High Holiday Online Experience - 2020

A Reconstructionist community in Summit, NJ, Congregation Beth Hatikvah had the same shift from in-person-to-virtual challenges as other communities. At the same time, we have had a long tradition of finding unconventional ways to observe our life cycle events when needed. So right from the beginning, we knew we would figure out how to present our members and guests with a way to spend the High Holidays together.

How then to create a virtual version of experiences we counted on being in person? Our Rabbi took an informal survey of our membership to determine which parts of the High Holiday observance absolutely had to be represented. We then built a series of services and activities that recognized the limitations caused by the pandemic, including an outdoor Shofar service in our synagogue’s parking lot and the pre-recording of all of the musical numbers performed by our volunteer Singers. We separated our Rabbi and lay cantor at opposite ends of our sanctuary to ensure they could see each other and at the same time maintain a safe distance.

The technology considerations came next. We considered “screen fatigue” and made sure that each service was about 90 minutes in length. We then assembled a team of volunteers who quickly became proficient on creating and delivering the needed technology, including managing the Zoom/YouTube broadcast, running the audio board, tying in all the camera & video elements through OBS software, and providing a team of at-home testers to help our team learn and practice. We then turned our sanctuary into a TV production studio, with the core team at a table in the middle of the room, able to direct the Rabbi, Lay Cantor, and our Music Director.

In the weeks leading up to the Holidays, we leaned on our High Holiday Planning Committee to determine how we would put this plan into action. Where would we hold the Shofar Service/Tashlich? How would we register members and guests? What platform (interactive Zoom vs Webinar vs YouTube livestream) would we use for each service? How would we continue our annual tradition of interactive/discussion-based activities during the services? Where would our youth activities & services fit in? How would we communicate our plans to our members and through our Website?

Most importantly, how would we create a true “shared experience” for our members and guests? One great idea was to assemble a High Holiday Home Kit for members living in the area. That kit, delivered to each member’s home, included apple & honey snacks, a copy of the Machzor, a booklet with readings and information about our year-round activities, a set of holiday candles, a toy Shofar, a Havdalah candle, and more.

There were unexpected and wonderful surprises that we would not have experienced in the “real world.” For example, while our Lay Cantor was chanting Torah, we were able to follow along through screen share of the Torah Hebrew while he directed his “electronic yad” (actually a simulated laser pointer) throughout the reading.

Finally, and most importantly, this production, carried out entirely by our volunteer members, our Educational Director, and our Rabbi, truly reflected our community spirit and closeness. It had many bumps and glitches, but the lack of polish only made our at-home community enjoy the experience more. These were their fellow congregants bringing our High Holiday celebration to them at home, doing their best while clearly enjoying themselves. This was one of the best experiences our congregation has ever had that we never want to repeat.

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