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# Jewish prayer

Alone and together in Jerusalem during the pandemic

By Robert Hersowitz

**BECAUSE I** have underlying health issues I've been praying alone since the COVID-19 virus invaded the Holy Land. They say that God is everywhere and modern technology really attests to this maxim. Indeed, I joined a Zoom minyan that our local synagogue conveniently arranged. Strangely, the experience of virtual *davening* (praying) has proved to be extremely advantageous.

This turned out to be particularly true when Tisha Be'Av (commemorating the destruction of the two Temples) fell on July 30 in the midst of a heat wave and rising corona infections.

One of the key advantages of virtual gatherings apart from the safety factor is the amount of time that it saves. Instead of getting up an hour earlier each morning, I am able to rise and prepare myself in half the time. I've got into the habit of waking up and walking straight over to the next room where I simply flip the switch of my computer and allow it to boot up. Unhurried and with minimum stress, I perform the daily ablutions, get dressed and then return to the office where I don my tallit and tefillin, say the customary pre-minyan blessings and then reach for the mouse, ready to click on the morning service link.

I've learned a whole new lexicon of terms such as host, mute, unmute, Zoom link, chat, share screen, etc. My daily ritual includes joining the quorum with audio and video and waiting until the neatly arranged Zoom boxes appear with a grid of framed familiar faces and a shrill pinging sound. Suddenly my office is transformed into a *mikdash me'at* (small sanctuary) of worshipers, each one in his or her private domain. Some are in their living rooms, others are in their studies or bedrooms and some are outdoors on their terraces or balconies. There are even individuals joining the minyan from work, from a hospital or a police station where they are on an early shift.

Sadly, the familiar accouterments of the synagogue are missing. There is no Ark, no Torah Scrolls, no *bimah* and no Ner Tamid



'Backyard prayer' by Leah Raab: Six of Leah Raab's works are on exhibition at the Leonardo Gallery, 13 Leonardo Da Vinci Street, Tel Aviv ([www.LeahRaab.com](http://www.LeahRaab.com))

(eternal candle) shining over the Ark. On the positive side however, there are at least 16 people gathered together, separately in their own distinctly different spaces. Everyone can see everyone else (except for those who have chosen not to activate their cameras).

All of this has been sanctioned by our rabbi, who in turn has consulted leading Orthodox rabbinic authorities, such as Rabbi Eliezer Melamed and Rabbi Benjamin Lau.

It is a perfectly kosher gathering of adult Jewish men who can pray together. It is particularly important for those who are saying the Kaddish prayer for a deceased relative. According to the Halacha, the Zoom minyan counts as long as individuals can see each other. This is a ruling that has also been applied to "balcony" minyanim during the corona crisis where prayer services are held during lockdown in buildings where people can stand on their balconies and be heard from a distance.

Naturally most people, including myself, prefer to attend services in a synagogue in the old fashioned conventional way.

Once the pandemic took hold, the Health Ministry issued rules and guidelines which now categorically state that indoor gatherings in places of worship are restricted to

20 people. After six long months of not visiting the synagogue, I have gotten used to this new way of davening and realize that there are certain advantages of praying in a "Zoom minyan," another phrase which has been added to my lexicon. One major benefit of doing this is the ability to control distractions and peripheral noise.

Alone in my office with my headset on, I am able to focus and concentrate on the prayers and infuse them with new meaning and sincerity. The *baal tefilla* (one conducting the service), aided and abetted by the "host" has also got more control. The "host" is able to mute or unmute everyone depending on the level of background noise and potential disturbance such as family chatter, ringing phones, barking dogs or clanging dishes in the kitchen.

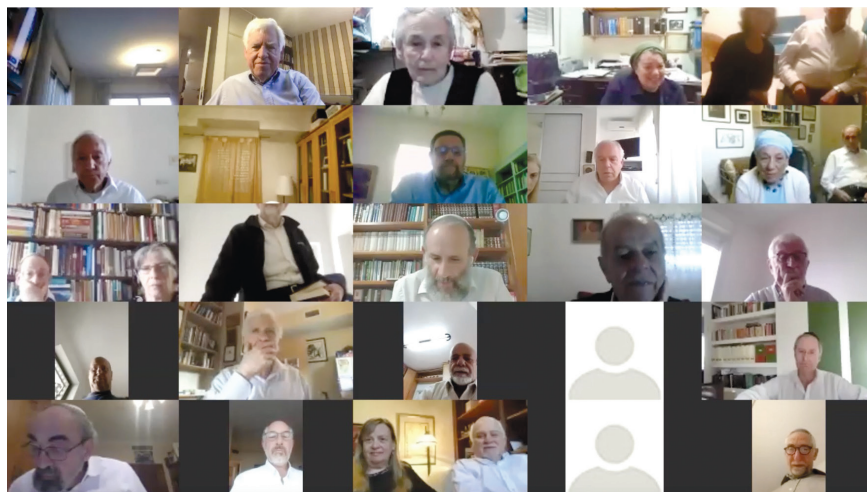
Back in "normal" times I used to attend morning services at the very large and airy Shai Agnon Synagogue in Talpiot. On a number of occasions, I would find myself sitting in a pew in front of nonstop talkers. No amount of dirty looks or shushing could halt these "once in a while worshipers" whose main reason for attending services was to say kaddish (memorial prayer) for a relative.

This is one aspect of in-synagogue communal davening that I do not miss. For me, since the start of the pandemic, prayer has become more meaningful in a most unexpected way. In fact technology has enhanced my experience of practicing my faith. Even before COVID-19, I adapted myself to 21st-century living. For several years I've been using an app on my iPad and iPhone that is a digital version of the siddur to pray and follow the service. The app is extremely user friendly and works brilliantly in tandem with the Zoom minyan. I never lose my place and can enlarge the fonts and the screen light levels. The software even detects your location and can point you in the direction of the Western Wall in Jerusalem no matter where you are.

Recently on Tisha Be'av when Kinot (mournful liturgical poems) were recited, the host loaded all the Kinot onto the screen in a clear magnified legible font. Every now and again he would use the cursor and scrolling mechanism to indicate where the reader was up to. This kept us all focused and attentive. It was a huge improvement on what used to happen in normal times when sitting on the synagogue floor, I would quite easily lose the place and drift off into an ADHD stupor.

The prayer services on Zoom have been abridged in accordance with halachic guidelines. While I do miss being blessed by the Kohanim and being called up to recite a blessing during Torah reading, the shorter services are a Godsend for my protracted ADHD!

One thing that is irreplaceable during this period of self-imposed isolation is the contact with friends and acquaintances. I definitely miss going to shul, sitting in my usual seat and meeting up with friends and acquaintances. And yet a feeling of camaraderie has begun to develop in our daily Zoom minyan. As is the case involving face to face contact, one quickly gets to know one's fellow congregants on Zoom. In the synagogue environment, one gets used to identifying people by their manner of dress, their body language, facial expression and



The writer's Zoom minyan: A grid of framed familiar faces

physical presence. On Zoom this is more complicated. In some respects one becomes much more visible than one would be sitting in a crowded shul. Zoomers get to see the inside of your living space in magnified proportions. They can see how your "Zoom room" is furnished, how tidy you are, whether you've fallen asleep, or whether you fidget or scratch or engage in other unmentionable gestures! And woe betide anyone who has unintentionally unmuted themselves while having an argument with their spouse or teenage daughter.

**QUITE A** few people who are not members of our shul have joined our Zoom minyan. They are not all from Jerusalem and are scattered across the country. They are not all retired people with underlying conditions like myself. Indeed it is refreshing to see some younger worshipers including a young Israeli police officer from somewhere up North who is sadly saying Kaddish for a parent. We have also had a few women joining the minyan. They, too, often participate when they need to say Kaddish for a parent.

The highlight of the week for us Zoomers is Friday evening. Our shul arranges a special partial Kabbalat Shabbat. It begins

before the official candle lighting time, and is led by a much-loved veteran member of the Emek Refaim Synagogue, Meir Fachler, who has a beautiful voice. This allows those of us who are not yet ready to participate in outdoor minyanim to soak up the special atmosphere of the Shabbat. Fachler leads us in singing some of the familiar tunes that we sing in Shul including the hauntingly beautiful Lecha Dodi prayer. Sadly, Zoom technology has not yet mastered the art of allowing participants to sing together harmoniously. When everyone is unmuted and trying to sing together, the result is a rather garbled cacophony that drowns out Fachler's dulcet tones and so the host, Bob Rosenschein, inevitably activates the "mute all" button. Jewish law places certain restrictions on the Kabbalat Shabbat virtual davening and it has to end just before candle lighting time. Those at home alone are then left to switch off the computer, light candles and continue with the Friday evening service in quiet solitude. The virtual service definitely enhances our experience of Shabbat. We get to see our friends, exchange a quick word, a smile and a wave, comfortable in the knowledge that we have been "virtually" together.

As I started writing this article on the eve

of the Shabbat of my bar mitzvah portion, I contemplated joining the Shabbat morning minyan held in an outdoor space behind our apartment building. It was to be the very first time in six months that my wife and I would venture out to join the group of mostly neighbors who assemble there each week. Arranged by local residents, the minyan got so large that it had to be split in two. Protocol suggests that any would-be participant has to pre-register each week. The services are strictly controlled in terms of numbers, social distancing and the wearing of masks. These minyanim are now completely full and we were fortunate to be given a place. I wanted to get called up to the Torah, to make a blessing and participate in the minyan. My wife and I arose early and prepared to carry our folding chairs downstairs to the outdoor space. We were met by the rather odd sight of the men setting everything up. Chairs were spread out across the vast area. A table with a white cloth was positioned near a wall upon which the “hosts” had placed a newly constructed portable wooden Ark housing the Torah Scroll.

I was advised to seat myself near the back away from the makeshift *bimah*. The full complement of 10 male masked worshippers duly arrived. It was an utterly surreal experience for me. The expanse resembled some sort of Jewish moonscape with figures on chairs wearing a variety of headgear including straw hats and skull caps. Amazingly, from where I sat, I could hear almost every word of the recited prayers and Torah reading.

When it came to my turn to be called up, I was quite emotional. It had been so long since I had been afforded the privilege of being called up to the Torah. I mistakenly approached the *bimah* as I would have done in our synagogue. I stood next to the reader who had removed his mask in order to read from the scroll. He politely allowed me to stand next to him. I instinctively kissed the parchment with the fringes of my prayer shawl through the mask to recite the blessing.

The officiating rabbi stepped forward and signaled to me to step back. I realized then



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that I'd crossed the line of protocol. The new rules of engagement in the outdoor minyan are to keep one's distance at all costs. Needless to say, I was very careful to recite the concluding blessing from at least two meters away.

Despite the nostalgic feeling of praying with a minyan again, I felt a certain sense of loss. Although the organizers had done the best they could, the rules meant that we were spread out a little too far to enjoy the closeness of a real congregation. The singing and joining in with the service was sparse and thin. Everyone was masked and so there were no smiles or facial expressions or handshakes or hugs to acknowledge one another in the normal human way. Everyone knew that it was important to disperse quickly out of the fear of catching or spreading something.

Secretly, I began to yearn for the comfort of my own apartment and even the Zoom minyan where I could pray without the discomfort of a mask, a fold-up chair, flies and the fear of disturbing upstairs neighbors, where I could pray more or less at my own pace with the ability to focus on what most of us are praying for, an end to this pandemic scourge and an exit from the 21st century twilight zone where we are alone and together simultaneously. ■

An outside prayer gathering in Jerusalem