# Jewish Worship, Music, and Technology during the Covid-19 Pandemic

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During the Covid-19 pandemic, synagogues, like other houses of worship, reluctantly closed their doors and worshippers stopped congregating physically for prayer. Leaders and congregants responded to health directives stating that gathering indoors in large groups for prayer and song could super-spread the coronavirus at a time before vaccines or clear treatment protocols were available. Many liberal synagogues quickly initiated virtual services on a variety of platforms, just as educational establishments scrambled to shift to online teaching, and businesses worked to expand and normalize virtual work. In this article, I focus on the experience of congregational music in online worship from the perspective of synagogue leaders in the Jewish Emergent Network, innovative liberal synagogues especially known for fostering vibrant musical expression during worship.[1] This article is based on online interviews I conducted with many of these rabbis and music leaders during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. Leaders spoke about the ways—both challenging and positive—that online worship changed the experience of music in communal prayer, the Jewish legal ramifications of using technology on the Sabbath, and the ongoing changes they believed would happen as virtual community gradually returned to in-person gathering. During this time, many religious traditions were confronting similar issues in online worship. In her examination of Christian worship during the pandemic, Helen

Parish writes about "the absence of presence and the presence of absence" experienced by virtual religious communities.[2] Perhaps one of the greatest ways that congregations experienced this "absence of presence and presence of absence" was the loss of the ability to fully participate in communal singing as worship communities.

During the pandemic, I also had personal experience with the challenges and opportunities inherent in transitioning from in-person worship to online prayer and back again. Our family attends a *havurah* (Jewish fellowship community characterized by participatory lay leadership)[3] whose worship services went online during the pandemic. Recognizing my experience as an ethnographer, the community's leadership committee asked me to chair a research group to assess the worship community's experience with online services and determine if our congregation should continue offering virtual options (Zoom, streaming, or hybrid) once the congregation returned to in-person worship. This article draws both from that autoethnography and from my interviews with leaders from the Jewish Emergent Network as I examine how a range of clergy, and one congregation, experienced virtual worship at that challenging time.

**Jewish Worship and Participatory Singing**
Jewish worship is the performance of sacred text. The ethnomusicologist Mark Slobin categorizes the performance of synagogue music into three areas. The first includes the participatory hymns and songs that

the leader and congregation sing together. Slobin calls these metric tunes "the music of participation."[4] The second category is composed synagogue music, performed for the congregation by the cantor often with a synagogue choir, which Slobin calls "the music of presentation."[5] The third category in the Ashkenazi tradition is *nusach,* traditional prayer chant, performed by the cantor or the *ba'al* or *ba'alat tefilah* (Hebrew, prayer leader). Worshippers chant the prayers to time-bound modes quietly in free rhythm while the leader marks the progression of the service by chanting the endings, and often the beginnings, of certain prayers out loud. Slobin calls *nusach* "the music of improvisation."[6] There is also a fourth form of synagogue music, the cantillation of sacred scripture.[7] This article primarily focuses on the first category, "the music of participation," and to a certain extent on the second category, "the music of presentation," and on the ways in which online worship impacted the experience of participatory music from the perspective of congregational leaders.

Participatory singing shapes the experience of worship on many levels. Philip Bohlman writes that "central to the power of music to instantiate American religious experience is its ability not only to represent but in fact to unify community."[8] Singing together is one of the few ways that a congregation can actually experience unity. When worshippers sing together, an individual can hear and feel what it means to blend voice and breath, to create, even temporarily, a transcendent community of palpable beauty and harmony. In this way, singing becomes an occasion for transformation as well as an opportunity to experience, and then model, a vision of community, clear separate voices coming together to create a whole. Participatory song also imprints the textual content of the liturgy on the worshipper in a deeper, embodied way. In his examination of aesthetics and theology in congregational song, Don E. Saliers discusses how sung text repeated frequently by a congregation becomes "part of the body memory of faith" and the experience of "the act of breathing, sounding the air, and reproducing the musical form embodies the words in a more than cognitive way."[9] In turn, just as participatory congregational song deeply impacts the worship experience of the participant, as noted by Monique M. Ingalls, the "social process and ... its resulting product" of participatory music in worship actively shapes and constitutes a congregation, "weaving together a religious community inside and outside" institutional houses of worship.[10] In my interviews, many of these leaders so valued participatory congregational singing that they used powerful natural imagery—the flow of water, the movement of waves and wind, the rhythms of nature—to convey how intensely they experienced communal music in prayer and how congregational singing connected them with holiness.

It is challenging to get a handle on "meaning" and "experience," words these leaders use broadly when describing communal worship. In my previous research, I have taken a phenomenological approach to examine music and Jewish prayer.[11] Here, too, my examination of the meaning and experience of online worship is influenced by Harris Berger's work on stance, a phenomenological approach to assessing meaning in culture. He understands stance to be "the affective, stylistic, or valual quality with which a person engages with an element of her experience" and writes

that "meaning arises, not from the text alone, but from the culturally specific ways in which people grapple with texts and cog them into structures of lived experience."[12] The stance of the service leader during online worship is impacted by many factors—including but not limited to one's comfort and familiarity with presenting on a virtual platform; whether one has technical support while leading a service on Zoom; issues of isolation and loneliness that arise from singing and preaching into a screen; and how a leader perceives and evaluates congregants' online involvement in a service. The leader's stance is also relational, formed by one's interpersonal connections to congregants.

The stance of congregants in relation to virtual worship is also formed by many factors, such as one's ease and familiarity using a computer to participate in worship; one's ability to navigate the functions of programs such as Zoom; the place and setting from which one is watching the service (one's kitchen, living room, bedroom, automobile); whether one sings along with music of the service or watches and listens quietly; and whether one sees the faces of other participants, as on Zoom, or only sees those leading the service, as is the case with many livestream broadcasts. A congregant's stance is also shaped by the depth of relationship one has with other participants, whether a service is interactive (utilizing breakout discussion groups, unmuting all participants for certain communal prayers), and whether one is watching the service in real time or after it was recorded. The stance of participants is also impacted by whether one is multitasking (eating, checking email, jumping from one online service to another) while "attending" worship.

Both the leader's and the congregants' stances are also shaped by the occasion of the service, for example if the occasion is a weekday service, Shabbat worship, the High Holidays, or the bar or bat mitzvah of a relative or friend. All these social and interpersonal issues impact the stances of those leading and engaged in online Jewish worship. As Robert Bellah writes, "even though religion is always concerned with problems of meaning, and therefore primarily cultural, it is always also social, personal, and embodied."[13] But during the pandemic, when all of the synagogues I investigated were meeting virtually, the experience of worship ceased to be embodied and this added new elements shaping the phenomenology of congregational prayer and participatory singing. In investigating the stances of both leaders and congregants, I draw from interviews, my participation in online Jewish worship, and my own experience as a knowledgeable insider in the American Jewish community.

While the limited adoption of online worship in certain liberal synagogues preceded the Covid-19 pandemic, such online worship was framed by the values of access and inclusivity, primarily used to provide an opportunity for worshippers in nursing homes or homebound during a period of illness. Some congregations also provided an online option for life-cycle events such as a baby naming, a bar/bat mitzvah, or a funeral in order to allow access to family and friends who were unable to travel to the service. The assumption on the part of worshippers who participated in virtual worship before the pandemic was that their experience of the service was on a second tier. They understood that they would not be able to participate in communal singing, or step outside of the

sanctuary to visit with other congregants before or after the service. Zoom opened the possibility for limited interaction among virtual attendees, but because of the problem of sound latency—the delay between the audio and visual transmission--it was not possible to sing together with others while online. This did not create large problems when people joined online services occasionally. However, when all worship went online, this presented deeper challenges for liberal Jewish congregations.

### "Singing together allows us to transcend ourselves"

I focused on the leadership of synagogues within the Jewish Emergent Network because these congregations are seen to be among the vanguard of congregational singing in North American Jewish worship. Comprised of seven loosely affiliated congregations, these synagogues have joined together in a range of projects. This network sponsors an innovative rabbinic fellowship to train new leaders They participate in musical collaboration and partner in social justice initiatives on climate change and antiracism. On their joint website, these synagogues define themselves as "path-breaking Jewish communities" that, while not affiliated with mainstream denominations, share "a devotion to revitalizing the field of Jewish engagement, a commitment to approaches both traditionally rooted and innovative, and a demonstrated success in attracting unaffiliated and disengaged Jews to a rich and meaningful Jewish practice." These are all congregations that see, and refer to, themselves as communities, bound together not only by worship but also by educational programming, social justice initiatives, and structures of interpersonal

support. They all have connections with Hadar's Rising Song Institute, founded by musician and composer Joey Weisenberg, whose musical compositions, especially contemporary *niggunim* (Hasidic devotional tunes, characterized by repetition and usually sung to vocables), are used in their congregations. While many liberal congregations in the United States have innovative and vibrant musical participation in worship, these seven congregations have built a strong reputation as musical innovators. In additional to traditional prayer chant, all these congregations sing the text of selected prayers to contemporary compositions, influenced by American and Israeli folk music. Beginning in the 1960s, composers such as Debbie Friedman and Shlomo Carlebach were very influential in introducing contemporary American folk styles, new Israeli music, and Hassidic *niggunim* into liberal synagogues. In addition, these congregations draw from diverse sources beyond Ashkenazi worship to introduce Sephardic and Mizrahi (Jewish Middle Eastern and North African) music into worship.[14] Some congregations in the Emergent Jewish Network will reconfigure worship spaces by arranging chairs in concentric circles, with the musicians and leaders in the center of the congregation, and approach prayer with a willingness to extend the singing of *niggunim* for longer periods to immerse fully in the experience of communal singing.

For these and other congregations that especially value and cultivate vibrant, participatory music in worship, a profound irony emerged as the pandemic developed. Rabbi Ebn Leader, professor and prayer leader at Hebrew College in Newton, Massachusetts, and an influential teacher

for many of the rabbis and music leaders interviewed for this article, reflected, "Singing together allows us to transcend ourselves. Our *neshamas* [the same word for soul and breath in Hebrew, here in Ashkenazi pronunciation] merge and become one sound. Then, along comes Covid-19 and says, 'Yeah, that immersion of breath, the very thing that allows you to transcend in communal worship, that's the thing that's going to kill you."[15] Singing together, a source of communal joy and spiritual expression, quickly became one of the most dangerous communal acts. In fact, one of the early studies on the spread of the coronavirus focused on a super-spreader event that occurred after a choir rehearsal in Skagit, Washington.[16] The loss of communal singing was a profound disruption both to interpersonal connections and to the possibility of accessing transcendent experience in community.

In the course of my interviews, prayer leaders expressed powerful negative reactions to Zoom *davenen* (Yiddish, praying, with the connotation of chanting and swaying in rhythmic movement) and the inability to sing together in worship. Rabbi Noa Kushner, the founding leader of an innovative congregation in San Francisco, The Kitchen, said, "Not being able to sing together and pray with a *kahal* [Hebrew, worship community] in real time is like having my limbs cut off. I just can't feel the community in the same way."[17] In sharp contrast to the experience of embodied communal prayer, Kushner's vivid imagery underscored how strongly she felt that the lack of communal singing was like living in a mutilated body, shutting her off from deep connection with members of her congregation. For

many leaders, the joining together of voices in communal singing was seen as a core embodied expression of spiritual and communal connection.

Rabbi David Ingber, the senior and founding rabbi of Romenu, a Jewish community in Manhattan, said, "we never fully valued the experience of harmony until we lost the opportunity to sing together."[18] Here, Ingber uses "harmony" loosely, meaning voices joining together in communal singing. While it is common for congregants and leaders to improvise simple, spontaneous chordal harmony during the communal singing, they do not sing from musical notation in printed hymnals. A number of these congregations have musical leadership teams who do work though arrangements of the participatory music they present to the congregation. But the dominant style is not intended to be performative but rather to encourage congregational participatory singing. Ingber quoted the book of Ecclesiastes (4:9) in Hebrew and said, "What is going to come out of this experience of Zoom davening [English version of Yiddish, *davenen*], something we never fully understood, is '*tovim hashnayim min ha'ehad*'—two is so much better than one. No matter how beautiful your own voice is, if you can't hear two voices harmonize together, sync together, it's a profound loss. This will be a forever learning." Ingber told a poignant story underscoring the pain he felt during the pandemic when he was unable to experience the embodied joining of voices in song. He recounted how he walked to the home of one of the musicians in his congregation and they both sat outside at a distance from one another. He continued, "And we sang a song together! We harmonized! [At this point

in the interview, he choked up.] It was unbelievable. I think that the longing that came out of this is no matter how beautiful your voice is, if you can't hear another voice, it's just . . . ." Ingber's voice trailed off as he struggled to describe how powerful that experience of vocal harmony was for him in the middle of the pandemic. He finally compared it to the power of physical touch and explained that there was a period when he became more traditionally observant: "I had a five-year period where I was strictly *shomer negiah* [someone who refrains from physical contact with members of the opposite sex, except one's immediate family and spouse]." When he became less observant, he continued, "I remember the first time I just held a girl's hand. It was like, beyond!" So too was the power and intensity of harmonizing with a fellow member after the isolation of the pandemic. In worship, this leader longed for the intimate, embodied connection forged through participatory song. Ingber's observation that "two are better than one" does not only impact the experience of the individual. Participatory music sings the congregation into being and helps individual worshippers understand their place in relation to a larger community. While online worship provided valuable social connection during the pandemic, much was lost when congregants no longer had the opportunity to join together in song.

Similarly, Rabbi Sharon Brous, founder of the congregation IKAR in Los Angeles, reflected, "When people sing together, something happens in our heart. That harmony [in this usage, communal singing] allows people to break through to a vertical connection to God. That's what is lost in this moment: the ability to experience that connection—not only with other congregants but with the divine."[19] The lack of experiencing voices joined together in song robbed them of the ability to connect to the sources of holiness in their lives. For many of these leaders who experience God through communal singing, the necessary move to virtual worship was understood as not only a physical loss but a spiritual loss as well.

Congregations in the Jewish Emergent Network, and in liberal synagogues in general, stress the importance of participatory singing as a key to building vibrant worship communities. But when worship shifted to virtual platforms and congregants could not hear one another sing together, the role of rabbis, cantors, and music leaders of necessity became more performative. Professor of liturgy Lawrence Hoffman, an influential scholar and teacher for many of the leaders interviewed in this study, referred to a term coined by Émile Durkheim: the "collective effervescence" that occurs when congregants sing and pray together.[20] He continued, "No matter how hard you try to sing with the leader on the screen, something's missing—you have to get high off of the fumes of watching others."[21] While worshippers appreciated being able to see and be seen by fellow congregants on Zoom, audio latency and the resultant inability to sing together dramatically changed the nature of presence in worship. Were you really in the same service if you could not sing together? How was virtual presence different from physical presence?

**Virtual Presence and Jewish Worship**

In his book *The Virtual Embodied: Presence, Practice, Technology*, John Wood reflects on how the word "virtual" defines "anything

that is the case, although not in the fullest sense."[22] He goes on to say that when we "hear of a product defined as being virtually safe, we know we should not trust it." This, he states, is ironic, because the Latin root word, virtus, combines "the semantic idea of "truth" with the ethical idea of "worth." He points out that in its origin, "virtual" is a positive word and there are reasons that we should be cautious about "privileging bodily presence."[23] It is clear that during the pandemic, online presence became an essential means of interpersonal connection, a truth underscored by desire and necessity. Still, worshippers and leaders struggled to define the difference between online and in-person presence.

To place this discussion in a historical context, rabbis have discussed the question of "presence" in prayer from a number of perspectives dating back more than two millennia. Historically, physical presence in one common location has been the defining factor in the requirement to constitute a *minyan*, or quorum, for a full recitation of the prayer service.[24] The Talmud (the compendium of rabbinic commentary, law and lore, redacted in the fifth century, C.E.) and later Jewish legal codes stipulate that ten people (traditionally, ten men) must be physically present to constitute a *minyan*. Worshippers strongly value the presence of a *minyan*: this quorum is required to recite important prayers in the service as well as the mourner's Kaddish, the prayer that a mourner is obligated to recite after the death of a close family member. The challenge of assembling a *minyan* for prayer has led to various traditional compromises over the years.[25] The sixteenth-century Jewish code of law, the Shulḥan Arukh, states that if one is able to see the faces of worshippers who are behind the synagogue looking through a window, those worshippers can be counted in a *minyan*,[26] an interesting analogy to seeing people's faces through the windows of Zoom.

In addition, there is a long-standing rabbinic belief that "presence" in prayer is not only defined by embodied experience. To fulfill the obligation to pray, one must both recite the text of the prayers (Hebrew, *keva*) while praying with a directed mindset, a focused intentionality. This mindset is called *kavanah* in Hebrew. The scholar and rabbi Maimonides (1138–1204) stated that prayer without *kavanah* is not prayer at all and stressed that if one prayed without *kavanah*, one had to go back and repeat the prayer with focused attention.[27] So while "presence" in Jewish worship is defined as an embodied experience, that experience is not defined by the physical body alone.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, all Jewish denominations dealt with the challenges of gathering in person for prayer.[28] While Orthodox practice does not allow the use of technology on the Sabbath or major holidays, some Orthodox synagogues did livestream or gather virtually on Zoom for daily services. However, Orthodox rabbinic authorities ruled that worshippers could not "make a *minyan*," that is, assemble a quorum for prayer, on virtual platforms, stressing that a *minyan* required that worshippers be in physical proximity with one another.

Reform Judaism initially rejected the virtual *minyan*, privileging physical presence in prayer as the ideal. Reform rabbinic authorities wrote at length about the difference between virtual and physical presence.[29] However, during the pandemic the Reform Movement's rabbinic body, the Central Conference of American Rabbis

(CCAR), ruled that the community was in a crisis situation and was allowed to constitute a *minyan* through interactive technology, as long as members of the community could see and hear one another. The key here was the interactive component: since worshippers viewing a livestream of the service could not be seen or heard, their participation did not constitute a *minyan*.[30] Conservative Judaism is more bounded by traditional *halachic* (Jewish legal) practice. Still, the Conservative Movement's Committee on Jewish Life and Standards (CJLS) also ruled that the pandemic was a *she'at hadehak* (Hebrew, crisis situation). As such, they presented a range of rulings on whether virtual presence could constitute a *minyan*, with the decision ultimately to be made by local rabbis. While various stricter interpretations were offered, one opinion allowed worshippers to recite the mourner's Kaddish in a *minyan* constituted virtually.[31] These Jewish legal innovations at a time of crisis provided a fuller online prayer experience for congregants in liberal congregations during the pandemic. They also provided comfort for congregants in mourning, who were then able to fulfill the religious obligation of reciting the Kaddish mourning prayer in community. Still, the lack of embodied presence in worship meant that it was not possible for worshippers to experience other core aspects of communal gathering: the comforting touch of friends and family, an impromptu conversation with clergy, the joy of children's voices as they run in and out of the service. In her study of the interface between congregational music and digital music, Anna E. Nekola observes that "the shift in musical technology is not merely a media issue; it is also a religious

issue: if music is meant to be a medium through which God can be encountered, changes to interfaces and listening practices are co-constitutive with changes to spiritual and religious experience."[32] Nekola concludes that digital platforms increasingly "reinforce the individual over the collective."[33] As such, worshippers have fewer options to experience unity with their larger worship community, and that in turn can limit how they experience the divine.

There are other ways in which virtual worship changes the nature of the prayer experience. In her article discussing an ontology of virtual worship, Serafim Seppälä observes that while the content of a virtual service is perceptible, "it is detached from the material substance that conveys it" and asks "whether spiritual content can genuinely be conveyed without the material substance that embodies it."[34] Jewish worship is rich in material culture: the ornamental ark holding the scrolls of the Torah, the handwritten parchment scrolls, a congregation full of worshippers wrapped in their *tallitot* (Hebrew, prayer shawls). All these elements create an authentic worshipscape grounded in tradition and history. As much as an individual can reconfigure one's kitchen or living room as a worship space, it will lack the material culture that frames and holds the experience of an embodied congregation worshipping in a synagogue.

### "To my surprise, I find enormous spirituality on Zoom"

While there was a general consensus that the loss of the ability to sing together had a profound impact on the worship experience, many leaders in the Jewish Emergent Network spoke about

surprisingly positive aspects of online services. David Ingber described the impact of being able to look deeply into others' faces on Zoom—something that many congregants experienced as spiritual in and of itself. He continued, "I might have met you a thousand times, but I've never really focused on your face before." Just like when congregants see the cantor or the rabbi looking at them as if they are the only person in the room, Zoom services created a meaningful connection in worship at a time of isolation and loss of social contact.

Worshippers experienced other positive aspects of praying on Zoom. In an effort to make online services more interactive, many leaders would use a portion of the service for small-group discussion. The leader would give a prompt for discussion and people joined breakout discussion "rooms" of four to six persons to address meaningful—and often personal—topics. Ironically, worshippers spoke about having more opportunities to meet other congregants and interact in such discussions than they experienced when physically attending services. That direct personal connection online made certain worshippers feel more deeply engaged with community during the pandemic than they did when attending in-person worship.

So, too, worshippers were surprised by the way that participating in a Zoom service expanded their experience of sacred space. It was common for leaders to encourage congregants to set up a designated space for their computers when they joined online worship. Some congregants put a family heirloom tablecloth on the kitchen table. Others lit candles around the computer or cleaned up the living room before they used that space to join their synagogue in online worship. In this way, home space was transformed to sacred space. Lawrence Hoffman said, "To my surprise, I find enormous spirituality on Zoom. The cantor is singing this sacred melody and I feel quieted, my mind quiets. My room becomes more like a sanctuary, something quite beautiful."

Leaders reported that for many people, services on Zoom worked well: Rabbi Lizzi Heydemann, founding rabbi of Mishkan Chicago, said "It's really amazing. People will sit in their house and at the end of it, they haven't moved from their place, but they say, 'That was an amazing service. That was an especially good one.'"[35] She continued, "So I wonder, what does that mean for them? I think they feel the energy, and they feel differently inside themselves because of what they heard." Heydemann reflected, "Since you can't sing together on Zoom, you're left with listening, and I underestimated the power of listening in a moment when our lives are just off the chart, out of control. Listening has become more and more important." She concluded that listening, too, was a deep form of participation and that the music functioned like "alchemy" in quieting people's anxiety and fear, transforming the experience of online worship into one that could hold longing and hope. In his examination of ethnomusicological theories of participation, Matthew Rahaim observes that while many proponents of participation would characterize "merely listening to music" as the opposite of "joining in," in fact there are many ways to participate in a musical event, including "participatory listening."[36] So, too, in Christopher Small's discussions of "musicking," which he defines as "to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance," he includes listening

as an active component of musical involvement.[37] Many of the leaders I interviewed observed that "participatory listening" became amplified during the pandemic.

Remote prayer also made it easier for people in liberal congregations to come to daily services. Lizzi Heydemann said, "We never had a daily morning service before, and suddenly 40 or 50 people were coming every day on Zoom." Before the pandemic, these congregants would never get up early in the morning and fight commuting traffic to drive to synagogue. As positive as this was, she also believed that this was potentially problematic for post-pandemic worship. She continued, "Now, many people prefer to do services in their pajamas at home with a cup of coffee--or glass of wine, if it's an evening service. But when we come back to in-person davening, will it be to be worth the *schlep* [Yiddish, effort, energy to move] of leaving your house? Or will they say, 'But I'm so comfortable praying from home!'" In fact, as rates of congregational affiliation have dropped in the United States, innovative synagogues have explored a broad range of modalities to engage members. In many ways, the pandemic forced the question as it necessitated exploring virtual models of congregational worship.

Virtual worship also opened the possibility for congregants to experience the chanting of the Torah in a more immediate way. During the pandemic, certain liberal congregations installed a webcam that could be focused on the parchment scroll of the Torah as the text was chanted in the synagogue. David Ingber commented, "Who would have ever thought that you would have a live Torah cam, and your average person could see the beauty of [the Hebrew calligraphy] while you're chanting?" Torahs are written with a unique Hebrew font, with ornamental "crowns" on top of certain letters. In traditional practice, only the reader and the few people surrounding the reader can actually see the text of the scroll, but with the webcam, the entire Zoom congregation is brought into the Torah and can follow the words as they are chanted.

**The Local Becomes National**
During the pandemic, as synagogues began to livestream prayer services, it became common for some worshippers to go "service hopping," jumping between the livestreams of different congregations. Worshippers realized that they had many options from which to choose.

In certain congregations, including those considered in this article, the service leader was accompanied by professional, well-rehearsed singers with instrumental backing, often using guitars, mandolin, hand drums, keyboards, and bass. The livestreamed services of many congregations in the Jewish Emergent Network drew a significant national audience. Worshippers attended these services not only because of the quality of the congregations' music and sophisticated video production but also to hear the sermons and reflections of charismatic rabbis throughout the service. People in Boston started attending a synagogue in Los Angeles or New York. Worshippers in remote locations joined synagogues in large urban areas with inspirational leadership. In this way, the pandemic also underscored the difference between the "haves" and "have-nots" in the North American Jewish world. Wealthy congregations had the resources to hire professional production

teams. Such productions included much better sound and multicamera video of their services, especially during the High Holidays. Congregations with fewer resources had to use Zoom or livestream on Facebook in a much simpler presentation of virtual worship. While congregants spoke positively about sophisticated production, many others felt that the impact of virtually being with their own community, and seeing familiar faces on a Zoom screen, had a deeper impact on their worship experience than virtually attending a slicker production of a synagogue where they did not recognize or have relationships with the participants.

Still, many of the synagogues examined in this study with charismatic leaders and compelling music built national followings, and this had an impact on how those communities began to think about their place in North American Jewry. Lizzi Heydemann reflected, "We're never not going to livestream services again. I think we now have over forty out-of-state Mishkan members. I had a conversation earlier today with someone in New York. It's not like there's any shortage of synagogues in New York, but he found us and really digs what we do." She continued, "As a community, we now feel a responsibility and an obligation to a national audience." Zoom services were often restricted to a synagogue's members, but livestream options were generally open to all. Noa Kushner said, "Now we have people from different parts of the country and even the world. The distinction between local and not local is no longer so significant to me." The Jewish community has long privileged the importance of local affiliation, local leadership, and *minhag hamakom* (Hebrew,

local custom). This development points to a significant change in virtual worshippers' relationship with a congregation. In addition, leaders recognize that even after the pandemic, virtual services can continue to provide important access to worship for a range of worshippers who cannot attend in person—the nursing parent, the patient in the hospital, the traveler far from community. But the nature of congregational affiliation will undergo significant changes as technology becomes integrated into congregants' Jewish lives and practice. Never has it been so easy to jump from service to service while sitting at one's kitchen table. However, the ease of virtual access can come at a price. One congregant asked, "When does going to virtual services stop feeling like a spiritual experience and just begin to feel like you're watching television?" She continued, "I was sitting with my five-year-old son watching services and he looked up at me in frustration and said, 'Mommy, change the channel. I don't like this program!'" When the portal for entering worship becomes the screen of your computer, the experience of congregational prayer becomes colored by all of the secular, workaday ways one interfaces with screens throughout the day.

Noa Kushner reflected on the challenging work of building online community:

> We are now aware that actual community can be built virtually. We're not just going to drop all these people who have invested their spiritual lives with us. We're going to really figure out how to serve them. We have to make an effort and invite people to share things. We have to make sure that it's not all frontal.

We ask you to share in the chat. We make breakout rooms so that you're talking to somebody directly, ideally in *hevrutah* [Aramaic, learning with a study partner], because then you can't check out or turn off your camera.

Leaders also stressed that even if people cannot sing together, the physical act of singing while attending an online service is important in order to experience Jewish prayer. Rabbi Mónica Gomery, one of the cofounders of the initiative "Let My People Sing," and rabbi and music director at Kol Tzedek Synagogue in Philadelphia, said, "Especially now with Zoom, we have to say to people, 'It's really hard that we can't hear one another sing at the same time. But trust us when we tell you, you *have to* sing. You *have to* take it into your body.'"[38] She stressed that if prayer was to be powerful and transformative, then breath, resonance, and song had to combine even if a worshipper was sitting by themselves participating in a virtual service.

### Negotiating Technology and Worship in One Traditionally Oriented Community

The worship community that I attend as a participant is a traditional egalitarian *havurah*. The service is all in Hebrew. Men and women participate equally. It is not Orthodox, but members lean traditional and tend not to use technology on the Sabbath. It was only after an excruciating year of not gathering in person that we decided to make an exception and offer a Shabbat service on Zoom. Even though members decried the lack of the ability to sing together, the virtual service created a regular opportunity to gather on Shabbat. As one member expressed, "Just seeing people's faces kept me going through the week." The virtual service worked well enough during the height of the pandemic, but problems arose after the community cautiously returned to in-person prayer.

The majority of members longed to return to in-person services with their worship community. But a small group of people, either for health reasons or because they lived farther away, wanted the in-person service to integrate technology to facilitate virtual participation, so that remote participants could see and be seen by people in the service. This would entail placing video screens in the worship space so these people could virtually take an active role in the service, such as leading a portion of the prayers, giving a sermon, or chanting from the Torah remotely. In the past, discussions about the use of technology during Shabbat services, such as using a microphone or allowing people to take photographs, would center on issues of Jewish law. Some technological issues—such as the use of a microphone—had been resolved by turning on the technology before the Sabbath. But the members who wanted an active integration of technology into the in-person service asked that we broaden our criteria and not only consider Jewish law but also frame our discussion stressing the values of accessibility and inclusion for those who were unable to join the service in person.

I was asked by the leadership if I would chair a "Remote Access Working Group" and facilitate a process so that the community could come to a consensus about whether to continue to allow remote participation and to what extent that service would provide interactive contact between remote participants and worshippers in the physical service. In that role, I facilitated community conversations, interviewed congregants, and designed a community

questionnaire to determine how, and if, the congregation would continue virtual worship options after it felt safe to return to in-person prayer.

While my role in chairing this working group was in a way performing autoethnography, researching a synagogue in which I was a member, I was prepared for this project by my previous research in North American Jewish communities, where I regularly conduct research with groups of Jews who are similar to me. In fact, I was asked to chair this working group because of my experience conducting ethnographic research on the topic of Jewish music and prayer. I was conscious that I needed to pay attention to my biases and the challenges confronting the knowledgeable participant-observer. One of the most profound challenges is how to elicit thick interview detail when the people you are talking to assume that you know more about the material than they do.

We have long recognized that the stance of the researcher impacts the process, nature, and outcome of one's research. A body of material in ethnomusicology and anthropology has addressed the complexities of fieldwork, both when a researcher enters the "field" as an outsider and when a researcher is a bona fide culture bearer.[39] As ethnomusicologists Gregory Barz and Timothy J. Cooley explore in *Shadows in the Field*, there is no longer an illusion in fieldwork that there exists an Archimedean point of removed, objective reflection—being "in the field" and then "out of the field."[40] I believe that ethnographers have multiple identities, and we ideally use them thoughtfully and strategically in the course of our research. At its core, fieldwork is relational and experiential. As ethnomusicologist Michelle Kisliuk notes, "we get to know other people by making *ourselves* known to *them*, and through them to know ourselves again, in a continuous cycle."[41] While I had my own relationships with people in this congregation, and my own perspectives about the experience of online worship, I felt comfortable negotiating my charge: to interview congregants and facilitate group discussion.

Surveys, interviews, and focus groups showed that congregants deeply valued the importance of accessibility and inclusion. At the same time, the majority of members felt that the introduction of too much technology in the service—such as a screen that showed the Zoom participants—changed the aesthetic and spiritual dynamics of communal prayer. As one member said, "I am constantly on a screen for work during the week. Come Shabbat, I really want a break." Having a screen in services felt like a profound intrusion, not to mention the unintended interruptions from some of our older members who found it challenging to find the mute button on Zoom. As such, many congregants felt that the integration of technology into worship violated the spirit of the Jewish Sabbath, a time meant to be different from the work week, when these traditionally oriented Jews refrained from using their computers, phones, and email.

After considerable discussion, our working group decided to propose a solution where there would be a fixed camera that could be turned on before the Sabbath and the projection of the service would be one window in a Zoom screen. In that way, people could see the live service and interact on Zoom for discussion or visiting virtually after the service. Still,

remote participants would not be able to interact with people in the in-person service or play an active role in the in-person service over technology.

The majority of people in the community felt that was a good compromise, but the small group of members who wanted a more active remote option were unsatisfied, feeling that that solution did not integrate them as fully into the service as they wished. Certain musical components of participation were especially important for the small group who wanted to actively participate virtually. They wanted to be heard by the congregation as they responded to certain prayers and while they recited the mourner's Kaddish remotely. Some also wanted to be able to chant the blessings before and after the Torah reading or chant a *haftarah*, the weekly reading of the prophets. While many members cared about the values of access and inclusivity, the integration of interactive technology in the service felt too intrusive. Members in the majority feared that the technical difficulties inherent in Zoom participation, such as knowing when—and how to—mute, and the cacophony of voices due to the sound latency if the Zoom participants were unmuted to say a prayer together, would prove too intrusive to the in-person service. People did counter this point, saying that davening in *nusach*, praying in traditional Jewish prayer chant, where worshippers chant specific prayers in an undertone at their own speed, creates a cultural cacophony of its own. Still, that embodied sound of communal davening was long experienced as integral to Jewish worship, and its coded meaning was connected with authenticity, history and the performance of Jewish identity. The sounds of congregants negotiating Zoom

worship had no such historical or spiritual resonance.

In the end, we simply did not solve the problem. The Zoom service that was initiated during the pandemic continued, but it has been increasingly difficult to maintain a critical mass of attendees to sustain the service. Recently, the small group who want to continue a remote access option reconsidered and requested that the congregation install the technology to allow a streaming option where participants could see and hear the in-person service and have the capacity to interact among themselves on Zoom during and after the service. They saw this as an imperfect solution, but said they realize that the move toward hybrid worship will develop over time.

**Looking Forward**

Many leaders in the Jewish Emergent Network expressed hope that the crisis of the pandemic would move worshippers to a new appreciation of the importance of gathering together in communal prayer. Composer and musician Joey Weisenberg said, "I'm hoping that this major disruption, this forced separation of the pandemic, could bring us to look deeper inside ourselves, and to ask: 'What are we doing? Who are we?'"[42] Reflecting on the isolation of the pandemic, he continued, "We've faced deep internal loneliness. I hope we're able to come back richer for the experience and recognize that community is precious. When things hit rock bottom, that's when you invest. I hope that this can be a time for Jews to re-invest in our spiritual lives."

However, how and where congregations invest is increasingly complicated. The use of technology is pervasive in the lives of these worshippers. So much of congregants' social and work lives are now online.

There are many reasons why leaders and congregations value online prayer services, not least the simple convenience of joining worship virtually. And yet, core factors that make the experience of worship meaningful—engaged participatory singing, an embodied connection to fellow congregants, the vibrant material culture of the synagogue—are missing from online worship. Rabbis, cantors, music leaders, and congregants actively struggle to determine the impact of this cultural shift. As they consider the experience of online worship, they will need to assess whether the "absence of presence and the presence of absence" is simply too high a price to pay for virtual prayer, or whether, over time, it will be possible to develop new methodologies of engaged musical participation, spiritual experience, and interpersonal connection through worship online.

## NOTES

1 See *The Jewish Emergent Network* (http://www.jewishemergentnetwork.org). See also Steven M. Cohen, J. Shawn Landres, Elie Kaunfer, and Michelle Shain, "Emergent Jewish Communities and Their Participants: Preliminary Findings from the 2007 National Spiritual Communities Study," sponsored by the S3K Synagogue Studies Institute and Mechon Hadar, November 2007, https://www.synagoguestudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/10/NatSpirComStudyReport_S3K_Hadar.pdf.

2 Helen Parish, "The Absence of Presence and the Presence of Absence: Social Distancing, Sacraments, and the Virtual Religious Community during the Covid-19 Pandemic," *Religions* 11/6 (2000): 276.

3 For more on the Havurah Movement, see Riv-Ellen Prell, *Prayer and Community: The Havurah in American Judaism* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989) and Shirah Weinberg Hecht, "When Tradition Leads: Prayer and Participation in the Contemporary Jewish Equalitarian Minyan" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1993). The term "traditional" in the context of a *havurah* indicates that group uses the full Hebrew liturgy. "Egalitarian" signifies that both women and men can lead the prayer service and chant the Torah.

4 Mark Slobin, *Chosen Voices: The Story of the American Cantorate* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 195–212. See also Jeffrey A. Summit, *The Lord's Song in a Strange Land: Music and Identity in Contemporary Jewish Worship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 33–104.

5 Slobin, *Chosen Voices*, 213–55.

6 Ibid., 256–80. See also Summit, *The Lord's Song*, 105–27.

7 Jeffrey A. Summit, *Singing God's Words: The Performance of Biblical Chant in Contemporary Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

8 Philip V. Bohlman, "Introduction: Music in American Religious Experience," in *Music in American Religious Experience*, ed. Philip V. Bohlman, Edith L. Blumhofer, and Maria M. Chow (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 9.

9 Don E. Saliers, "Aesthetics and Theology in Congregational Song: A Hymnal Intervenes," in *Music in American Religious Experience*, ed. Philip V. Bohlman, Edith L. Blumhofer, and Maria M. Chow (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 335.

10 Monique M. Ingalls, *Singing the Congregation: How Contemporary Worship Music Forms Evangelical Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 5.

11 Summit, *Singing God's Words*; Summit, *The Lord's Song in a Strange Land*.

12 Harris M. Berger, *Stance: Ideas About Emotion, Style, and Meaning for the Study of Expressive Culture* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2010), xiv.

13 Robert Bellah, "The New Religious Consciousness and the Crisis of Modernity," in *The Robert Bellah Reader*, ed. Robert N. Bellah, and Steven M. Tipton (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006 [1976]), 6.

14 For more on contemporary American Jewish Music, see Mark Kligman, "Contemporary Jewish Music in America," *American Jewish Year Book* 101/88 (2001): 88–141.

15 Ebn Leder, in discussion with the author, November 3, 2020. All quotes without citations are from ethnographic interviews conducted on the virtual platform Zoom in the fall of 2020. The first time a person is quoted, their title and position are listed. Subsequent quotes only reference the person's name.

16 L. Hamner, P. Dubbel, I. Capron, et al., "High SARS-CoV-2 Attack Rate Following Exposure at a Choir Practice—Skagit County, Washington," *Morbitity and Mortality Weekly Report* 69 (2020): 606–10.)

17 Noa Kushner, in discussion with the author, December 7, 2020. The Kitchen and other communities mentioned in this article—Let My People Sing, IKAR, and Mishkan Chicago—provide in-depth descriptions of their aims on their websites.

18 David Ingber, in discussion with the author, November 13, 2020.

19 Sharon Brous, in discussion with the author, December 8, 2020.

20 Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. J. D. Swan (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1912).

21 Lawrence Hoffman, in discussion with the author, November 18, 2020. Hoffman cofounded Synagogue 2000, an interdenominational initiative to transform synagogues into spiritual and moral centers for the twenty-first century.

22 John Wood, ed., *The Virtual Embodied: Practice, Presence, Technology* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1998), 4.

23 Ibid., 1.

24 Shulḥan Arukh, Oraḥ Hayyim, 55:13.

25 Some authorities say it is permissible to count a minor holding a Torah or holding a Humash, a printed text of the Pentateuch, as the tenth "man." Although this opinion is disputed, the *Shulḥan Arukh* says that some hold the opinion that nine men and a minor older than six years old who understands the nature of prayer can constitute a *minyan* (*Oraḥ Hayyim,* 55:4). See also Rabbi Yitzhak Zilberstein in Hashukei Hemed on Berakhot 21b, 135, where he permits constituting a *minyan* for mourner's Kaddish where people are scattered in a field but can see each other. See also Babylonian Talmud, *Brachot* 47b–48a.

26 Shulḥan Arukh, Oraḥ Hayyim, 55:14.

27 Mishneh Torah, Tefillah 4:15,16. Even though Maimonides' view was disputed by later commentators, Joseph Caro's sixteenth-century legal code, the Shulḥan Arukh, stated that it was better to do a little supplication with *kavanah* than

a greater amount without it (Shulḥan Arukh, Oraḥ Ḥayyim, 1:4); See also see Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 13a.

28 See Ruth Langer, "Jewish Liturgy During the Early Stages of the Covid-19 Pandemic: Vignettes from Boston Suburbs," *Contemporary Jewry* 41/1 (2021): 23–37.

29 Their rationale presents a thoughtful approach to these issues and I quote it here at length: "There is a difference in essence, and not merely in degree, between a community that assembles in physical proximity and one that is constituted by digital transmission and pixels on a screen. The former enjoys a human presence and sense of immediacy that is lacking from the latter. A real community, unlike a 'virtual' one, is a community that facilitates close communication with our fellow human being. It is a venue in which we can make palpable and physical contact with the other, shake their hand, share an encouraging touch or embrace. A real community is an act of coming together that symbolizes in the most powerful way our determination to bridge the gaps of space that separate us into our individual lives and worlds. By no means do we deny the value of electronic communication to the work of our synagogues. Thanks to digital technology we enjoy marvelous opportunities to expand the reach of our religious life, to study Torah, and to bring our people closer to one another, opportunities of which even our most recent ancestors could only dream. We are thankful for the blessings of the Internet, even as we are mindful of the challenges it poses to us. But so long as we are capable of distinguishing between reality and virtual reality, so long as we conceive of the ideal prayer community as one that is physically constituted, whose members occupy a shared physical space, we cannot expand the definition of minyan to include those whose presence with us is virtual rather than real." CCAR Responsa Committee 5772.1, "A Minyan via the Internet?", https://www.ccarnet.org/ccar-responsa/minyan-via-internet/.

30 For a fuller treatment of the Reform Movement's ruling on aspects of the service permissible with a virtual *minyan,* see CCAR Responsa Committee 5780.2, "Virtual Minyan in Time of Covid-19 Emergency," https://www.ccarnet.org/ccar-responsa/5780-2/.

31 "Committee on Jewish Life and Standards Guidance for Remote Minyanim in a Time of Covid-19," posted on March 17, 2020; https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/story/cjls-guidance-remote-

minyanim-time-Covid-19; and "Constituting a Minyan by Means of Virtual Technology," posted on July 28, 2021, https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/story/constituting-minyan-means-virtual-technology.

32 Anna E. Nekola, "Mediating Religious Experience? Congregational Music and the Digital Music Interface," in *Studying Congregational Music: Key Issues, Methods and Theoretical Perspectives*, ed. Andrew Mall, Jeffers Engelhardt, and Monique M. Ingalls (New York: Routledge, 2021), 39.

33 Ibid., 56.

34 Serafim Seppälä, "A Sacred Cyberspace? Towards the Ontology of Virtual Worship," *Review of Ecumenical Studies* 15/1 (2023): 105–22, 110.

35 Lizzi Heydemann, in discussion with the author, November 19, 2020.

36 Matthew Rahaim, "Theories of Participation," in *Theory for Ethnomusicology: Histories, Conversations, Insights*, ed. Harris M. Berger and Ruth M. Stone (New York: Routledge, 2019), 226–27.

37 Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1998), 9.

38 Mónica Gomery, in discussion with the author, December 15, 2020.

39 Jewish ethnomusicologists conducting research in Jewish settings have examined issues of stance and reflexivity in their own research. See Kay Kaufman Shelemay, *A Song of Longing: An Ethiopian Journey* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1994) and *Music, Ritual, and Falasha History* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1989) on her work with the Beta Yisroel. and the Syrian Jewish community in Brooklyn; Ellen Koskoff, *Music in Lubavitcher Life* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2000) on her research with the Lubavitch Hasidim; Judah M. Cohen, *The Making of a Reform Jewish Cantor: Musical Authority, Cultural Investment* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009) on his research with the cantorial program at HUC-JIR's School of Sacred Music; and Slobin, *Chosen Voices,* on his work with the American Cantorate.

40 Gregory F. Barz and Timothy J. Cooley, eds., *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology,* 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 14.

41 Michelle Kisliuk, "(Un)doing Fieldwork: Sharing Songs, Sharing Lives," in ibid., 2008), 187.

42 Joey Weisenberg, in discussion with the author, November 17, 2020.