

Having the High Holidays During a Pandemic

July 10, 2020

By David Vogel

With the Jewish High Holidays just over two months away, how are synagogues going to address our most important holidays when congregants won't be allowed to pray in shul? This very question is weighing heavily with every synagogue across the country. How do we celebrate together, pray together, ask for forgiveness, and reflect when we won't be together this year?

Thankfully we live in the 21st century, and technology will offer us many options so that we can be together virtually. Jewish law may make this challenging for some depending on whether your synagogue is reform, conservative or orthodox. I think the technology is not the issue here. The bigger issue is how do you live stream the high holidays to our congregants in a way that is fulfilling, meaningful and engaging, and fosters a sense of community?

Most synagogues are already discussing this issue, have organized committees to address it and have sent surveys to gauge priorities from their communities.

Some may be thinking that because we won't be together this year that the high holidays will be some lesser version of what we are familiar with. I challenge each and every one of you to see this as an opportunity to provide a richer, more meaningful, more engaging high holidays than was possible ever before.

Some synagogues have seen an increase in attendance to weekly services during the pandemic. With services being virtual, it is easier than ever to attend. One person I spoke to now goes to minyan every morning virtually. People are enjoying the convenience that virtual services offers.

For years, synagogues have been in search of new ways to bring in new members, engage existing members and expand the reach of their message. Thanks to the pandemic and technology, you are now going to have the opportunity to do just that, and reinvent your holiday services.

Keep in mind that many synagogues are planning to make their live stream available to anyone to watch. This is a huge marketing opportunity for every synagogue to show what makes their synagogue special and why people should consider joining your synagogue. They will be able listen to your Cantor sing, hear your Rabbi's sermon and get a sense of the experience you provide to your congregants.

If you are concerned that you may lose congregants because of the pandemic because of a less than fulfilling high holiday services, I encourage you to change your thinking and use this as the greatest opportunity you have to grow your membership.

Where to Start?

Make a decision quickly. Here are some of the key points to consider:

1. Are you going to do a virtual service or are you going to close and do nothing?
2. Is it going to take place in the synagogue or from people's homes?
3. Are your clergy willing and comfortable leading services alone?
4. Are you going to allow some congregants attend services in person observing social distancing?
5. Will your Rabbi want to convene a minyan?
6. What aspects of your service are you going to keep and what are you going to eliminate?

Social Distancing

If your clergy wants to lead the service live from the synagogue with congregants in attendance, this may be possible with social distancing. But keep in mind, many people will not be comfortable with this option. And those that are, will have to follow social distancing, wear masks the entire time and only one person will be able to use the bathroom at a time.

Keep in mind you will also have to deal with sanitizing the synagogue before and after every service. Not only will you incur costs that you didn't have previously but by doing this you lose the cost savings of doing everything remote. This would be the most costly and challenging approach because this means none of the video content of the rabbi or cantor can be pre-recorded. This means you would need to have a video crew present in synagogue or install video cameras prior to the holidays.

Content

How do you keep your congregants engaged when they are attending services from home? No matter how much money you spend, how great your content looks, if you don't make your high holiday services engaging, you may lose viewers in very short order.

What can you add to the service that is going to keep your congregants watching?

Having attended the high for over 50 years, I am really excited about the possibility of synagogues doing things that wouldn't have been considered or possible before. For example:

- If you aren't the first one to temple, you will most likely be sitting in the back of the sanctuary, where the view is not good. It may be hard to hear what is being said. With the proper equipment, you could be closer to the rabbi than you ever could be in temple. He or she will be able to look and speak directly to you. This level of intimacy is very powerful.
- I was speaking with a Jewish leader last week and he shared the idea of having an Israeli choir contribute to the service remotely.
- Consider integrating a PowerPoint slide presentation or show photos and/or video of Israel during your appeals to make the ask more compelling for congregants.
- During the shofar blowing, consider having a group of people do it simultaneously.
- Consider setting up break out rooms where congregants can gather to chat.
- Have a choir record themselves singing together.
- Add an interactive discussion about the Torah reading.

I encourage you to think creatively. The possibilities are endless.

Video Production

Some synagogues may be using Zoom or [StreamSpot](#) to offer virtual services. This might be ok for shabbat but that is not going to be acceptable for the high holidays. You will need to step it up.

Whether the content is live or pre-recorded, you will need to figure out how to handle the portions of the service that are responsive. With no live feedback in either direction, this needs to be taken into consideration.

It is extremely important that the video look and sound great. If people can't see the person clearly or the audio is poor this will adversely affect engagement. Make sure you invest in some lighting, quality microphones and cameras. Keep in mind if you are using a smartphone, they run off a battery and not AC, so the battery will eventually run out of power. And lastly, you want to make sure the set or background is appropriate. Filming in your bedroom isn't going to work.

The good thing about live content is there are no editing costs; however, there is greater chance that you will have a problem. What happens if the rabbi loses power or his internet connection? What will you do then? You need to have redundancies and contingency plans in case something goes horribly wrong.

As much as you will have filming and editing costs with pre-recorded video content, you have much greater control of the content, will have a better idea of the duration of the service, and have much lower risk that something might happen.

What are Your Options?

Option 1: Use a FREE Webcast Service

Using a free webcast service like Zoom or Skype is certainly an option but I don't recommend it for broadcasting your high holiday services. It would be great to see other members attending the service, but connectivity could be an issue, there are delays, screen freezes and all sorts of issues inherent with these free services. This could be a supplement you use to give members a way to connect with each other but I wouldn't use it for your service. Many of us enjoy chatting with other congregants in the hallways outside the sanctuary. It may be possible to use these services or chat to recreate that experience online. Please note that the FREE version of Zoom only allows for calls up to 40 minutes. To use this for the high holidays you would have to get the paid version.

Option 2: Use Existing Live Streaming

Many synagogues already have invested and installed a video camera and live streaming technology. They most likely have a camera mounted on a wall in the rear of the sanctuary and live stream the service to congregants who for one reason or another can't make it physically to synagogue but want to watch.

These systems work really well, are very reliable and for the most part, run automatically. This is a great option and most synagogues that have these systems are seriously considering using them for the high holidays.

As much as this type of solution is fine when you are talking about a few congregants wanting to watch. Most of these systems you pay based on the number of simultaneous viewers. You should check with your provider to see if your plan supports the number of viewers you are expecting and upgrade if necessary.

One of the services many synagogues use is [StreamSpot](#). Their monthly plans range from \$79/month for Lite to \$249/month for their Premiere service. Please note that this doesn't include the cost of cameras, hardware and installation. If this is something of interest, I recommend you speak to Dan Taplitz of [Right Click Solutions](#). He is the local reseller of their StreamSpot and has installed it in many of the houses of worship in the area. However they don't offer live support. The best response time is 12 hours if you have a problem.

From a technology standpoint, this solution should work but what about the experience? No one really cares about the technology. What they do care about is the service itself. Watching the high holidays this way is not going to keep someone's interest for very long.

You can invest in additional cameras or one with a zoom lens but now you are talking about a solution that requires staff to operate. Who is going to do that? Where are you going to find these people? As soon as you move to a solution like this, it becomes a bit more complicated.

Option 3: Produce a Live Streaming Event

If you don't have any video capabilities in your synagogue or you want to be add live or pre-recorded video content or you just want to deliver a richer visual experience, you are going to need to hire an AV company and a video production company to produce your virtual high holiday services. Prior to that you probably should hire a video consultant or video producer to help you map this out. You can no longer think of this as a service. It is now a TV show you are producing.

Live streaming the high holidays is no small feat. There are many components to high holiday services. There is the cantor, the rabbi, the shofar blowing, and congregant aliyahs. There are many questions to consider.

1. Who is going to be in charge of your virtual high holidays?
2. Is it video content pre-recorded, live or a combination?
3. Where is the content going to be filmed? Synagogue or people's homes or both?
4. Who will coordinate all those different live streams?
5. How will you ensure the quality of the audio and video?
6. How many different video clips will you need?
7. Who is going to be handling the video editing?
8. Are they using their smartphone or is there a professional video crew or setup?

Costs

Cost is what may ultimately define what you can and can't do. The three biggest costs are event production, video production and live streaming. It is important that you prioritize what is important. I recommend you come up with a budget and then see what is possible. The costs can vary greatly but I anticipate that for a professionally produced live stream you can expect to pay between \$40,000 and \$80,000 for both Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

As a cost saving measure, consider what video content you can create internally. Also look for any existing video content that you can repurpose. Keep in mind that as much as a virtual high holidays was not something you had budgeted for, there are many costs that you won't have this year. You no longer have to rent other facilities, rent tents and chairs, and hire security. Your building won't be open so you also won't have the additional electricity and air conditioning costs.

If you are not already doing this, reach out to your congregants who know IT, networking, video, video production, live streaming, event planning, social media, chatbots and web development. As I mentioned earlier, you are no longer running a service but a TV show. The last thing you are going to want is your congregants to change the channel.

When considering the investment in livestreaming your high holidays, you should be thinking long-term and not short-term. Are there things you do that will not only help with the high holidays but can be used for doing bar mitzvah, weekly services, minyan and more.

Putting a Team in Place

I recommend that you partner with a company who understands video, events and live streaming. This could be an events company, a video production company or an AV company. There are going to be a lot of moving parts to this, equipment and services you are going to need so you need someone who can speak to other vendors.

When livestreaming your high holidays, you will need video content, both live and pre-recorded. You will also need a streaming service and contingency plans to ensure that no matter what happens, your service will happen.

You also are going to need some sort of event planner, someone who understands logistics and planning because there are a lot of people and moving parts that need to be coordinated.

You should also speak to your web developer and if you don't have one, look into one who can help with the hosting of the live stream on your synagogue website.

Conclusion

I hope you found this information helpful. I implore you to not wait until the last minute. With only two months until the holiday season arrives, there is much to do. If you need help planning your High Holiday service this year please feel free to reach out.

About the Author



David Vogel is a video consultant, video producer and video strategist. He is the owner of Video SEO Pro in White Plains, a video marketing agency which helps small and medium businesses leverage video to grow their businesses. During the pandemic he and his team have been helping businesses and nonprofits with their remote video production services to produce high quality video content remotely without the need for a video crew. David can be reached at david@vsp-agency.com or you can reach him directly at (914) 393-1954.