

## Statement on Religious Services at Beth Ahm - May 20, 2020

### From Rabbi Rubenstein

Even as we have adjusted in a wide variety of ways to the unusual situation in which we find ourselves, our society remains in crisis. Most families continue to shelter in place; most are not working from their normal place of business; and most of us have been cut off from physical interaction from our loved ones---not to mention the people and places we usually visit as part of our normal lives.

As the pandemic reached Michigan, and Beth Ahm temporarily closed our building (along with the other congregations in our area), we made decisions about the way we would provide services and other ritual practices during this time. In some ways, these have been quite extensive for this unusual time. We have held services online several times each week including a 6:00PM pre-Shabbat service and a weekly Havdala. We have hosted programs for Pesah (including Yizkor and a Zoom Seder), Yom HaShoah, and Lag BaOmer. Still, we have been limited in two particularly noticeable ways: (a) we have not held services on Shabbat; (b) we have not constituted a virtual minyan and therefore we have not recited kaddish, kedusha, or other parts of the service recited only with a minyan. Some (but not all) of this will change in the near future.

The two primary changes are:

- 1) In the presence of 10 people gathered online, we will begin to recite Mourner's Kaddish at online services. We will not be considering this a minyan for other aspects of the service such as the recitation of the Kedusha or Torah reading.
- 2) Beth Ahm is making plans to stream our Shabbat services based on a recently passed responsa from the Committee on Jewish Law & Standards (see below) – timing is to be determined and we will let you know in advance. A critical element of this decision is the fact that there are ways for the congregation to stream services and for congregants to access streamed services in ways within the bounds of Shabbat observance.
- 3) When we are able to stream our services from the synagogue and we have a minyan physically present, we will naturally add all of the sections of the

liturgy that call for a minyan. Those viewing the service online can rely on the teshuva, “Wired to the Kadosh Baruch Hu” (see below) and recite the Mourners Kaddish as well as the other prayers said with a minyan from a distance.

These changes are being made due to the fact that we are living through a *sha’at ha-d’hak*, a time of emergency. Over the course of Jewish history, changes in religious practice have been made in times of emergency to make life possible under difficult circumstances. When the emergencies resolved, religious practice usually reverted to the original practice. The changes that we are making at this time are under the heading *sha’at ha-d’hak* and are therefore temporary. This does not preclude their continuation, but that decision is explicitly not being made at this time.

## **Background Resources**

### **Remote Prayer Services**

The above statement gives the practical decisions related to our davening. In order to understand the background of these decisions, the following resources can be helpful.

#### A. CJLS Guidance for Remote Minyanim in a time of COVID-19

The Rabbinical Assembly released a paper as the pandemic began on the issue of Remote (virtual) Minyan. As you will see, there are several different opinions offered in this one paper. We continue to follow the majority opinion of the Committee on Jewish Law & Standards. The majority opinion states that a minyan can only be constituted with 10 people physically in the same space---not virtually. Even during this crisis, we will consider that we have a minyan only when we have 10 people physically together.

The full statement can be found here:

<https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/story/cjls-guidance-remote-minyanim-time-covid-19>

B. Rabbi Avram Reisner's teshuva/responsa, Wired To the Kadosh Baruch Hu: Minyan via Internet

<https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/Reisner%20-%20Internet.pdf>

Here are a few of the key conclusions of Rabbi Reisner's teshuva:

1. A minyan may not be constituted over the Internet, an audio- or video-conference, or any other medium of long distance communication. Only physical proximity, as defined, that is being in the same room with the shaliah tzibbur, allows a quorum to be constituted.
2. Once a quorum has been duly constituted, anyone hearing the prayers being offered in that minyan may respond and fulfill his or her obligations thereby, even over long distance communications of whatever sort. (a) Some would refrain from fulfilling the specific requirement to hear the shofar in this way, due to its specific nature, but others permit. This committee is on record among those who would allow even the hearing of Shofar in this way.
3. This specifically refers to hearing. A real-time audio connection is necessary. Two-way connection to the whole minyan is preferable, though connection to the shaliah tzibbur alone or a one-way connection linking the minyan to the individual are sufficient. E-mail and chat room or other typewritten connections do not suffice. Video connections are not necessary, and in the absence of audio would not suffice.
4. A clear hierarchy of preference is discernible here. It is preferable by far to attend a minyan, for the full social and communal effect of minyan for which it was established is only possible in that way. Less desirable, but closest to attendance at a minyan proper, is real-time two-way audio-video connection, wherein the individual, though unable to reach the other minyonnaires, is able to converse with them and see and be seen by them. Only in rare or exigent circumstances should one enact the third, and least desirable, method of fulfilling one is obligation to pray with a minyan by attaching oneself to that minyan through a one-way audio vehicle, essentially overhearing them as one standing outside the synagogue.

5. With regard to Mourner's Kaddish, some member of the minyan must recite the kaddish, but a participant at a distant location may recite it along with him or her, as this is not considered a superfluous blessing. There is no obligation to pursue additional opportunities to recite kaddish, and this should be discouraged.

### **C. Streaming on Shabbat and Hagim**

Here is the link to Rabbi Joshua Heller's teshuva "Livestreaming on Shabbat and Hagim":

<https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/story/livestreaming-shabbat-and-haggim>

Rabbi Heller's teshuva is fairly long and quite detailed. Some may prefer to first read the statement the Rabbinical Assembly released when Rabbi Heller's teshuva was approved: <https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/story/conservative-rabbis-rule-streaming-services-shabbat-and-yom-tov>

As mentioned above, Rabbi Heller's teshuva provides permission for livestreaming on Shabbat and Hagim within the context of Shabbat observance as understood within the Conservative movement. Therefore, he considers issues of the use of electronics (and electricity itself) on Shabbat by both the party streaming and the one receiving the stream. Rabbi Heller suggests several ways that one can take part in streaming without breaking the laws of Shabbat.

Rabbi Heller spends time discussing the benefits of streaming for keeping our community connected. He also discusses potential pitfalls of employing streaming technology in regard to the spirit of Shabbat and potential loss of Shabbat observance. I am also concerned about this potential. I encourage those who will take advantage of streaming of Shabbat services to consider how they can separate out that activity from other uses of technology so that the experience of Shabbat is insulated from our weekday world so identified with the many uses of our computers and phones.

We will have opportunities in the coming weeks to discuss the decisions mentioned above. Please stay tuned for these opportunities which, of course, be found online.