

Turning Your Home into a Sacred Space



BY CANTOR MATT AXELROD

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COMMENTS 5



ועשו לי מקדש ושכנתי בתוכם

Save

They will make me a sanctuary and I will dwell among them.

For months now, we’ve all become accustomed to working from home—it’s gone more smoothly for some than for others. Social media has been replete with work-from-home fails: toddlers barging in on important calls, dogs and landscapers disrupting meetings with intrusive background noise, and even partially clad family members being caught on camera. Convenience aside, there’s a reason why work is kept in the workplace.

What we haven’t heard nearly as much about is *praying* from home. With synagogues shuttered, congregants have had to avail themselves of the various live feeds, streaming, and Zoom services that their temples have created. Furthermore, the pandemic and its continuing restrictions have forced us to begin planning extensively for the High Holidays considerably earlier than usual.

Be assured that your synagogue—wherever you belong—has already been thinking, planning, strategizing, and agonizing over what High Holiday services are going to look like this fall.

Have *you* been planning as well?

Setting up a laptop on the kitchen counter and “playing” Friday night services may be just fine for you. You can listen to the cantor, hum along with the familiar tunes, hear what the rabbi has to say—all while cleaning up after dinner and loading the dishwasher. Sometimes praying from home is just as convenient as working from home.

But wouldn't you agree that your High Holiday experience should be a little more meaningful? Assuming that you will be participating virtually in services this year, what will that look like in your house?

For however long services last, you need to transform some place in your home into a *makom kadosh*—a holy place. Here are some ways that you can accomplish that:

The Space

Find somewhere in your house that's spacious enough for everyone to sit comfortably and see the computer. Even better—and well within most people's technical capability—connect your computer to your big screen TV so you aren't all crowding around a small monitor.

Most sanctuaries in North America are situated so that people face east when they pray—towards Jerusalem. Do you know which direction east is when you're sitting in your designated prayer space? [I always ask this when I lead a shiva minyan in someone's home, and surprisingly, many do not.] If it's possible, try to face east when you participate in services. Otherwise, it's nice if you at least know where it is.

Participate

Take it from me: it's awkward and foreign to sing at a computer screen. (I did get used to it quickly.) You may very well find it strange to sing along as the cantor sings a congregational melody when all you hear is your lone voice. Try anyway. Respond Amen when appropriate. Stand up and be seated at the usual times. Put on a tallit and kippah, and otherwise engage in all the usual choreography of the service.

Just as you would come to shul with your family, make sure that everyone is present in your newly created worship space. I predict that your kids are less inhibited than you are to sing out loud and participate in front of the screen.

Hold The Book

Remember all those books—various Siddurim and Chumashim—that your children were presented from temple over the years? Every Hebrew school class graduation, bar mitzvah, or other important life cycle event was marked by another book, which the rabbi somberly handed over with the words, “...and here's a book from the board of trustees that I know you'll enjoy reading.” You dutifully put them on the bookshelf and there they have sat for years gathering dust.

This is their (and your) big day! During your virtual service, pull those tomes off the shelf and hold the Siddur or Machzor in your hand. There are also numerous resources and options available to download electronic versions of the Machzor. During the Torah reading, turn or scroll to the appropriate page in the Chumash. Follow along with the davening. Read the texts and the translations. Seek out interesting and provocative readings—perhaps online—before services begin so you can enhance your synagogue's service with your own insights. Don't be a passive viewer. Be an active worshipper.

Get Dressed

Months of nothing but Zoom meetings have required all of us to make sure that we look professional on screen—from the waist up. For High Holiday services, wear pants! You can probably do just fine without the usual formal and uncomfortable suit and dress, but don't attend services in jeans or sweats even though you might be sitting on your den couch. Before you hear a single word of prayer, being dressed a certain way will begin the process of transforming your home into a personal sanctuary.

Be On Time

In the old days (that is, 2019), all congregants arrived at shul at various times throughout the service, stayed for however long, and then left. Then there were always the diehards who were in their seats before the rabbi and cantor even began the service, and wouldn't think of leaving before the 5 1/2 or 6 hour service was over.

I imagine that most synagogues will be abbreviating their virtual High Holiday services considerably. It's simply not realistic to expect someone to remain engaged and attentive for over 5 hours in front of a computer screen. So if services end up lasting closer to 2 or 3 hours, make every effort to tune in for the whole time. Those few hours will contain the most recognizable and significant portions of the service.

Be Open

Sitting in the sanctuary for High Holiday services last year, no one could have ever imagined that this would be the way we'd usher in the year 5781. While it may not be what we want, it's what we have. Take advantage of these unusual circumstances to experience something new. Sitting in your den, surrounded by family and all of your familiar possessions—the message of *Unetaneh Tokef* about the fragility of life and our tenuous mortality may take on a whole new meaning. This is a unique opportunity to understand and appreciate the liturgy and message of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur differently than you ever have.

This year, you may not have to face the crowds or remember to bring your tickets, but you should still prepare to transform your home into a sacred place of holiness.

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About Cantor Matt Axelrod

Cantor Matt Axelrod has served Congregation Beth Israel of Scotch Plains, NJ since 1990. He is a graduate of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America and a national officer of the Cantors Assembly. Cantor Axelrod is the author of *Surviving Your Bar/Bat Mitzvah: The Ultimate Insider's Guide*, and *Your Guide to the Jewish Holidays: From Shofar to Seder*.

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