Creating a Sacred Space in Your Home

Our ancestors could never have imagined a time when we could celebrate the High Holy Days together via Livestream. But, the idea of each of us having the capacity to create a sacred space wherever we are is an ancient one. After the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash, the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, nearly 2000 years ago, the rabbis of old taught that each of us should turn our own home into a mikdash me’at, a living sanctuary in miniature.

If you are joining our services online, we invite you to intentionally create a sense of sacred space in your home, so that the time of the High Holy Days can truly feel like a time and place special and apart from our “everyday” time of the regular week and year.

Below are eleven suggestions for setting up your own Mikdash Me’at in preparation for marking the High Holy Days!

Location and Setting

1. A Changed Place for Your Screen

Over the past two and a half years of the COVID pandemic, many of us have become accustomed to using our computers, tablets, and phones for mundane, everyday activities like work meetings, doctors appointments, and school—and then using the same devices for entertainment and relaxation.

For High Holy Day services and programming, you might try creating a different space within your home, set apart from your normal workspace or entertainment, for participating in High Holy Day services and programming. Even if your space is small, we invite you to try creating some small “shinui”—a “change” to make it feel different, as a tool to remind you of the distinctness of this time. For instance, reorient your table or the screen itself, or choose a new place to sit or stand in relation to it. Think about if you want to change the space between you and the screen: would you like to watch up close or from farther back with room for you to move? How else might you want to change your physical relationship with your device to make this time feel different?
Location and Setting (cont.)

2. Your Space for Sitting and Standing

This is an opportunity to think about where you want to place yourself during these Holy Days. You might choose a special space to sit, one from which you can actively stand up and sit down during services.

In order to adorn your sitting spot, you might want a cushion or festive pillow on your chair, or to drape it with a tallit, scarf, or special fabric. Do you want something special on the floor in front of you or on a surface next to you?

3. Adorn Your Screen's Space

There are no rules for how you should Jewishly decorate the area around a computer screen or TV when joining for High Holy Day services. Some suggestions include:

- Cover the desk or table where your computer will be with a white tablecloth, runner, or placemat
- Photographs of people or places that you think of during this time
- A Mizrach, a sign for the eastern wall, to help orient our hearts toward Jerusalem
- Artwork, of your own creation or others', that helps you to reflect or that “grounds” you
- Flowers, beautiful leaves, seashells, or other items from nature that you want to bring into your space to connect you with the outside world
- Candlesticks, a kiddush cup, a shofar (if you own one), family heirlooms or other holiday-connected objects

Technology

4. Disconnect to Connect

One of the remarkable parts of High Holy Days in the Diaspora is the feeling of it being an “everything-stops” time, when outside of our walls, the world keeps on moving. To help us re-create this feeling this year, you might choose to turn off your phone and email, turn off your alarms, and silence your text message sounds. Put up an away message on your email.

Alternatively, if there are a handful of special people with whom you want to remain connected through the holiday time, instead of turning off your mobile phone altogether, set them as Favorites in your phone app, and set your phone to Night Mode or Do Not Disturb mode and set your phone allow calls only from Favorites.
5. Hold a Machzor

During the service, we invite you to hold a Machzor, a High Holy Day prayer book, if you can. Feel its cover and flip its pages. Find new words in it. Embrace—or argue with!—what’s on the page. Let the book move you.

Your Outer Self

6. Your Clothing

Wear clothing that helps you feel as if you are entering a spiritual space. Some might choose to wear a special color, such as white, which is traditional to wear on Yom Kippur as a symbol of purity and fresh beginnings.

7. Ritual Garb

You might choose to wear a kippah or other head covering, or a tallit to help you feel a connection to prayer or our services. Traditionally, a tallit (or tallis) is worn by Jews who are over the age of Bar Mitzvah during morning prayers throughout the year or by anyone leading prayer on behalf of others, like rabbis and cantors. Yom Kippur is the one day in which it is traditional for those praying to wear a tallit in the evening and throughout the day.

Your Inner Self

8. Cheshbon Ha’Nefesh

In our Jewish year-cycle, the time leading up to Rosh HaShanah, and the ten days between Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur, are considered days for reflection and for cheshbon ha’nefesh, literally, “accounting of our souls.” This is a special time for looking at the months that have passed and on ahead to how we hope to conduct ourselves in the year to come. You might choose to write, create art, or in other ways explore these themes for your own personal growth. If there is repair that you need to make—between yourself and others, or between yourself and yourself—this is the time to engage in that t’shuvah, “returning” ourselves to the right path as best we can.

9. Offer a kavanah

A kavanah is an “intention,” a statement of the way that we want to direct our minds and our hearts. Once you have created your special space and readied yourself for these special days, you might choose to say a blessing or say something out loud to designate it as your mikdash me’at. If there are words or phrases that you want to hold in your sight during this time, place them where you will be.