

# Synagogues plan virtual services

HIGH HOLYDAYS 5780

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MASSACHUSETTS – Following the lead of participants in a recent Synagogue Council panel, most area congregations will either move their High Holyday services online next month or offer hybrid celebrations with limited in-person activities, typically outdoors.

The Zoom panel, “What Makes This Year Different from All Other Years?” was put on by the Synagogue Council of Massachusetts in order to help congregations prepare for High Holyday services during the coronavirus pandemic. More than 60 people attended the discussion.

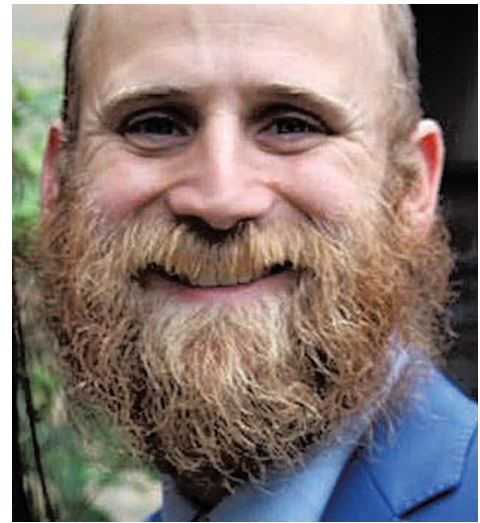
Moderated by Gretchen Marks Brandt, SCM acting director, the one-hour discussion featured rabbis from three denominations: Rabbi Yaakov Jaffe, Maimonides Minyan, Brookline; Rabbi Daniel Berman, Temple Reyim, Newton; and Rabbi Valerie Cohen, Temple Emanuel-Sinai, Worcester.

Rabbi Cohen began by asking the 400 families of Temple Emanuel-Sinai, at a town meeting and through email and snail mail, what was most meaningful to them about the High Holydays in past years and what they need from this year.

They decided to go completely virtual, but to be very intentional in creating an authentic High Holyday experience and to find ways to reach their members in additional ways as well.



Realizing how quickly Zoom fatigue could set in, Temple Emanuel-Sinai set about creating some programming besides services, including a tashlich service at their own pond and a video of a congregant driving up, entering the building, going to the sanctuary and standing before the ark. They will encourage congregants to send in pictures of themselves in their homes or other environments, and these pictures will be placed around the virtual ark in the video. The idea is to think of how to make your home a sacred space.



Many other area congregations, including Peabody's Temple Ner Tamid, Somerville's Havurat Shalom and Temple Sinai of Cranston, R.I. will livestream their services.

"Services for the High Holydays at Temple Emanu-El in Marblehead will be streamed on Facebook Live, as we've been doing for Shabbat worship since mid-March," said Rabbi David J. Meyer.



"We are not holding in-person services, only virtual, unfortunately," said Ronli Merlis of Temple Beth Torah in Holliston.

"We at Temple Emanu-El of Haverhill are looking forward to welcoming congregants and guests virtually to our services," noted Cantor Vera Broekhuysen. "Our services will be Zoomed."

"Even as we grieve for not being physically together with each other this HHD season," she said, "we know it's critical to uphold *pikuach nefesh*, the preservation of life. And it's exciting to explore some of the innovative possibilities that Zoomed services open up, as each one of us transforms our home into a mishkan, a holy space."

"As of now, the Boston Synagogue is planning for hybrid services live-streamed via Zoom from the synagogue sanctuary, with a limited amount of in-shul seating," noted board chairwoman Susan S. Weingarten. "All of the synagogue's decisions are subject to real-time Covid trends and changes in government guidelines."

Still others will supplement their virtual offerings with live events.

"We understand these are very hard times for our community and we are balancing abundant caution and a deep desire for community," said Rabbi Amy Katz of Temple Beth Elohim in Springfield. "So most of our services will be online, but we will also be having some in-person experiences in addition to online."

"Our goal is to lift up every congregant," said Rabbi Shira Joseph of Congregation Sha'aray Shalom in Hingham. "We will have Rosh Hashanah gift bags to distribute with honey and havdalah candles and spices. We will have a shofar brigade. We will zoom a Rosh Hashanah seder and livestream our services. We will have a physically distanced, masked Tashlich. And will will prerecord our Torah services and shofar services to have more participation in which we can be safe by inviting individuals honored one at a time and then have the recordings spliced together."

"At Congregation B'nai Shalom, Westborough, we are creating a hybrid set of offerings," said Rabbi Rachel Gurevitz. "Our main services will be all be online. We are creating more interactive online rituals for Erev Rosh Hashanah and the close of Neilah. We have created interactive online resources for our youth and will be providing some online activities for them on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur mornings."

"We are also planning an outdoor in-person experience for our families with school-aged children on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur afternoon that follows all good protocols regarding wearing face masks and physical distancing," she added. "We expect those to take place if Covid infection numbers remain low in Massachusetts, but will have online alternatives as backups if the situation in late September necessitates a change of plan."

## **Expanding the zone**

Temple Reyim's Rabbi Berman – who said he "loved" the intention of creating a sacred space in your home – also knew up front that he wouldn't be able to offer his congregants what they had experienced in the past, but wanted to make sure that the result didn't feel like "a contraction."

One way to do this was to expand the defined period of time, to consider the entire six-week period beginning with Elul and concluding with Neilah. The goal was to create an "extremely robust period of introspection" that will feel very satisfying. The aim was a total redesign resulting in learning, individual growth, and an enhanced sense of community. They also may try, on the second day of Rosh Hashanah, to get people together in small groups for shofar and Torah study. And

they are planning some special experiences, such as having a late-night service on a hill in Brookline, and scheduling individuals to come in and stand before the ark.

One challenge that Rabbi Berman mentioned was how to ensure that his congregation, which is very traditional about Halacha, balanced that observance with other considerations, such as use of technology and inclusivity (e.g., what to do about people at risk who could not even come to an outdoor service).

Other congregations, including Temple Sinai of Brookline and Temple Israel of Boston, will also offer celebratory events throughout the six-week period beginning with Elul and concluding with Neilah.

Of the three congregations represented on the Synagogue Council panel, only one plans to hold in-person services. The 75 families of the Maimonides Minyan, an Orthodox congregation, have found value in their size, in the past because they could know each other well, and now because they can fit in people who must social distance.

While Maimonides will be having in-person services, they did not want the focus to be on the needed logistics for spacing, measuring, masks or shofar blowing. Rather, they were looking for new ways to enhance the feeling of togetherness that is essential to their members.

Rabbi Jaffe also raised a challenge that much of the nation is facing: how to ensure that his congregants will get too complacent about following the guidelines. His message: you are doing this not for yourself, but for everybody else in your community.

A number of congregations contacted by The Jewish Advocate, including Newton's Congregation Shaarei Tefillah, Congregation Beth El of Bangor, Maine and Chabad of Chestnut Hill, noted they are still surveying their congregants and planning their celebrations.

"These are challenging times, but it is now more than ever that people need to pray," said Rabbi Mendy Uminer of Chestnut Hill Chabad.

"Each of our 295 synagogues in Massachusetts must work within the constraints of our common challenge," the Synagogue Council's Brandt said. "While our adaptations and answers differ, we share common goals to preserve life and to provide our communities with beautiful and meaningful celebrations of the High Holidays."

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