

# Yamim Noraim – The High Holydays 2020 – 5781

By Masorti Judaism

## Summary

We encourage everyone to read our full paper and the articles referenced at the end, but for convenience have added a summary:

- The upcoming High Holydays challenge us to offer a spiritually meaningful experience to our communities when large gatherings are very unlikely and many of our members are self-isolating.
- After much deliberation, the Masorti rabbis and chazanim have agreed on a set of principles for all Masorti communities in the UK, based on creativity, halakhic integrity and compassionate concern for all our congregants.
- All Masorti communities will produce pre-recorded and written materials for prayer and reflection at home, as well as online services and study sessions that will take place on Erev Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur as well as during Elul and the Ten Days of Repentance.
- If health guidelines permit, some Masorti communities will offer face-to-face services in smaller groups.
- Shabbat is central to Jewish life and the use of screens on Shabbat and Yom Tov cannot be sanctioned. However, halakhah takes exceptional circumstances into account and some rabbis consider the use of otherwise prohibited technology to be halachikally warranted, following strict guidelines and only during the current emergency.
- If a rabbi considers that the need to connect with certain groups or individual members within their congregation warrants it, there are ways of enabling the passive streaming of services using 'set and forget' technologies which conform to halakhah. The active streaming of services, using Zoom or similar platforms involves clear infractions of halakhah and is not permitted.

- This decision has been made out of a sense of profound need. While many of our communities will choose not to take advantage of this decision, some of our rabbis may determine that this is needed for their community. The rabbinic tradition has always taken pride in diversity of opinion and constructive debate (machloket l'shem shamayim). As a team, we fully support the conclusions of each one of our rabbis and offer our collective support to each and all of our congregations, and to each other.

Decisions made here are for these exceptional times and are temporary during this Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur

## **The Challenge**

As the rabbis and chazanim of Masorti Judaism, we have spent much time reflecting on how to serve our communities over the High Holydays in these exceptional times in a manner which is faithful to our spiritual and halakhic principles yet strives to meet the needs of all our members.

Every day is special and every Shabbat is holy. But we recognise that Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, together with the month of Elul preceding them, the days in between and the festival of Succot which follows, are a unique period of intense personal and communal reflection and prayer. The gatherings of family and friends, the full synagogues, the rich liturgy and resonant melodies evoke deep feelings and associations which touch our heart and stir our soul. To miss out on these experiences is unthinkable. Yet how to offer them when large gatherings are unlikely to be possible and when many people may still be advised either to self-isolate or avoid even small meetings, is complex.

Our endeavour is to respond creatively, with halakhic integrity and with compassionate concern for everyone in our communities. We see this not just as a challenge, but also an opportunity to deepen our personal engagement with the themes of the High Holydays during what has proved to be a time of reflection and re-evaluation across the globe.

## **The Challenges of the Current Time.**

We are deeply aware of the difficulties of the current time. They affect us all. But they do not impact on all of us equally. Some of us have to be more cautious as a result of medical conditions, our age, or the need to protect vulnerable members of our family. None of us has remained untouched emotionally. The importance of including all members of our communities is thus greater than ever, especially over the High Holydays.

As rabbis and chazanim we have a primary responsibility to listen, respond to and try to support spiritually everyone in our congregations as well as many others who have turned to us during these unsettling times.

## **Resources and Service**

### **1. At Home**

We believe personal contact is deeply important at a time when people may feel especially alone.

We therefore plan to support each of our congregations in contacting all members by phone, wherever possible. We believe this personal contact is deeply important at a time when people may feel especially alone.

We aim to provide each community with study and reflective materials in hard copy and online. These will include commentaries on key prayers, teaching by their own leaders and by Masorti Judaism's leadership team and guidance for prayer and reflection at home.

We will use zoom or similar technologies to offer engaging discussion of the key parts of the liturgy, placing recordings of those sessions on our websites, aware that people will download them at the time of their choice.

We will encourage every community to record its prayer leaders singing some of the core sections of the liturgy and we will make the sound tracks available on our websites.

We will offer pre Yom Tov online services on Erev Rosh Hashanah and Erev Yom Kippur before the sanctity of the day begins.

## **2. In Person**

The opportunities for offering in person services will depend on the circumstances at the time and the facilities available to each community. At this point the national situation remains unknown, but it seems possible that some congregations may be able to have small gatherings for short services. These will need to be conducted as the law, prudence and the premises available to us permit, ensuring all necessary distancing and hygiene precautions are taken, in accord with Judaism's core injunction 'to take great care of our own lives' and the health and safety of those around us.

We will support the individual decisions made by each of our communities in the light of these considerations

Some communities plan to offer Selichot services, accessible where possible in person but also virtually, throughout Elul and during the days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

On Rosh Hashanah, we will make every effort in whatever ways we can to enable everyone to hear the shofar on the 2nd day. (1st day Rosh Hashanah falls on Shabbat, when the shofar is not blown).

On both Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur we will support our communities in conducting whatever in-person services are prudent and possible. These are likely to be short, and may be conducted in shifts, ensuring the core prayers and melodies of each special day are included.

While far from our normal services, we hope that the above will provide thoughtful, inspiring and uplifting experiences over the forthcoming High Holidays.

## **A Time of Special Need**

Nevertheless, we are conscious that there will be groups and individuals for whom even this provision will not suffice, for good reasons of health and safety.

The question therefore arises whether there are currently special circumstances which might be considered to allow, on halakhic grounds, exceptionally and temporarily during this Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, what would normally be forbidden.

We first need to consider the central status of Shabbat and Yom Tov in Jewish life and law.

### **Shabbat and Yom Tov**

Shabbat is the heart of Jewish spiritual and communal life; the purpose of the laws with which the Torah and rabbis surround it is largely to protect this sacred time from being breeched by the tasks, pressures and worries of everyday life. As Rabbi Joel Levy has written: To view the world as a resource to be struggled with, mastered and mined can only ever be a fraction of the story we tell. If we only ever look at the world in order to see how we need to change it then our eyes will be closed to the sacred and beautiful in our world without our intervention. One day in seven Jews are called upon to look at the world from an entirely different perspective, to attempt to see it as utterly divine and beautiful in and of itself and to resist our urge to change, master, shape, prod and control. The early rabbinic tradition framed a series of precise spiritual disciplines, Shabbat prohibitions, that push us to release our urge to master and allow us to simply be...

On *“the seventh day is a shabbat to the LORD your God: you shall not do any work”* we consciously avert our gaze from imperfection and try to open our eyes to the complete and astonishing giftedness of our universe. We try to walk through that world with awe and appreciation, to see glory in each and every demonstration of its abundance. We try to open our eyes anew to perfection. We practice gratitude and thanks for our lot, for what we have received. [1]

For millennia and through times more difficult than today Jews have observed and protected the sanctity of the day, understanding that it is at the heart of our personal, family, communal and religious life. In Achad Ha'am's words, 'More than the Jews have kept Shabbat, Shabbat has kept the Jews.' But it has kept us because we have kept it. Yom Tov has a broadly similar status.

We strongly affirm the centrality to Judaism of the traditional observance of Shabbat and aspire to the spiritual ideal it expresses.

### **The Use of Screens on Shabbat and Yom Tov**

The halakhah of Shabbat does not countenance the use of screens, whether on smartphones or computers, except for the saving of life. As Rabbi Chaim Weiner writes:

In the past, our work was mainly hard physical labour or other forms of crafts. In our world, digital technology occupies a central role in the workplace and creative industries. Shabbat is a weekly

time of putting technology to the side and dedicating ourselves to our spiritual and social lives...

In addition to the use of screens being *uvdin de'chol*, work activities, they present specific halakic difficulties:

One of the main categories of forbidden work is writing. This includes any method of creating a permanent (or semi-permanent) record of something, such as writing, drawing, photography and digital recording. Streaming regularly creates a record, even when this option isn't selected. There are also concerns regarding signing onto a service, unlocking phones and computers, comments people are liable to make during broadcasts, Wi-Fi connection issues and computer updates. All of these mean that this is not a suitable activity for Shabbat

[A further major] problem with streaming services on Shabbat is the use of electricity and turning things on and off. [2]

The 2012 responsum on electricity by Daniel Nevins analyses the roles electricity plays in contemporary life and the halakic challenges they pose. [3] Rabbi Joel Levy, whose essay on the spiritual ideals of Shabbat and their halakic implications is referenced above, carefully considers the nature of the problems presented by the use of screens. [1] Commitment to halakhah is a basic principle of Masorti Judaism to which we must remain faithful. We cannot therefore simply give halakic sanction to the use of electronic screens on Shabbat or Yom Tov.

### **Exceptional Circumstances?**

However, we are living in very difficult times, within which the High Holydays are even more challenging in that they present a particularly intense need for connection. It will be deeply distressing if this is not possible.

Halakhah takes exceptional circumstances into account under various headings, which include:

- ❖ *Pikuach nefesh*: the saving of life, including the possible saving of life, which overrides virtually all strictures of Jewish law except for murder, idolatry, adultery and incest, on the basis of *vachai bahem*, 'you shall live by them [Jewish laws] and not die by them'. This has been understood to include threats not just to physical but also to mental health and is therefore closely relevant to the suffering and risks to mental survival incurred by lockdown and intense loneliness. [4]
- ❖ *Sha'at hadechak*; a time of emergency, warranting special measures necessary in the immediate present to preserve Judaism for the future. [5]
- ❖ *Kvod Haberiyot*, the profound concern for the dignity of individuals, for the sake of which the Talmud exempted them from obeying specific laws.

Taken together, these very serious concerns are considered by some rabbis to warrant within the halakhah the use of otherwise prohibited technology in a time of emergency only, despite the stringency of the basic prohibition, in order to prevent the deep emotional and spiritual anguish of isolation and enable

connections with family and community at times of deep inner need.

### **The role of the community rabbi**

Only the mara or marta de'atra the community rabbi or minister can be in a position to determine whether such a step should be taken in his or her particular situation.

Masorti Judaism has always valued the principle of mara / marta de'atra – the religious leader of a specific community best understands the needs of that community. Individual rabbis and congregations rightly exercise a degree of autonomy. If the mara / marta de'atra of one of our communities considers the situation so demands, there are ways of enabling passive streaming of services that, in these special circumstances, may be appropriate.

If he or she seriously considers that the need to connect with certain groups or individual members within their congregation warrants it, there are ways of enabling the passive streaming of services in a manner which, in these special circumstances, conforms to halakhah. The recent responsum by Rabbi Heller of the Committee of Jewish Law and Standards of the Conservative Movement, based in the US, describes in detail the specific conditions in which passive streaming ('set and forget') may be carried out under the guidance of the mara or marta de'atra. [6] (Attention should also be drawn to the critical response to this teshuvah by rabbi Amy Levin [7]) We wish to emphasize that the use of Zoom Meetings for such streaming involves clear infractions of halakhah and is not permitted.

Rabbi Jeremy Gordon has framed the type of computer use that may be permitted as follows: There are ways to stream in a minimally halakhically invasive manner, and it is these alone which must be utilised. They entail the installation of a 'set and forget' system using PTZ (pan-tilt-zoom) cameras driven by AI. The stream must be embedded in the Synagogue's website so as to broadcast from before Yom Tov until after Yom Tov, functioning similarly to the Synagogue's existing security camera set-up. Technical guidance must be circulated, together with support for members who request assistance in setting up their viewing computers before Yom Tov so as to run over Yom Tov, broadcasting such visuals and audio as appear in front of the cameras without the need for direct interaction with the computer at home. [8]

This decision is a great responsibility, which no Masorti rabbi will take lightly. If he or she decides to passively stream on Yom Tov, it will only be with an anguished heart and out of a sense of profound need. While many of our communities will choose not to take advantage of this decision, some of our rabbis will determine that this is needed for their community. As a team, we fully support the conclusions of each rabbi as to whether or not he or she deems passive streaming, under the conditions specified, necessary for his or her congregation in these exceptional circumstances. We all offer our collective support to each and all of our congregations, and to each other. The rabbinic tradition has always taken pride in diversity of opinion and constructive debate (machloket l'shem shamayim) and this critical and important issue is no different.

## In Conclusion

We deeply hope that by Rosh Hashanah we will have reached a time when we can connect in person with all the members of our communities so that we can participate together in prayer and reflection, albeit in smaller and shorter gatherings than usual. We hope the materials we plan to offer will enable us all to engage more deeply with our Judaism at this most profound period of the Jewish year.

## Notes

1. For Rabbi Joel Levy's full article please see [https://730cde57-e4f0-41ea-97c3-149ce7ac86f5.filesusr.com/ugd/64ef00\\_ae170ddd8d964](https://730cde57-e4f0-41ea-97c3-149ce7ac86f5.filesusr.com/ugd/64ef00_ae170ddd8d964)
2. For Rabbi Chaim Weiner's full responses, please see <http://masortijudaism.social/blog/2020/4/2/streaming-services-on-shabbat-rabbichaim>
3. Rabbi Daniel Nevins: The Uses of Electrical and Electronic Devices on Shabbat <https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/pu011-2020/electrical-electronic-devices-shabbat.pdf>
4. For more detail please see Rabbi Natasha Mann's article and the references there at <https://vigilantejudaism.blogspot.com/2020/06/a-thought-on-hhdays-technologyand.html>
5. See Alan Yutter: 'The Emergency principle in Jewish Law' <https://jcpa.org/article/horaat-shaah-the-emergency-principle-in-jewish-law-and-acontemporary-application/>
6. Rabbi Joshua Heller: Streaming Services on Shabbat and Yom Tov: <https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/20>
7. Rabbi Amy Levin: <http://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/202>
8. Rabbi Jeremy Gordon: <https://rabbionanarrowbridge.blogspot.com/2020/06/pospaper-for-roshhashanah-and.html>

Posted on 25 June 2020

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