

## Between creativity and caution in the age of Corona: is there room for Zoom on Shabbat?

By BZ Gilinsky

The current lockdown has, without doubt, disrupted practically every element of our lives. Naturally, the Masorti movement has also been affected, particularly by the suspension of in-person synagogue services. Alongside this, there has been a range of reactions on how to navigate and attempt to fill this gap in our communal lives.

Central to this has been the advent of services run over Zoom or similar video-conferencing software, including on Shabbat and Yom Tov. For a number of reasons, the rabbinic leadership of the Masorti movement have ruled that it is not permissible to hold such services on Shabbat, ranging from more technical concerns over *ketiva* – writing – an activity fundamentally forbidden on Shabbat, to an idea that Shabbat should look different to the other six days of the week.

Of course, we don't live in a theocracy, and some have opted for a different route. Craving the communal connection provided by a Shabbat service, some have turned to resources offered by other denominations, or set up their own informal services. It's a deeply understandable reaction. The closeness of community is an incredible antidote to grief at the loss of loved ones, fear at falling ill ourselves, not to mention the sheer overwhelming nature of the current crisis. Zoom services on Shabbat offer a semblance of that comfort that we would normally find in physical communal gatherings.

Nevertheless, I think we should be wary about the prospect of translating Shabbat services to videoconferencing software. Not only are there the numerous halachic concerns, which I do find compelling, but I suggest we should be more generally cautious about the prospect of normalising Zoom services on Shabbat.

Firstly, there is a value in accepting what we cannot control, and what we have lost as a result of the current reality. For many of us, it was a painful gap in our Jewish lives to be unable to spend

Pesach with the relatives we would normally be with. The loss of regular synagogue services and minyanim creates a similar, if not greater, vacuum. I want to suggest that this loss is one we might accept, recognise and openly affirm as a detriment, rather than attempt to paper over. Leaving a gap there, in that time of the week when we would normally be with our communities, recognises that incompleteness, and our inability to totally recreate what has been lost.

Of course, that doesn't require us to submit ourselves passively to the circumstances, and the emptiness should spur us into action. While it is already a cliché to say so, these are unprecedented times, and unprecedented times do call for unprecedented actions. There are many things we can do, as thoughtful, halachic Jews, who care about differentiating Shabbat from the rest of the week, to try and compensate for the lack of synagogue services. One option I think worth exploring could be a much enhanced virtual service on a weekday morning or evening, using these times to all come together as a community. This would not only allow those in our community who are mourning to say kaddish, but also bring us together to pray for those who are ill, to sing, to talk, and unite as a community. Indeed, as any Zoom service now lacks communal Torah reading, there's very little which distinguishes a Shabbat morning service from a weekday prayer service. Channelling our desire for communal closeness onto a weekday service would recognise that we have a gap in our lives at the moment, but also provide the collective support that we need. Of course, this need not be at the detriment of recommitting ourselves to important elements of our communal obligations, such as reaching out to people in our communities who may be enduring lockdown alone, and calling them before Shabbat each week. There are many different options, which will work for different people, but there are far more creative solutions available to us which do not involve totally changing how we, as Masorti Jews, mark Shabbat.

Part of my wariness around Zoom services, therefore, is rooted in a sense that it is a sweeping, and perhaps permanent, change in how we celebrate Shabbat as a community, but which is not the only solution to the problem we face. I worry that the introduction of things such as livestreaming to our in-person services, when they resume, will have a damaging impact on our community. If attendance at a shul service can be achieved by logging into a Zoom meeting room, even when there is an in-person service, we run the risk of disincentivising physically turning up, and deprioritising face-to-face interactions with those in our community. In that sense, we risk undermining the very thing we want to bolster – our synagogue community.

Moreover, some have compared this to issues such as egalitarianism or same-sex marriage, wherein the rabbinic leadership were unconvinced, but widespread support from the membership forced halachic change. This, I think, is not quite an accurate comparison. Notwithstanding that those two issues do have far more rabbinic, textual, and halachic support; those were also cases of fundamental values. Egalitarianism is an ideal state – those of us who are egalitarian believe that Judaism is at its best when women are considered fully obligated in Jewish ritual life. Nobody who believes in an egalitarian Judaism, thinks that there is any value to going back to being non-egalitarian. Likewise with same-sex marriage. With virtual Shabbat services, I think we all

agree that the ideal is to have in-person services. At best, this option is reflective of a momentary emergency, a *sha'at hadchak*. Indeed, while some form of social distancing may be here to stay, the most pessimistic estimates place that as lasting perhaps two years at most before an effective vaccine or therapeutic treatment will provide enough resistance to coronavirus. Indeed, some other European countries are already beginning to permit the resumption of in-person religious services, under some conditions. While this may seem lengthy, it's a blink of an eye compared to that of halachic Judaism, a system which has withstood far bleaker crises, and which has given us a toolbox replete with time-tested rituals and traditions to lead fulfilling lives.

Seeking rabbinic approval for something which has almost no halachic support, which even its proponents do not see as a permanent solution or precedent, undermines the whole basis of being a traditional community. Part of the power of a traditional community is being challenged, and pushed to be better. That doesn't mean we should live with permanent angst, nor that religion should transgress our fundamental sense of what is moral. But we should be pushed to be better people, sometimes against what might feel like our own interests. Rabbinic leadership is sometimes about giving the people what they want, but it is just as often about providing that challenge. We are challenged by our collective tradition to act in a more thoughtful, considered way. When we set aside that challenge because people are doing something else, I fear we lose something powerful about a committed and halachic Jewish life; that push to be better and more thoughtful Jews.

My caution around Zoom shabbat services is therefore part of a sense that it has the potential to do more damage in the long term to the system which we inhabit than it helps in the short term with the loss of Shabbat services. All this is to say that while some radical actions now may be appealing, and might seem necessary, it's potentially worth thinking more deeply about why, and what we are doing.

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