

The Future of Live-Streaming at B'nai Aviv

July 7, 2021

My friends, one year ago I drafted a lengthy letter to the congregation outlining drastic changes to be implemented to safeguard our B'nai Aviv community in the wake of Covid. In it, I noted that one of the few certainties of the pandemic was the survival of the Jewish People. It was Mark Twain who famously wondered, "All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but the Jew remains. What is the secret of the Jew's immortality?" And while no single answer satisfies the question, the question itself is reassuring. The Jewish People have withstood, exile, inquisition, pogrom, genocide...and I reassured you that the Jewish People would indeed survive Covid-19 just as the Jewish People survived the other great pandemics of history.

Yet, this general guarantee about the immortality of the Jewish People does not promise that we, or our children, or our grandchildren will survive as Jews. During our 3000 year history, entire Jewish communities have disappeared for a variety of reasons. Today is no different. When Jews vanish from our midst today, however, most our doing so through active assimilation or just plain apathy. That is where the synagogue comes into play. We have no guarantees that any specific family or community will remain Jewish forever, only that somewhere in this world, and for all time, there will be descendants of Avraham reading the Torah given to Moses on Mt. Sinai, and our role as a synagogue is to do our best to ensure that our congregants and their children are amongst those who still count themselves as Jews. One year ago, as the pandemic raged with no end in sight, I was not worried about the survival of the Jewish People. I was however, concerned about the survival of our B'nai Aviv community.

Prior to the pandemic, we had created something substantive, serious, spiritual, sentimental, and unambiguously Jewish. At B'nai Aviv, Jewish Identity was not a fashionable piece of clothing we kept tucked away in a drawer and pulled out only when needed. At B'nai Aviv, the "main course" wasn't schtick that we sprinkled with a little Jewish seasoning, so that a fragrance of Yiddishkeit masked an otherwise secular entrée. At B'nai Aviv, we didn't flaunt ritual objects or use Torah as a prop to convey an impression of authenticity and tradition. B'nai Aviv was the lynchpin between the Jewish past, the Jewish present, the Jewish future, and Gd simultaneously, and each of us took this very seriously.

For many, B'nai Aviv was the primary point of contact for all things Jewish. Last year, we made many changes in hopes our B'nai Aviv community would not succumb to unprecedented times when that point of contact was eliminated physically. We needed to simulate the sacredness of what we'd built to the best of our ability, and like the rest of the world, we moved ourselves into the virtual realm. Some aspects of this were convenient and perhaps even improved, but others were controversial, most specifically live streaming our Shabbat and Yom Tov services.

The decision was not made lightly. As opposed to other approaches that tried to explain how to legitimately use electronics in an alternative or non-routine way that would comport with upholding the sanctity of Shabbat, our approach was to call live-streaming on Shabbat what it is, a transgression of Jewish Law, and to permit it nonetheless because the survival of our B'nai Aviv community depended on it.

I introduced you to a complicated principle developed in the Talmud called an *Aveira L'Shem Shamayim* – a transgression of the sake of heaven. The principle appears in Masechet Nazir 23b and is anchored in the biblical story of Yael (see Judges 5:24), who is surprisingly considered more blessed than our Matriarchs Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah. To summarize, the reason Yael's blessings are elevated is because she commits an *Aveira L'Shem Shemyaim* by engaging in the prohibited act of cohabitating with Sisera for the sole purpose of killing him, consequently saving the Jewish People. In our case, the preservation of life, or *Pikuah Nefesh*, was not imminently at stake. As noted, the only certainty of the Covid era is that the Jewish People will survive...But the Jewish Identities of so many in our community was at stake! I advocated for this specific transgression of Shabbat and holidays so that we could continue to strengthen and enrich the Jewish Identities of those who call B'nai Aviv home...As Maimonides concluded in his 12th century corpus of Jewish Law, "**Desecrate one Sabbath for a person's sake so that that person will keep many Sabbaths.**" In other words, there was precedent for advocating a transgression of halacha if it would retain B'nai Aviv as the community's Jewish point of contact, eventually bringing people closer to Torah and Jewish Life when the pandemic made it nearly impossible, and that is what B'nai Aviv did...

As noted a year ago, this was not a permanent solution to a temporary problem, but a temporary solution to a temporary problem, and while Covid looks to be a part of our lives for some time, we are in a drastically different place today than we were. Our 4th Commandment requires that we **remember and guard the Shabbat and keep it holy and separate from the rest of the week.** Until 2020, we used technology for every single other thing, but we did not use it on Shabbat. The survival of B'nai Aviv required us to alter this, but we have reached a point in time where our community can gather in safety and holiness, without the need to live-stream services, thus sanctifying the Shabbat and differentiating it from the other days of the week, as the Torah intends.

Beginning July 10, B'nai Aviv will no longer live stream Shabbat and Yom Tov services. This decision, too, was not made lightly, and required weeks of rumination, study, and conversation with colleagues and congregants alike. Our security camera, which runs 24/7, will remain on, allowing families celebrating life cycle events to pull segments of services, as was possible prior to 2020. **Most importantly, live streaming will be utilized for this year's High Holy Days.** While most feel comfortable at this point coming to Shabbat services with a few hundred people, there may be reticence with regards to our High Holy Day attendance numbers. For that reason, live streaming will be available this year for congregants uncomfortable being with us when our sanctuary, ballroom, and multi-purpose room are once again opened.

Last year, we waded together into uncharted waters, shifting our approach to both secular and religious life to survive. Today, we wade together back onto the shores of normalcy. B'nai Aviv was one of the first Conservative synagogues in the country to open its doors for in-person services. Our pre-school, summer camp, youth groups and religious services and programs have thrived safely in-person throughout the duration of the pandemic. As a nation we are, as the president stated, close to declaring our independence from this terrible virus. Returning to fully in-person Shabbat and Yom Tov services is our next step. I look forward to davening with you all in our sanctuary at some point soon.

B'Shalom

Rabbi Adam Watstein