.

C:) Will you be attending for the entire service or just parts thereof? This will allow us to maximize capacity, utilizing rotating times if necessary.

Please understand that the seating configuration will be entirely different this year. Seat rows, numbers, and placement which have been familiar to so many of you for many, many years are not an option this year. We really appreciate your understanding during these challenging times. If you will be joining us outdoors, it is imperative that you let us know as well. The tent size is also limited and we would like to try to accommodate everyone. Please note: Social distancing and face coverings are MANDATORY for both those seated indoors AND outdoors. With everyone's safety and comfort in mind, please be advised that Services will be somewhat shortened, honors and communal readings will be very limited and all precautions possible will be taken to minimize exposure and intermingling. These arrangements will be in place both for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

The second *Yizkor* service on Yom Kippur will take place OUTDOORS ONLY!

Wishing everyone a healthy, safe and sweet New Year!:

The rabbi of a conservative synagogue on the eastern seaboard writes to his congregation on the meaning of prayer, particularly during the pandemic...

For the High Holidays, to Zoom or not to Zoom is not the question: Now is the time to focus on the value of personal prayer and how to utilize this time for a deeper personal connection with Gd.

In 1953, at the Rabbinical Assembly Convention held at the Breakers Hotel in Atlantic City, NJ, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel delivered a talk entitled, "The Spirit of Jewish Prayer." He called on the rabbis there to have a *Cheshbon HaNefesh*, a personal accounting, in relation to the prayer lives that they are facilitating within their congregation. After accusing the synagogue of the 1950s of becoming the graveyard where prayer is buried, he shared the following "The Spirit of Jewish Prayer."

"The problem is not how to fill the buildings but how to inspire the hearts...The problem is not one of synagogue attendance but one of spiritual attendance. The problem is not how to attract bodies to enter the space of a temple but how to inspire souls to enter an hour of spiritual concentration in the presence of God. The problem is time, not space."

We had become overly attuned to how many people were praying, but not sufficiently attuned to creating meaning for those people in their experiences.

As I reflect on the Jewish community's preparations for the High Holidays this year, I can't help but arrive at a similar conclusion. We have been focused on the challenge of the medium, rather than on the enhancement of the message. An overwhelming amount of the conversations around Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur has been about Zooming or not Zooming. Utilizing a one-way live stream, or offering the chance to pray along with recordings from the congregation. Praying in backyards or praying in shifts. All of these questions revolve around the idea that we wish to create as close to a recreation of the normal High Holiday experience as we can, depending on the viability of different technological possibilities for different communities.

Rarely have I encountered conversation about the ways that this year is unique and requires new thinking about the essence of prayer. I haven't heard many focusing on the value of personal prayer and how to utilize this time for a deeper personal connection with Gd. We have engaged in conversation about how to create connection with our fellow congregants while physically distant, but not on how to develop a deeper connection with the Almighty. When I was involved in a conversation about what creative approaches were being taken by non-Zooming congregations, I constantly pushed back, reminding everyone there that whether one is Zooming one's services or not does not preclude the ability to think creatively about how best to meet our community's spiritual needs at this time. Contrary to Canadian thinker, Marshall McLuhan, the medium is not always the message. We need to start with the message and then find the medium to share it.

If there was ever a time to reassess the effectiveness of the High Holiday liturgy at accomplishing the objectives that we hope for our communities, this year is it. So much is changing to begin with, this must be the moment to create new and meaningful rituals that can fully actualize our vision for the season. This year, of all years, is the time when we can try to actualize Rabbi Heschel's vision of prayer.

Here are some of the projects that we are taking on this year to attempt to meet the spiritual needs of our community:

We are coordinating with three other synagogues' outdoor *shofar* blowing in locations all around our city on the second day of Rosh Hashanah. This perpetuates our synagogue's commitment to community both by bringing different spiritual communities together but also by bringing people together as well.

We are setting up a Zoom for the end of Yom Kippur (*Maariv/Havdalah/Shofar*) not only so the community can share in the experience together, but also to encourage people who are home alone to share their break-fast together.

We have created a DIY personal *Tashlikh* experience using dissolvable paper that not only allows people who are not comfortable coming to a public place to participate in the ritual, but also creates a potentially even more meaningful ritual for us to practice.

We have created Spotify playlists with both liturgical music and non-liturgical music for people to listen to in order to get into the spirit of the season.

We have created lesson plans that can be executed by individuals and families at home, including one on ethical wills. On the day when we are called to experience our own mortality, what better way to reflect on that theme than by writing about what is most important to us and how we wish to be remembered.

And we are also providing a live stream and recordings of the service for people to utilize so that there remains the familiar and comfortable as well.

But with all of these new opportunities in place, not only do we believe that this year can be the most spiritually fulfilling yet, but we also believe that we are creating a community that can continue to actualize that vision for prayer and spirituality in the years to come, no matter when 2021 and beyond may bring. The medium may change, but the message of what true prayer is remains, and can continue to inspire us for many years to come.

[site/Downloads/High%20Holy%20Days%20Brochure%20\(1\).pdf](#) = Mass synagogue?

Letters Requesting Members' Continued Financial Support:

From a large Conservative synagogue in the mid-west:

At its core, a synagogue is a community. It is a community of people who share a history, an ancestry, a culture and a common ethical purpose. Am Yisrael is our Jewish community. And, as our Zoom services and almost daily programming show, our community has never been stronger.

However, that does not mean that individual members of our community are not hurting. In an effort to be sensitive to the uncertainty wrought by the Covid-19 pandemic, the Board felt that it was important to pass a budget that did not raise dues or school fees. But we also have an obligation to the congregation to pass a balanced budget. So, as I stated in my last letter, while we did adopt a balanced budget, it is based on certain assumptions that may be difficult to achieve.

The first assumption is that we have no attrition in our membership or the number of religious school students. This year, more than any other, it is important that we retain all of our existing members and attract new members. Our existing members are our best recruiters. We need you to speak to friends, neighbors, colleagues and acquaintances who may be looking for a synagogue. The best way to guarantee our financial future is to increase our membership.

The second assumption is that our members pay their dues and maintain their voluntary contributions at the same level as this past year. However, we understand that this year may be different than last. If you have suffered as a result of the current situation and feel that paying full dues or your usual voluntary contribution would be a hardship, please call the Rabbi or the Executive Director. The Board feels strongly that no member should leave the synagogue because of financial difficulty. Your conversation with the Rabbi or the director will be confidential.

The budget has been cut to its bones. Our Clergy, professional staff, administrative and maintenance staff all have made the personally painful sacrifice of foregoing cost of living raises. In addition, the Board had hoped to give raises to our SJS teachers. They have not had a raise for several years and richly deserve it. However, in order to control costs, their raises have been deferred. If we are to achieve our balanced budget, it will depend upon revenues. Even in the best of times, dues and school fees account for barely 60% of our budget. We always rely on the generosity of our members. This year, those of us who may be more financially secure and able to support our synagogue must step up and increase our voluntary contributions to help offset those who may have been hurt by the pandemic.

Whatever happens, our synagogue will continue to provide meaningful religious and educational experiences. We are monitoring the situation very carefully. We will not open the building prematurely. We are making plans for both in-person and virtual

services for the High Holidays and are mindful that, even if it becomes safe to have in-person services, some members may be concerned about participating in a large group. As the past several months demonstrated, our SJS students will get the best Jewish education possible, even if via Zoom.

This year can be our best ever. But we need to work together to make our beloved synagogue our vibrant Jewish community.

From the president a large Conservative synagogue of 900 families on the east coast, in addition to video messages from the clergy of the synagogue – all emphasizing their hopes for support from the membership:

Dear Congregant,

At its core, our synagogue is a vibrant community that shares a history, a culture and a set of values. The importance of our communal bond has grown even stronger in the wake of the COVID pandemic. Although we have not been able to physically enter our beautiful building since mid-March, our “doors” have remained open for you and your family to make spiritual, intellectual and emotional connections during this challenging time.

Over the past three months, we have operated under the premise that physical distancing should not lead to social isolation. With that in mind, our clergy, staff and volunteers have collaborated, in an unprecedented effort, to navigate the technological paths that have linked all ages and stages of our community. Together we have been able to:

- Make outreach phone calls to the entire congregation
- Establish regular contact with our more senior members
- Offer support from our Nurse and from our Social Worker
- Transform our early childhood program to maintain connections between students and teachers
- Provide a range of on-line options for elementary school children and teenagers
- Offer a wide array of adult learning opportunities
- Continue our daily minyanim, along with Shabbat, Yom Tov and B’nai Mitzvah services
- Create a weekly spiritual wellness Service with a staff member/congregant joint offering

During this period of uncertainty, our Board of Trustees has also remained focused on its goal of fiscal responsibility. We have worked to fortify the synagogue’s financial

resources through government assistance programs and careful budgeting, **but we also NEED your continued support as members of the synagogue which is so important to us.**

Your financial commitment to the synagogue will enable the Board to effectively plan our budget for the coming year. However, if the pandemic has posed a significant financial hardship for your family, please contact the office and we will work with you to find a comfortable accommodation, in the same spirit and confidentiality that always guide these discussions.

On behalf of the entire Board of Trustees, I thank you for your dedication to our synagogue and for placing your confidence in us to work, in partnership, with our amazing clergy and staff to lead this remarkable institution. We are currently consulting with our medical and legal advisors to evaluate all of the protocols and all of the recommended options to safely serve our community in the coming weeks and months, including the operations of our Early Childhood Center, Religious School and High Holidays services. As always, we will keep an open line of communication with the entire membership regarding these plans.

Sincerely,
Synagogue President

Sample of a Commitment Letter

It is a challenging time to plan for the coming year. Will we gather together or worship in a virtual setting? Will we celebrate our 40th Anniversary saying the Shehecheyanu with arms around one other or will we bump elbows in small gatherings? I don't have answers to these questions. But the answer I do have is that we must move forward, we must plan ... if we do not plan for the future, we will fail to be prepared for whatever it brings.

And so it is that I am sending you this letter – planning for the next year. This letter is about the financial support which our synagogue needs in order to continue serving our community. As in years past, your support is our lifeblood and now more than ever, as we plan for the coming year, your support will enable us to continue to serve our members, our staff and our greater community. In the coming months our community will look to gather once again and preparations are underway with the guidance of our newly formed Re-Opening Task Force to enable a safe, timely and healthy re-opening.

It is important to share the ways in which your Annual Commitment supports our synagogue. There is a cost to retaining our amazing Clergy and Staff, to keeping our facilities in top shape, and to providing the spectacular programming offered through our Adult Education, Membership, Ritual and Caring Committee Teams. Our membership annual commitment supports all that is involved in the daily efforts of

running a synagogue, including supporting life-cycle events, comforting mourners, visiting the sick, and conducting Shabbat and holy day services – and in addition we are a force for good in our greater community.

Our congregation is a responsibly frugal operation, a reflection of our culture of volunteerism and fiscal caution. Our Finance Committee Team members are steadfast stewards of fiscal integrity and are working diligently to keep our synagogue on solid financial footing, especially in these difficult times.

To sustain our congregation and serve our community year-round, *it costs \$2,700 per dues-paying household*. Meanwhile most area synagogues have a “sustaining number” of \$3,500 or more per household – a testament to our fiscally responsible operations. Under our fair-share Annual Commitment system, those who are able to give more than the sustaining level help to support the participation of those who cannot.

In this time of economic uncertainty, I know some in our family will not be able to meet their fair-share Annual Commitment and to those in difficult situations, please know we are here to comfort and support you regardless of your ability to fulfill your Annual Commitment. I also know that there are those in our family who are fortunate, and continue in full employment or who are not as financially adversely affected as others. I hope we come together as a community to support each other and to support our congregation so that we can ALL once again share in the *ruach* of our new song.

Your annual pledge form is enclosed. Please complete and return it by June 24. Moreover, please try to make your pledge not just with generosity but with joy, pride, and a positive sense of obligation toward our present and our future ... together.

With deep gratitude and appreciation,

Your President

A letter was sent by the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism offering a wealth of resources to help synagogue navigate during the pandemic:

Dear Synagogue Leaders,

As we adjust to the new normal, across the movement everyone is looking for answers and guidance. Even as we approach Shavuot, we understand that our congregations are engaging in two important challenges – planning for the High Holidays when there is a high likelihood that we will not gather in person - and when and how to restore in-person activities.

Our goal is to present a weekly email with updated information including webinars, relevant articles, materials and downloadable resources, providing insight and guidance on how we will each engage and build our communities during this time. High Holidays We are certain that High Holiday services will not look like those of last year or the year before. Although nothing is certain, we must prepare for virtual and home-based gatherings. Earlier this month we announced the formation of a Conservative movement High Holiday Task Force created with representatives from the CA, JEA, NAASE, RA and USCJ.

Our objective as a Task Force is to develop ways to re-imagine the High Holiday experience and will include information and digital resources to help synagogue leaders inspire active and reflective participation. Through our work together, we will unleash great creativity from across our movement, providing you with a vast array of exciting materials and resources. One of the ways to initiate the High Holiday planning process in your synagogue is to create their own dedicated Task Force. We are pleased to offer a webinar, "Developing Your Synagogue High Holiday Task Force" on May 21 at 1 pm EDT.

For more High Holiday resources and conversation, please go to the High Holidays 2020 forum on The Commons. Building Re-openings, Resuming In-Person Activities.

The following information from the Secure Community Network (SCN) will help in thinking through reopening buildings and resuming in-person activities:

- "Overview of considerations for resumption of operations and organizational re-opening" was created by the SCN national working group, which includes USCJ.
- SCN's guide to low/no cost facility security guidance for use in re-opening can be accessed here. A related SCN webinar will be announced shortly.
- An Emergency Operations Plan Template can be accessed here. Along with the items above, there is an explanation of why Jewish institutions should factor into their decisions the values that have continued to guide us throughout the pandemic in his article Reopening Our Institutions and Jewish Values. Please be in touch with your USCJ Synagogue Consultant if you have any questions or concerns. Stay healthy and safe

The following website points to a very helpful reference guide – across the movements – for scores of Program Resources including suggestions for making Rosh Hashana at home including how to make a Rosh Hashanah seder; activities for children; crafts for all ages, Tashlikh rituals and much more!

<https://www.CJHighHolidays.com> – Conservative movement's High Holiday website – this is a cross-movement reference guide

More about Safety Regarding Re-Opening Synagogues: Jewish Values, April 2020

As the weeks of mandated physical separation continue there is growing desire around the world to reopen businesses and other institutions as quickly as possible. Failing

economies and ballooning job loss create tremendous economic pressure on our families and threaten the viability of our institutions. There is also a great yearning for social interaction with physical proximity and the need to be relieved of the isolation and loneliness of the past weeks. We hope this document will be used by clergy, staff, boards, and leadership of institutions associated with our movement and clergy in various parts of the world to guide their decisions in coming weeks as we respond to this desire. It is clear that what will emerge will be a gradual and phased restarting of physical proximity, based on factors including:

- Declining rates of infection and mortality in specific areas
- Availability, accuracy, and ability to obtain swift results of testing both for the active virus and immunity, along with contact tracing to contain infection “hot spots”
- Development and wide availability of treatments that reduce mortality
- Development and wide availability of a vaccine The timeline for each of these conditions is uncertain, and is also likely to vary among different locations around the globe. We do not have the expertise to provide specific medical guidance. Instead we suggest relying on medical authorities who can assess local conditions. Individuals and institutions should follow government guidelines and evaluate opportunities to increase physical proximity based on sound scientific and medical advice. Along with those medical considerations, Jewish institutions should also factor into their decisions the values that have continued to guide us throughout this crisis. These include:
 - *Pikuah Nefesh* -- “Safeguarding Life” is a bedrock principle of Jewish law, and supersedes most other obligations or mitzvot. To that end, our institutions must ensure that any steps towards restoring physical proximity place preserving life first and foremost.
 - *Sakanat Nefeshot* -- “Endangering Life” -- participants, staff, and clergy should not be in positions where they will be unduly endangering their own lives or the lives of their families due to pressure to restore activities. We must honor the needs of those who lead or participate in our communities when they have individual circumstances requiring the need to reduce risk to themselves or those they live with.
 - *She’at Hadehak* -- “Extraordinary Moment” -- Jewish life has always made adjustments in times of emergency and crisis. We will need to come to terms with the fact that this crisis will last for well over a year, and that we will need to continue to change our expectations and operations. We will need continued flexibility in Jewish practice informed by our commitment to authentic modes of interpretation of our tradition.

- Kol Yisrael Areivim Zeh Bazeh -- “We Are Responsible for One Another” -- It’s our job to look out for the mental and physical health and safety of one another. Those who have resources need to give tzeddakah to help others and to sustain our institutions. Our participants are connected to others outside our community, and our policies and activities affect the broader rate of infection. And we must be sure that we act in ways in which clergy, staff, and participants do not feel discriminated against or unduly disadvantaged based on their health needs.

- Hesed -- “Profound Love and Kindness” -- Decisions around our operations and the risks involved create uncertainty, grief, and anxiety, and we must act with tremendous love and kindness towards the members of our families, communities, and the world at large. Institutions should therefore:

- Act with caution before undertaking activities that allow for physical proximity. Given all of the values above, and despite the fact that it continues to challenge the finances of our institutions, in many locations our concern for health and safety should make us among the last to return to physically proximate activity, rather than the first.

- Ensure partnership in decision making among clergy, staff, and lay leadership. Institutions should establish a committee that involves all of these leaders, along with medical professionals with appropriate expertise, to evaluate next steps.

- Continue to use technology whenever possible for prayer, education, and community building. Even when not ideal, these tools continue to ensure health and safety and help avoid tempting people who should not attend because of age or health conditions from endangering themselves. Other key functions like daycare, nursery school, or camp might be possible to resume on a different timetable.

- Realize that the path toward resuming “normal operations” will be long.

- Understand that even when we have the medical technology to overcome the challenge of this virus, our communities will still be forever changed in the way we operate and we should be looking for the ways in which our new modes of operation can permanently enhance our reach and impact.

- Work together with others in local communities to develop a coordinated approach, given that specific conditions relating to the stage and severity of the pandemic are different in each locale.

- Respect decisions made by synagogues, institutions, clergy, staff, leaders and participants. These decisions are hard, the data and guidance from authorities is sometimes not clear or ambiguous, and the perception of risk and safety can vary. Anxiety around making the right choice needs to be met with patience, deep listening,

and acceptance. Our tradition teaches us that there are blessings to be found in every moment. Moreover, our experience as a people shows us that we can exist and maintain spiritual solidarity even when we cannot see one another physically. With positive and inspiring leadership, patience, and tremendous hesed we will persevere during this challenging period and make choices which preserve the well-being of our community while honoring the profound need and desire to participate in Jewish life and meet our spiritual and communal needs.

A very helpful document on the subject of re-opening synagogues:

<https://securecommunitynetwork.org/resources/institutional-safety-and-security-library/houses-of-worship>

Many additional resources are available from the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism (USCJ) uscj.org/blog/educational-creativity-in-a-time-of-crisis, including

- **Educational Creativity in a Time of Crisis**
- **Upcoming Webinars**
- **Webinar Recordings**
- **High Holiday Speech Writing for Synagogue Presidents**
- **Community Building in a Time of Corona**

The rabbi of a suburban synagogue in the northeast has seen a big turnout at virtual services, which he leads from home:

([JTA](#)) — A congregant of this synagogue started attending daily services for the first time since his bar mitzvah shortly after joining the synagogue in 2012.

Praying every day with the same small group of people was “a wonderful experience” for the 62-year-old paralegal, and he enjoyed being deeply involved with his Conservative synagogue.

But when he accepted a job a few years later that required a commute to New York, attending the daily minyan, or prayer group, was no longer feasible.

“My life went back into the stress of getting up, getting on the bus, commuting. There was no kind of spiritual foundation there,” he said.

That changed in March, 2020, when the synagogue started live streaming all its activities rather than holding them in person to decrease the risk of spreading the corona virus. Now this congregant, whose commute disappeared after his office also closed because of the pandemic, is praying again each morning with the tight-knit minyan.

“This global pandemic is terrifying, really, so to have some kind of spiritual anchor is a real gift,” he said.

He’s not the only one making it to morning services more often. A service that typically drew 15-20 worshippers prior to the corona virus outbreak now has some 30 computers logging on daily. Since multiple family members often watch from one screen, that sometimes means as many as 50 people are tuning in.

“It’s been an eye-opening experience for us, understanding how many of those who have joined previously were unable to join,” another member of that synagogue’s Rabbinical team said.

This synagogue’s experience is playing out in many parts of the Jewish world. As synagogues have moved services online, rabbis say they are seeing a surge in attendance because of the increased accessibility and because Jews are seeking solace amid the deadly pandemic.

Indeed, people often seek out religious services during difficult times, according to a professor of clinical psychology at an Orthodox college, who researches the relationship between mental health and religion.

“This is a time of uncertainty, whether because of the pandemic or the related economic meltdown. People are reaching out for stability,” he said.

But this professor said that it’s not just a hunger for stability that might be causing congregants to log on to virtual services.

“There’s the fact that people are nervous, the fact that people are scared and they hunger for something like religion to grasp onto,” he said. “There’s the social element that people are lonely, there’s the technological component that this is something we can do today in ways that are easier than ever before.

“There’s also the lack of whatever else a person would be doing.”

Indeed, most non-Orthodox synagogues have long competed for congregants' time and attention, with work, competitive sports or school activities sometimes proving more attractive than worship services. But with the corona virus pandemic upending — and often just ending — those options, congregants have fewer built-in ways to experience community.

Meanwhile, the situation is different in Orthodox communities. On a typical weekday, an orthodox synagogue in the northeast with 1,300 member families, holds 10 morning services that attract a total of 500-600 worshippers. The same number come for their afternoon/evening ones.

The synagogue has been holding weekday services over Zoom but with a much lower attendance — about 20-30 people attends its morning service and up to 100 join the afternoon and evening ones. (Like other Orthodox synagogues, this synagogue does not offer any virtual services during Shabbat.)

Part of that has to do with the fact that unlike many Reform and Conservative synagogues, Orthodox ones do not allow for a virtual minyan, the prayer quorum of 10 that is necessary to say certain prayers, including the Mourner's Kaddish.

"I think a lot of people might feel, 'I'm not praying in a minyan anyway, I'm not going to be locked into a specific time on Zoom, I can just do my prayers at home,'" offered another Orthodox rabbi.

Some non-Orthodox synagogues are responding to the increased interest by adding services. A Reform congregation with 575 member families on the eastern seaboard typically drew 100 people in person to its Friday night service before the corona virus, and another 20 would join by live stream.

But now that services have been getting more than 600 views combined through its website, Face-book and YouTube, the synagogue also launched a weekly Havdalah service to mark the conclusion of Shabbat.

"People are looking for spiritual connection at this time and the synagogue community, the religious community in general, I think is becoming more and more important for people to feel that sense of connectedness in the world when everyone is in their own home," said the rabbi of a conservative synagogue.

A Reform synagogue with nearly 1,800 member families located in the mid-Atlantic states region, typically gets about 250-350 worshippers at its regular Shabbat services. Though some virtual services since the pandemic have seen a fewer number, some have been much higher, gaining more than 500 views.

The synagogue had been live streaming its services prior to the corona virus, but it recently started streaming on Face-book in addition to its website and has been getting

approximately 500 additional views there. The majority who join are members, but there are non-members, too.

The Rabbi of this Reform synagogue said she isn't sure if the higher attendance is here to stay — but of course she hopes it is. She has seen similar spikes during other difficult times, including when her synagogue was picketed by a church, after the 9/11 terrorist attacks and following the shooting at Pittsburgh's Tree of Life synagogue.

“When this all finishes — who knows when that will be — and when we go back to our regular scheduled lives, while I do think the temple will take better advantage of technology and other people may as well, I think for a large part we will go back to the usual” in terms of attendance, she said.

She also said the high level of interest has caused her to think about how else she can use technology to engage the community. “I do think that this experience will change us for the better in so many ways,” she said. “One of them, I think, is that congregations, including my own, will learn and embrace technology in greater depth.”

Rabbis are Anticipating a Very Different High Holiday season:

6 months into pandemic, Jews prepare for a High Holiday season of rupture and resilience

(JTA) — For many Jews, a high point of services on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is the *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer, which wonders who will live and who will die in the year ahead.

This year, that question will take on added resonance, as the High Holidays fall six months into a global pandemic that has reshaped lives, battered institutions and killed hundreds of thousands of people, including many in Jewish communities.

At the same time, the prayer will be experienced in dramatically new ways: on the same computer that usually is home to work or school for most American Jews, and in solo or socially distanced prayer services for Orthodox Jews who do not use technology on holidays.

“How do you do Rosh Hashanah on your own?” asked a rabbi who is also a professor of Jewish studies at a mid-Atlantic states university. “Our community hasn't invented that yet.”

When Passover arrived weeks into the pandemic, there was little time to rethink age-old communal traditions for a moment that required isolation. Five months later, congregations have a great deal of experience — albeit unplanned and unwanted —

creating meaningful Jewish experiences that are safe amid a global crisis, and they are applying the lessons they've learned to the most-attended services of the year.

There will be no packed sanctuaries. Some synagogues that are convening in person — almost all Orthodox — are taking dramatic steps to keep congregants safe, including limiting attendance and shortening services to allow for multiple shifts.

The following is a sampling of what some Orthodox synagogues are doing to prepare for a very different High Holyday services this year

(JTA) An Orthodox rabbi in the mid-Atlantic states is making the following preparations.

To keep congregants safe, this rabbi, along with many others, is dramatically shortening the services, which can run for most of the day under normal circumstances, to limit the duration of potential virus exposure that any worshipper might encounter.

“First thing to go is my sermon,” announced one rabbi.

Across the country, Orthodox communities are preparing to come together for live services during the High Holidays, even as most non-Orthodox synagogues have committed to holding services online. That's because Orthodox Jews do not use electronics on Shabbat or holidays, leaving live streamed options off the table.

Holding in-person services amid a pandemic means adjusting the pacing, spacing and other practices to maximize safety, and accepting the likelihood that many people will choose not to attend services at all. Even those who are optimistic about being able to safely hold services are reckoning with the fact that the most powerful days of the Jewish year will bear little resemblance to how they have been observed in the past.

“This is services, but this is not shul,” said the spiritual leader of an Orthodox synagogue in Washington, D.C., using the Yiddish word for synagogue. “Shul means everyone is together in the space, davening together, and this is not that.”

In a normal year, this synagogue would host 700 to 800 worshippers for High Holiday services. This year, she said, about 100 members expressed interest in attending an outdoor service.

Those who plan to stay away include parents of young children struggling without child care and older people who face the biggest risk from the corona virus.

“The folks who can't come are the people who already are experiencing this pandemic the hardest. It just adds insult to injury to have shul start without you.”

Other synagogues also anticipate greatly reduced attendance. At a large synagogue on the Upper West Side in Manhattan, approximately one-third of the congregation is older than 60. Its rabbi expects many of those members to stay home.

“I suspect we’re going to have a pretty significant drop-off in attendance,” he said.

That’s not necessarily a bad thing as social distancing requirements mean the synagogue can accommodate less than half its regular capacity. In a normal year, the Modern Orthodox synagogue would have between 700 and 800 people praying in the building on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. This year, approximately 300 people will be able to participate in services spread across multiple rooms and time slots.

The rabbi is hoping to find an outdoor space to rent to accommodate those who would feel safer outdoors. After failing to find a school playground or park space that would work, he is looking into having a block closed off for services in the street.

In some Hasidic communities, like the Borough Park and Williamsburg neighborhoods of Brooklyn, synagogues are expected to hold in-person services as they have for months. Some synagogues have operated with few, if any, restrictions.

But most Orthodox communities, mindful of risk and, in some cases, traumatized by their own experiences — the disease spread in New York’s Orthodox communities early on — are making substantial changes. In some synagogues, the cantors will wear masks. Others will install Plexiglas barriers to keep them and any virus-laden particles they might expel through singing safely separated.

At suburban synagogues, where the space is less cramped, leaders are engaged in the complicated logistics of planning multiple services. At an Orthodox synagogue in the mid-Atlantic states, the rabbi said he expects to have as many as four services, some indoors and some under open tents outside. An engineer who is a synagogue member is helping the rabbi arrange the setup, which for the indoor services includes seating charts designed to ensure at least 6 feet of space between congregants.

In another synagogue in the same general geographic area, the rabbi has already ordered a large tent for outdoor services for his synagogue. He’s expecting to have six to eight minyanim at his synagogue, with options for an indoor or outdoor service. The timing of the services is designed to allow parents to take turns attending and staying home with their children, as child care will not be offered as it normally would be.

The compromises all feel worth it coming off a period when the very foundations of Orthodox life, which includes thrice-daily prayer often conducted communally, were demolished with little to replace them.

“Unfortunately for three months, we had no shul at all,” reports another rabbi, who works at , an Orthodox synagogue in the mid-west, where services resumed in late May. “After the difficult year we’ve had over the last four months, people want a very meaningful Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.”

The rabbi is not planning to cut down the service for at least a couple of reasons: He believes his congregants want the feeling of normalcy provided by the full length and he doesn't see a health benefit.

"You're already exposed to each other for four hours, I'm not sure 4 1/2 hours makes a difference," he said.

Other rabbis and congregations are shortening services after being advised to limit the amount of time that people are gathering to lower the risk of spreading the corona virus. While a typical Shabbat morning service in an Orthodox synagogue can take between two and 2 1/2 hours, morning services on Rosh Hashanah can last as long as five or six hours. That has led to some difficult choices.

Several synagogues said they would begin with shacharit rather than pesukei d'zimrah, which cuts out at least 20 minutes and does not need to be recited with a minyan.

One rabbi said he would not have members open and close the ark or carry the Torah around the entire sanctuary for people to kiss, both practices he has done away with at Shabbat services since reopening. (He doesn't mind cutting out the carrying of the Torah, which he said "takes 15 minutes and breaks up the decorum.")

But some elements of the service would remain untouched, he said, even though they are not required for the worshippers to fulfill religious requirements.

"Unetaneh tokef is in," another rabbi said, referring to the prayer that asks who will live and who will die. The prayer specifically mentions the specter of plague. "We're not cutting that out."

Other centerpieces of the High Holidays services are also getting a pandemic makeover.

For Yizkor, a memorial service on Yom Kippur, Starr is considering organizing a Zoom service before the holiday or offering a 30-minute service outdoors for those who prefer not to join for the full service but want to recite Yizkor.

For those who would rather not come to synagogue for services, many still want to hear the shofar blowing, which is considered one of the most important obligations on Rosh Hashanah. (This year, Rosh Hashanah begins on Shabbat, when Orthodox synagogues do not blow the shofar, but the shofar will be sounded on the second day and at the conclusion of Yom Kippur.)

Some synagogues are planning to offer shofar opportunities in multiple locations to reach people closer to home..

The multiple soundings of the shofar and prayer services have created a need for more prayer leaders and shofar blowers.

“Thank God, I am blessed with a shul with a lot of people who know how to daven,” said this rabbi, using the Yiddish word for pray. But when it comes to shofar blowers, he said, “I would be happier if we had a couple more.”

The Orthodox Union, an umbrella organization of Orthodox synagogues, is offering a training program to teach people who have never led a High Holiday service how to do so.

Said one rabbi, “A lot of it is focused on confidence-building. Because it is not easy for people to get up in front of a crowd.”

That training also could be useful for Jews who observe the High Holidays at home. And with weeks to go before the High Holidays begin and COVID-19 cases continuing to proliferate in large parts of the country, even the most carefully laid plans for live services are subject to revision.

Said another rabbi, “We didn’t know where we’re going to be two months ago, so it felt premature to plan.” .The whole world could change.”

But with memories of a solitary Passover still fresh, many Orthodox Jews say they will be happy with whatever kind of communal services they are able to safely hold.

“Even if it’s a fast davening and we’re all sitting far apart, it still feels nice seeing members of the shul I haven’t seen,” another rabbi offered. “Once I figure out who they are because of their mask.”

The long sermons that are often a centerpiece of the holidays are being truncated — to safeguard against distraction for Jews watching from home and to limit virus exposure for those inside synagogues.

With singing considered among the most dangerous activities possible, choirs will not convene, nor will congregants’ voices rise together in song. Instead, in many non-Orthodox synagogues, cantors and others are taping services in advance outdoors or recording themselves individually, then mixing their voices to produce videos to air during their streamed services. In many cases, Orthodox synagogues are separating their service leaders from congregants, sometimes with Plexiglas sheaths, and discouraging congregants from singing.

“There are people who are singing through masks, through Plexiglas, through masks plus face shields plus Plexiglas,” said a cantor at a synagogue in the central part of the US, which is holding services online. “We did make the decision that we would rather not feel like we are leading services through a war zone.”

But the Cantor said that even though her congregation has come up with creative ways to deliver an elevated musical experience during the High Holidays, she also feels a sense of loss.

“I’ll miss the sound of everyone singing together because it feeds me as well,” she said.

The shofar will be heard in new ways. Rather than crowding their congregants into the sanctuary to hear the shofar blast, rabbis in many communities are fine-tuning schedules for shofar-blowing in local neighborhoods and public spaces. Many plan to apply a face mask on the open end of the ram’s horn in accordance with expert advice about how to protect against spreading the virus.

The Rabbi announced in July that he planned to put a mask on his shofar during the High Holiday season, a choice that many others are now making to ensure that they do not spread the corona virus when blowing the ram’s horn.

“I’ve been practicing and trying it,” said the Rabbi, a chaplain who was among the first to share publicly that he planned to mask his shofar, which he plans to blow multiple times throughout the hospital rather than in the single large service he typically holds for doctors, patients and their families. “It’s hard to hear a difference.”

The sounds of children will be absent, too. With child care settings carrying special risks, family services are not taking place in most synagogues that are open. Some are holding regular services in shifts so parents can take turns staying home with their children.

Some synagogues are trying to help families navigate the holidays at home, including by putting together boxes of supplies to be used instead of or in addition to family services at home.

“What we’ve learned over these months is that to create an online program is not just to take an in-person program and just to put it online, it’s a new field of engagement,” said the spiritual leader of an Orthodox congregation in the north, who is planning to send an apple cake mix to families in a container that can then serve as a “gratitude jar” all year. “You need something tangible.”

Some see all the changes as yet another way that the pandemic is depriving Jews and others of important traditional experiences, much the way that Passover this year lacked family Seders that typically characterize the holiday.

“This is services, but this is not shul,” said the spiritual leader of an Orthodox synagogue in the mid-Atlantic states, using the Yiddish word for synagogue. “Shul means everyone is together in the space, davening together, and this is not that.”

Simmering below the surface in the planning of many synagogues are deep fears that the pandemic’s extension through the High Holiday season may harm Jewish

institutions for the long haul. Though many have been seeing increased attendance at virtual services, without the annual cash infusion that ticket sales for in-person High Holiday services bring, and with community members under financial pressure and potentially less able to pay dues, congregations across the denominational spectrum aren't sure how they'll make ends meet this year.

"They're expecting that their revenue will be down, in some ways, for the next year," said a representative of the Reform movement who on strengthening congregations.

But the need to make adjustments has also spurred innovations that many rabbis say are needed.

"Catastrophe is absolutely the mother of creativity in Jewish life," said a rabbi who is from the south but has led a synagogue abroad for three years. His synagogue, like all but a few abroad, is not streaming services, but he does plan to offer congregants one live experience on Rosh Hashanah: a shofar blast from the top of a cathedral from the 11th century in their city!

And some see the pandemic, and the Zoom High Holidays, accelerating trends that already were present in Jewish life for years.

"I think it's important for us to realize that what's happening because of the pandemic is an extension of what was happening over the last couple of decades," said a popular song leader and performer in the Reform and Conservative movements.

This individual is working with two other song leaders to provide a package of customizable video services for kids and families that synagogues can pay to provide to congregants. It's an arrangement that even some participating synagogues recognize could create a dangerous precedent — having congregants come to expect high-quality productions over homegrown services.

For his part, the Reform official said he believes the two styles can coexist in thriving Jewish communities.

"I feel that we're heading toward a new paradigm of a hybrid, virtual and physical," he said.

Whatever long-term changes this unprecedented High Holiday season may portend, and however Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are being experienced this year, the spiritual core of the holiday season is sure to endure, as it has for centuries already.

"*Unetaneh Tokef* is in," said the rabbi of an orthodox synagogue in the mid-west, referring to the prayer that asks who will live and who will die, which specifically mentions the specter of plague. "We're not cutting that out."

Singing Safely on the High Holidays: Shorter services, held outside. Streamed services. Social distancing.

In the era of the corona virus, congregations across Jewish denominations have been forced to modify cherished High Holiday rituals in order to mitigate the risk posed by singing.

It was a choir rehearsal in a community in the northwest part of the country which led to the infection of 53 members that alerted everyone to the dangers of this most innocent-seeming activity.

“The act of singing, itself, might have contributed to transmission through emission of aerosols, which is affected by loudness of vocalization,” wrote the CDC.

What’s more, a “normal” indoor service can be viewed as a kind of choir on steroids, given that some synagogues have choirs in addition to congregants who join in. The virus load in the air increased by the amount of time spent singing, the number of singers, the size of the space and how well-ventilated it is.

Scientists who study this kind of thing got right on it, said a physician who is researching (<https://www.nfhs.org/media/4119369/aerosol-study-prelim-results-round-2-final-updated.pdf>) the spread of COVID-19 by singing and playing wind instruments. “Church choirs and other singing events really play an important role in communities’ livelihoods, so everybody was actually invested, positive, and interested.”

Here’s some of the science behind the virus and singing, and some ways rabbis and congregations are trying to maximize both safety, and spirituality.

These recommended precautions for singing do not guarantee total safety, however.

Aerosols are small respiratory particles that people can emit when they sing, speak, cough or sneeze and that have the potential to spread COVID-19. The known risk of spreading the virus during group singing sessions caused choirs to shut down, and scientists to sit up and take notice.

They found that some people are what’s known as “super-emitters.” They released more aerosol particles during speech or singing than most other people, causing “super spreading events” like that choir practice.

That adds to the uncertainty around corona virus transmission, the physician said.

“If two people sing the same tune, for example, and they get coached to sing it at the same level, they do not produce the same amount of aerosol.”

There’s probably some kind of range of aerosols emitted that scientists will be able to pinpoint someday, but that day hasn’t come yet.

Indeed, at this stage, the main thing doctors and scientists know is how much they don't know. There's just not a lot of data. COVID-19 is spread in pretty much the same way as similar viruses — it's just more contagious and for some people, quite dangerous, wrote several experts in an article published by the National Institutes of Health in early July. But in this sense, choir practice has always been risky.

Lack of information is a real problem, and it means that infectious disease experts have to fall back on saying they don't know how or when people can really start singing again until there's an effective, accessible vaccine. In the meantime, people are going to try to muddle through by looking to what data we do have, and combining that with anecdote and intuition: "It must be understood, that these recommendations and decisions are made not only on what scientific information is available but on intuition and unsystematic experience that is often biased and inaccurate."

The thing is, many people really love and need to sing. It's a powerful aid to prayer, for example.

At a Modern Orthodox synagogue in the north, the rabbi is still not only holding in-person services, he's letting people sing, but with tons of restrictions on this practice. Tests are required, attendance is limited, masks are mandated. In addition, the rabbi is shortening many of the psalms to only their first and last lines.

"There's no formal choir, but there's the informal people who sing along or hum along, which can be a blessing and a curse," the rabbi said. "You want to connect, and in theory, one could connect without music, but it helps. It helps to focus the mind, it inspires people, and it makes a relationship with Gd."

A cantor on the east coast also hopes to use the High Holidays as a chance to reconnect with her congregants.

"I've been trained not just to be a service leader, but to also do pastoral care," she said.. "Right now, I can't hug them. I can't sit with them in their hospital room. I have to reach out in any and every way that I can while keeping myself safe and keeping them safe."

For the High Holidays, she is helping to organize a live-stream service in which she and a rabbi lead prayers in real time between pre-recorded segments. She hopes that these virtual gatherings will allow her to support her congregants despite not being able to meet in-person.

"They need to know that I am praying with all my heart because I'm not only praying for my personal prayers to Hashem," she continued. "I carry them with me. I carry my congregants with me all the time. Whether they are seeing me on a screen or not, they have to feel it."

A choir director at a synagogue on the east coast., canceled weekly rehearsals in March following reports of the COVID-19 outbreak in her county. Transitioning to an online-only format, the cantor met with the choir every few weeks over Zoom.

“Whoever wanted to would sing something separately for us — just a folk song or a tune,” she said. “Then I expanded that to sharing a poem or even just a thought of the day and that turned out to be a wonderful experience to keep everybody together.”

When planning her synagogue’s Zoom High Holiday services, she experimented with recording music at home. Finding this strategy to be time-consuming, expensive and impersonal, she delved deep into her own hard drive and began pulling from 20 years’ worth of choir rehearsal recordings.

“I played it a few weeks ago for the choir at a “meet-up” on a summer Wednesday,” she said. “They felt what I felt. At first, they didn’t believe it was us. Then gradually they began to hear their own voices,” said Moot.

During High Holiday services, the choir will have the chance to share this retrospective of their greatest works with the rest of the congregation, reconnecting both with each other and the larger community.

“My heart is in my throat just thinking about it,” she continued. “It is such a beautiful thing.”

.A post-High Holiday article on the Zoom/Live Stream experience:

Rabbis Share Their High Holiday Experiences during the Pandemic

There’s No Going Back – what Rabbis Learned from the Extraordinary High Holidays of 2020

I am not a rabbi — but am I proud of my colleagues who are. Along with cantors, soloists, educators, executive directors, board donors and laypeople in hundreds of congregations and spiritual communities, they pulled off one of the most extraordinary historic pivots in synagogue life.

“This is epic,” said the rabbi of a reform Temple on the west coast. “We, all of us, were handed a ball we didn’t expect, and we in the synagogue community delivered, we stepped up to this moment.”

That is an understatement. For organizations steeped in tradition, it has never been easy for synagogues to embrace change. At the Synagogue 2000/3000 synagogue transformation conferences I organized from 1995-2015, I often joked that the aphorism inscribed above the Holy Ark on many synagogue pulpits – “*Da lifnei mi atah omeid*”

("Know before Whom you stand") – should instead be – "But, we've always done it that way!"

Yet, the COVID-19 pandemic forced seismic changes upon synagogues in March that were unthinkable a month earlier.

Congregations that were barely live streaming worship services suddenly had no choice. Resistance to shortening services, particularly in the Conservative Movement, mostly melted away when it became clear that people would not be able to sit in front of a screen for hours on end. All programming was moved online in a nanosecond. Teachers, many of whom had no training in distance learning, were forced to learn unfamiliar skills and strategies. When it became clear the virus was not magically disappearing, synagogue leaders began planning for the biggest events of the year, the High Holidays.

The author of the article under discussion wrote that he awaited what they would develop and when Rosh Hashana arrived, he found himself dipping into services at dozens of synagogues throughout North America. It is estimated that more than 2,000 congregations of all denominations apart from Orthodox congregations offered some form of online worship

He continued, saying that he knew what was possible; years ago when he was very sick on Yom Kippur, He tuned in to a Reform Temple on the west coast which was pioneering live stream and which attracted tens of thousands of participants and loved it. But now, everyone had no choice but to hit the internet.

The variety, quality, and creativity on display was spectacular. By all accounts, the sheer number of people who participated in these experiences, either live streaming or through archival views on the most popular distribution platforms – Facebook Live, YouTube, and congregational websites – was far beyond what would have been expected if services were held in person. Now that the holidays are over, I asked a number of synagogue leaders to reflect on the lessons learned.

"We learned that creating intimacy and connection is not just about size or proximity," the rabbi of a large Reform Temple in a large cosmopolitan city said. "In some ways our community felt smaller as we had members reading Torah and sharing stories from their living rooms, and in other ways, we were reminded of our global Jewish family as we were able to have prayers and songs read from friends in Australia and Jerusalem."

The variety of "production values" on display ranged from a couple of static cameras to the productions of a large Conservative synagogue in a large city and a synagogue in the mid-west which replicated Hollywood-caliber television complete with multiple cameras, lighting, and professional direction.

Some services were totally live and other synagogues pre-recorded everything, rather than risk any technical glitches during live streams. Many decided on a hybrid

combination of recorded pieces and live worship. Empty sanctuaries were turned into television studios; others featured clergy and Torah readers streaming in from living rooms or backyards. A few synagogues invited small groups of congregants to sit socially distant in the sanctuary, led by masked clergy shielded by a Plexiglas-enclosed pulpit.

The creativity on display was inspiring and came from lay volunteers in small congregations to large synagogues with major clergy teams. Here are some examples:

Modern dance and music choreography was on display.

The rabbi of a Reform temple in the mid-Atlantic states blew the shofar in front of some national landmarks in his state. Services at a synagogue in Canada began with a video montage of the rabbi bringing a Torah scroll to member's homes.

A large Conservative synagogue on the west coast created a "virtual lobby" before services with greetings from congregants and adorable preschoolers explaining the meaning of the holidays.

A large Reform Temple, also on the west coast, featured some Broadway and film actors rendition of the prayer, "Ahavat Olam" over a video montage of scenes from Israel.

Dozens of congregations offered "drive-by shofar blowing" in parking lots, and in some communities on the west coast, there were shofar blowers from more than 50 synagogues blasting notes through neighborhoods.

There were surprises: Yizkor memorial prayers at a synagogue on the west coast, were recited while photos of those who died during the past year appeared on a screen; a Neilah/Havdalah concluding Yom Kippur service on Zoom spotlighted families celebrating the ritual in their backyards; a guided meditation was offered; a "gift basket" of ritual objects was sent from a synagogue on the east coast to members' homes for use during the services.

The author of this article was curious about how viewers would follow along. Some synagogues distributed prayer books, while a few featured a moving chyron (a type of captioning) of Hebrew, English and transliteration of the prayers on the screen – no book necessary. Liturgy and sermons were shortened to fit what most considered the outside limit of two-hour attention spans on screens. Rabbis accustomed to talking to large crowds were suddenly speaking directly into a single camera, an entirely new skill set not currently in the curriculum of the seminaries.

The synagogues faced a tough decision: do we offer the services for free or just for our members? Those congregations that offered full and free access to all their online offerings shattered the limitations of geographic location, some attracting viewers from around the world. Others, after long debates, created password-protected platforms for

members only. “Membership has to mean something,” one synagogue president said about the decision to limit the live stream to members. “But, the very next day, anyone could view our services posted on YouTube and our website for free.”

Funding these efforts was a significant challenge. There was no line in most synagogue budgets for “television production.” Even well-resourced congregations turned to generous donors to underwrite the costs that reportedly ran into tens of thousands of dollars for some elaborately produced services. As usual, during this prime time in the synagogue calendar, there were fundraising appeals. Yet, despite the success in attracting and engaging participants, rabbis and lay leaders told me that the pandemic has taken a toll on both membership numbers and the financial capabilities and contributions of many individuals and families, reminiscent of the impact on congregations during the 2008-2009 recession.

So, did it work?

“People were stunned by the intimacy of the experience and by their ability to actually pray with a screen mediating their spiritual encounter,” said one Rabbi. “Most notably, people with mobility challenges told us how grateful they were to be able to access services from their homes and not have to fight for a seat.”

“On the whole, I would say it was an exhausting, draining, difficult, tricky and mostly triumphant substitution, but like all substitutions, not the real thing,” said the rabbi of a large Conservative synagogue on the west coast: “I think we came through remarkably well, and I am very proud.”

A rabbi in the north shared a bit of a secret. “I’m hearing again and again, in whispers, in I-hate-to-admit-it’ voices that many, many of our members enjoyed the service more from home than they did packed cheek to jowl in shul,” he said. “They could see and hear the rabbi’s sermon so clearly, they were not distracted by conversation, or people getting up from their seats.” Some will want shul delivered to their homes, all packaged and ready to eat. For them, this may be a wonderful thing. For the future of the synagogue, I worry. But then again, we always worry.”

Was this a one-off? Will synagogues “go back” to their previous ways once the pandemic has subsided, or will they move forward to a new normal?

“There’s no going back,” said the rabbi of a synagogue on the west coast. “We’ve already contracted with the production company for next year. Even with a vaccine, there will be people hesitant to gather in large groups. I hope we can return to the relationship-building in-person services, but we will continue to offer live streaming. The response of our members has been overwhelmingly positive.”

That was the consensus from all of the author’s interviews. I came away proud of how synagogues have stepped up to meet the moment, and I hope those who were touched by the services will be moved to step up and support the congregations. The pandemic

has forever shifted the way synagogues reach their congregants and beyond their sanctuaries to a worldwide audience. And there is no going back — only forward.

Summary: Addendum: Outreach

First and foremost, communication is key. It can also be called, “hand-holding”. Either way it is absolutely essential in building and in maintaining a relationship of trust between synagogues and congregants. Never was this more apparent and more imperative than during the Covid-19 pandemic.

There is so much to learn from the High Holiday experiences of synagogues across the country – the data from these experiences would literally fill volumes. I’ve tried to present a taste and a sampling of those experiences from the observations of rabbis and lay leaders. I am confident that our synagogues – clergy and lay leaders alike - will be learning and responding and learning more each day, as they continue to try to meet the needs of their communities in this time of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Synagogues are asking a lot of their members and supporters in this fraught time. They are asking for a leap of faith and they are asking their constituencies to commit to the continuation of a level of financial support despite the pandemic-induced physical separation.

Synagogues are asking their members to help make it possible – with their dues and with their donations – for the clergy and for the lay leaders to do whatever it will take to assure the most vibrant and effective level of connection. We’re in this together and we will get through it together, Gd willing, but it will take ever more effort and determination because even with the release of – as of now - 2 vaccines, the pandemic is not over. The synagogue needs people and people need the synagogue – now more than ever.

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