

Is there room for Zoom on Shabbat?

By Matt Plen

The coronavirus crisis has thrust the Jewish people into an unprecedented situation. Unable to meet up face to face, people have been looking urgently for ways to let Jewish practice continue on more than a private, individual basis. One solution has been the livestreaming of online services. The UK Masorti rabbis were asked if streaming Shabbat services could be allowed on an exceptional basis and as a temporary response to the crisis. Their response was that streaming on Shabbat is not permitted, but that other solutions are encouraged: streaming weekday services – including saying *kaddish* without the presence of a physical *minyan*, study sessions, Friday afternoon Kabbalat Shabbat services and Pesach *sedarim* (the prohibition against using electricity on festivals is less stringent than on Shabbat). They have also encouraged people to rethink their Jewish week during the crisis, beefing up Jewish and communal involvement on weekdays to compensate for being unable to use technology to connect on Shabbat.

There's been huge take-up of these non-Shabbat experiences. But at the same time, many Masorti members have been taking part in online Shabbat services being run by Reform and Liberal communities, and some have even organised their own, private, but well attended Shabbat livestreams, outside of the official synagogue framework. People who have taken part in these services say that connecting with Judaism and the community on a Shabbat morning is even more important during the lockdown than usual. Notably, participants in these services include people who avoided using phones and computers on Shabbat before the advent of Covid-19.

Some people have argued that this phenomenon means Masorti Judaism is broken. We say we are a halachic movement that operates according to Jewish law as understood by our rabbis, but here, some of our most committed members have chosen to go against the rabbis' guidance. To be clear, the problem is not that we have non-observant members who do not live according to *halacha*. We are an inclusive movement that aspires to include everyone, irrespective of level of observance, and that gently encourages them to deepen their Jewish practice. No, the issue here is that some committed, traditionally observant, core

members and leaders of Masorti communities are seeking to express their Jewishness in a way that has been explicitly prohibited by the rabbis. If so, how can we define ourselves as a halachic movement? Since our stated purpose as a movement is to combine halachic practice with modern values, this is a truly existential question for us.

I want to make clear that I'm not taking a position on the halachic issue itself and I respect the views of our rabbis. But I wish to suggest that this tension actually epitomises the true, authentic spirit of Masorti Judaism. It represents not weakness but strength. How so?

Solomon Schechter, one of the founders of the Conservative (Masorti) movement in the United States, believed that his form of Judaism was an antidote to the excesses of radical Reform rabbis. In the late 19th century, the American Reform movement sought to rid Judaism of what they saw as any superstitious, medieval or irrational components. This led them to redefine Judaism as 'ethical monotheism' and strip away anything that did not fit – including kashrut, traditional Shabbat observance, the connection to the Land of Israel, and most Hebrew prayers.

Schechter argued that since the time of the Talmud, authority in Judaism has rested not in the Bible itself, but in interpretations of the Bible – what he called the Tradition or the 'Secondary Meaning'. "It follows," he wrote,

... that the centre of authority is actually removed from the Bible and placed in some *living body*, which, by reason of its being in touch with the ideal aspirations and religious needs of the age, is best able to determine the nature of the Secondary Meaning. This living body, however, is not represented by any section of the nation, or any corporate priesthood, or Rabbi-hood, but by the collective conscience of Catholic Israel as embodied in the Universal Synagogue.... It is neither Scripture nor primitive Judaism, but general custom which forms the real rule of practice.... The norm as well as the sanction of Judaism is the practice actually in vogue. Its consecration is the consecration of general use – or, in other words, of Catholic Israel (quoted in Mendes-Flohr and Reinhartz, *The Jew in the Modern World*).

For Schechter, 'Catholic Israel' (best translated as *khal israel* or the Jewish people) was a brake on the excesses of radical reformers. At the time of writing in 1896, the bulk of the Jewish community was still traditionally observant. This basic commitment to tradition was the guarantee that gradually evolving, actually existing religious practice could be taken as a guide to authentic Judaism. Schechter believed that rabbis should listen to this group of traditionally observant Jews and ensure that any changes to traditional practice emanated from their norms, desires and needs, not from abstract ideology.

In our time, the situation is different. The majority of Jews are no longer observant and many are barely connected to the tradition. For Schechter's purposes, today's Catholic Israel cannot be understood as the entire Jewish people but that portion of the Jewish community which is broadly committed to traditional, religious Jewish life (this emphatically does not imply that secular or progressive Jews are not integral components of the Jewish people in all other ways). These are people who, while not

necessarily committed to punctilious observance, go to shul, maybe lead services, read Hebrew, engage in Jewish learning, keep kosher, celebrate Shabbat and take days off work for the festivals.

However, in the UK Masorti movement, it seems that this group is sometimes more religiously progressive than our rabbis. For example: many years ago when I was a leader in Noam, having studied the issue, we asked Rabbi Louis Jacobs if it was permissible to hold an egalitarian service. Rabbi Jacobs wrote back and said that while there were legitimate halachic precedents for an egalitarian *minyan*, he would not advise it as this would deviate from accepted practice across the movement (at that time, no Masorti community allowed women to lead all sections of the service). We considered his views but, based on our principles and the admission that there were halachic precedents, took the decision for Noam to go fully egalitarian. 25 years later, most Masorti synagogues are egalitarian and it would be unthinkable for one of our rabbis to contest this state of affairs.

More recently, our rabbis have been asked whether it's acceptable for Ashkenazi Jews to eat *kitniyot* (legumes) at Pesach. Their response until this year has been that although there is no textual-halachic basis for the prohibition, avoiding *kitniyot* is such a deeply ingrained custom that we should uphold the prohibition. Yet, on the basis of anecdotal evidence, more and more community members have begun to eat *kitniyot*. (This year, due to the difficulty of obtaining supervised kosher food, our rabbis advised us to observe Pesach in the most lenient way possible, including eating *kitniyot*.)

The dynamic of halachic decision making is not unambiguously top-down, nor has it ever been. The process is no less sociological than ideological. During the debate in 2014 over whether our communities should accept same-sex marriage, some rabbis expressed the view that despite the fact that this represented a sharp break with tradition, it was something we had no choice but to embrace as young people would simply abandon the movement if the decision went the other way. The people, in this instance, were held to have expressed their view, and the religious decision-making of the movement had to take account of this.

The innovation of unofficially livestreaming services on Shabbat should be understood, I believe, in this context. It does not represent an abandonment of the tradition or a break between rabbis and congregants. This and the other examples quoted above represent a true dialogue between committed Jews, their rabbis, their texts and their traditional practices, doing their best to make empowered decisions in the framework of this dialogue, and to express their Judaism in a way which is genuine, heartfelt, and responsive to the novel situations the world presents us with.

While we may not always agree with each other's answers (and *mahloket* or debate is itself a Jewish value), I hope we can agree that this phenomenon is an expression of Masorti Judaism's strength and authenticity. We are a halachic movement: not in the sense of some Orthodox communities where the rabbi's word is reflexively obeyed, but to the extent that we are deeply and honestly involved in the process of halachic decision making.

Click here to read the Masorti rabbis' guidance on [streaming services on Shabbat](#), [saying kaddish in online services](#), and [Pesach observance](#). For more resources go to masortijudaism.social.

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Posted on 28 April 2020

[✦ Back](#)