

Preparation for a Virtual Yom Kippur

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Health comes first — Refuah ha-nefesh

The following notes evolved from a Class “Using all this Technology as a Stage” at the Summer Institute of the National Havurah Committee¹, held on-line in July 2020. They are designed as guidance for any community which is planning a Yom Kippur davvening experience on internet communication software.

Some items have additional comments based on experience (mine or others). Others just identify topics or questions that *must* be considered. Responses likely will depend on the form of practice for each community.

I refer to Zoom specifically because I have used it for Shabbat davvening. The comments apply to any internet communications software.

Sections of the Yom Kippur Machzor

- Kol Nidrey
- Avinu Malkenu / Imeynu Malchateynu
- Shacharit
- Blessing of the body. (*Our synagogue often uses yoga, tai chi, or some kind of bodily prayer practice.*)
- Teshuvah text discussions (*In-person our synagogue would move chairs to form small discussion groups. This year I will screen share a picture of chairs as we prepare to move people into breakout rooms.*)
- Torah
 - Torah reading
 - Haftarah
 - Drash
 - Torah Discussion (*We will use breakout rooms. See discussion on page 4.*)
- Al Cheit
- Amidah
- Yizkor (*Our community uses breakout rooms for intimate small-group discussions.*)
- Kaddish
- Jonah reading or performance
- Ashamnu and more prayers

¹<https://havurah.org>

ABOUT THE NHC: The National Havurah Committee is a network of diverse individuals and communities dedicated to Jewish living and learning, community building, and tikkun olam (repairing the world). Since the 1970s, the NHC Summer Institute has been bringing together Jews from across North America to envision a joyful grassroots Judaism and provide the tools to help them create empowered Jewish lives and communities. The NHC is a nondenominational, multigenerational, egalitarian, and volunteer-run organization.

- 13 Attributes
- The Great Aleynu (*Many in our community practice full body prostration.*)
- N'eila and Havdalah (*For in-person davvening, our synagogue does this as a circle dance.*)

Halakhic Questions

Technical constraints related to Yom Kippur/Yom Tov/Shabbat restrictions.

- Electronics
 - Electronic communication is designed to avoid the public health risks of in-person participation. Most communities would not consider a Virtual Yom Kippur had there not been a quarantine situation.
 - Anshe Chesed has instructions to keep computer non-sleeping
<https://anshecheded.org/changing-your-computer-settings/>
 - Hire a non-Jewish zoom technical person.
 - Being Zoom host is an active job. Members of the Technical Team who take on the host role will be able to participate in at most 80% of the activity of the davvening.
- Joining the session
 - Those who don't wish to touch their computer at all during the holiday need to make sure it won't fall asleep or log them out. In practice, this may not be feasible, though it is theoretically possible.
 - If the host / community needs to keep the session open the entire holiday, the host's Zoom account and computer both need to be set properly. Must test this in advance. May be very difficult. See Anshe Chesed link:
<https://anshecheded.org/changing-your-computer-settings/>
- Individual Choices
 - Joining breakout rooms: It is possible to set breakout rooms to be automatic and not require individual users to click "join". Perhaps the system could be set to automatically unmute microphones on entry into breakout rooms, and automatically mute microphones on return to the main session.
 - Muting and unmuting oneself: people whose practice excludes using electric switches might have to stay muted the whole time and not participate in discussions.
 - Chat window: Writing (at all) in chat window. Clicking to read the chat window.
 - Microphones and electronics are in use by community representatives, even if some individuals choose not to touch their own machines.
- Compromises: If you really don't want your High Holiday events to feel like watching a movie of someone else davvening:
 - Consider shorter services.
 - Include non-liturgical sections in the programming.
 - Post EXACT schedule in advance (and stick to it).
- Community Preparation
 - Survey your community in advance to be sure you understand the range of practices that your design must accommodate.

Programmatic Constraints

- For a community that is already using Zoom (*Ours has done so at least weekly since March 14. Many of us have other long-term experiences with Zoom.*), and where many members are not tech whizzes, it's probably best to continue using the by-now familiar Zoom platform. Other internet communications platforms are available. All are known to have security limitations. See the section on Electronic Security on page 5.
- A Yom Kippur on Zoom is unlikely to work well unless the community is comfortable with its davening leaders interacting with the computer during the holidays.
- Zoom Fatigue
 - Expect people to leave and return as needed.
 - Make clear that attendees are encouraged to leave and return as needed.
- Screens freeze, voices get stretched, internet connections drop.
- Ahead of time, encourage your community members to discuss and think about what they want their Yom Kippur practice to look like this year.
- Study session with texts (*This is a frequent occurrence in our practice. It is usually done in small groups—breakout rooms now.*)
- Distributing texts:
 - Send handouts in advance as email attachments. (*This is the best method.*)
 - Post as chat contents (and remember this won't survive assignment to breakout rooms).
 - Post as chat links—then allow enough time to click and open before starting breakout rooms.
 - Place the texts on screen share (this won't survive breakout rooms).
- Share screen programmatically for texts (for example, display the Torah portion as it is being read) or illustrations (of the story of the parsha or haftarah during the drash).
- How will congregational responses work when sound can't be synchronized? Responsive readings can be done at home while still muted. Replying "Amen" to the leader might work unmuted, but might not be comfortable. The host will need to actively mute people after any unmuted activity.

Help Desk for Technical Support

- Write and distribute GOOD instructions for your community!
- Maintain an OPEN phone, text, email, chat line for the ENTIRE duration of the Zoom event—including set-up time and follow-up time—and publicize the contact phone number and email address.
- Accessibility constraints: does anyone in your community need to use a screenreader or captions? (*NHC has posted guidelines that include accessibility information:*
<https://havurah.org/online-resources/guidelines-and-best-practices-for-online-presenters/>)
- Provide tech-buddies to help technophobes access and work with on the system.
- Be prepared for some members to join the Zoom session by telephone. They may need to be muted for the entire activity.

Personal Protection

- Refuah ha-nefesh
- If you must eat, for health reasons or otherwise, turn your camera and microphone off (or move *completely* out of video/audio range).
- As additional encouragement to use an internet platform for the holidays this year, consider the liability for the synagogue budget if someone catches COVID-19 at in-person service.

Community Cohesiveness and Isolation

Here are some ways to use embodied activities to meet the goal of a feeling of community cohesiveness.

- Singing together
 - Community cohesiveness is one advantage we get from congregational singing together in person.
 - On Zoom, synchronized sound from separate locations is unlikely, perhaps impossible.
 - Play pre-recorded congregational singing and imagine that everyone is singing along with you.
- Movement together—swaying, for example.
 - Side-to-side might not work well because Zoom defaults to mirroring your own image.
 - Front-to-back? Less impactful, but could work.
 - Waving arms up and down?
 - Will delays on Zoom get in the way of unison swaying? (*My Zoom image on my own screen claps its hands about a half second after I do.*)
- Is there something you could do that wouldn't depend on moving or singing in unison?
 - Virtual hand-holding activity (place hands so that they appear in the sides or top-and-bottom of your screen, so it looks like you're touching the people next to you.) (*This works very well.*)
 - Coordinate together: breathe in and breathe out with opening and closing palms. Consider other types of hand and arm motions, and—as part of the choreography—change the leader as the motions are changed. (*This works very well.*)
- If some in your community (extended families or friend groups) are comfortable gathering in person in small groups of 5–10, they could meet in someone's back yard, and then connect as a group to the community Zoom. (Difficult in proportion to outside temperature and/or precipitation.) For friends zooming into your back yard, you might need external speakers and an external microphone on a long cord.
 - Might not know whether this is safe until the last minute.

Events in Breakout Rooms

- How big? (*3–6 is about the maximum for full participation of all group members.*)
- Randomized assignment is strongly suggested.

- Groups of people who identify themselves to each other in advance can choose on their own to leave the main Zoom session, then start an independent new session. At the conclusion of the independent session, the members would rejoin the main session. (If the main session has a waiting room (recommended for security), the host would need to readmit them.)

Electronic Security

Unfortunately zoombombing and other forms of trolling are prevalent. Your Zoom Technical Team needs to be aware of the problem and of some responses. I found this article to be helpful:

<https://palantetech.coop/zoombombing-self-defense/tech-guide>

- The entire Tech Team must become familiar with Security.
- Understand muting and unmuting of participants. This can be done centrally by the host, or by each individual. The choice depends on where in the davvening sequence you are.
- Screen sharing: You will probably want to limit it to co-hosts. Think about when and if you want to use it.
- You will probably want to turn off access to annotation of the screen share by your zoom guests (anyone who is not a host or co-host).

Activities for other Days of Yamim Norim

- Selichot
- Tashlich
- Recommend items for community members to do on their own.
- Shofar blowing, drive-by, block by block.
- Communal on-line break-fast (halakhic restrictions will not apply).
- Individual in-person or online pre-fast dinners with friends (halakhic restrictions will not apply).
- Avoid total seclusion, have lunch or breakfast in someone's back yard—either in-person or virtually.
- Arrange Zoom meetings with friends.