

Report COZ 22: November 24, 2020. High Holiday 2020 Reflections – and implications for the future of synagogues and cantors

8 distinguished cantors from across the world reflect

		<p>COZ 22: Tuesday 24 November Curated by Russell Grossman for ECA with international cross-denominational panel including cantors</p> <p>Benny Rogosnitsky New York, Deborah Katchko-Gray Connecticut, Eric Moses Toronto, Alby Chait Leeds, Nathan Goldman, Stuttgart Jeremiah Lockwood San Francisco, Marsha Dubrow, Florida, Lorry Black Beverly Hills, plus Alex Klein Manchester</p> <p>The High Holydays 2020: Reflections: how did they sound and work for the cantor and the community in Lockdown, and what are the implications for cantors in the future.</p>		
				
	<p>Deborah Katchko-Gray, Benny Rogosnitsky, Alex Klein, Jeremiah Lockwood Lorry Black</p>			<p>Eric Moses, Alby Chait, Russell Grossman, Nathan Goldman Marsha Dubrow</p>

This session is available the IFJMS YouTube channel,

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCXWueOMq-66z0vM2F5BxOug>

Read the report of what they feared or hoped for in the **COZ 6: July 28** session before the High Holydays here <https://hcommons.org/app/uploads/sites/1001827/2020/09/Report-COZ-6-28-July-2020-The-High-Holydays-2020.pdf>

Report on COZ 22: Reflections on the High Holydays 2020 – by Robert Brody

In the extraordinary circumstances of High Holydays 2020 and looking at the bigger picture:

1. Did congregations have a meaningful experience? were congregants reached and how do we know how they felt – did they stray to other offerings?
2. Did cantors and choirs have a meaningful experience?
3. Did rabbis and gaboyim have a meaningful or satisfactory experience?
4. Were there clear winners and losers?
5. What were the highlights – and low points
6. What are the benefits of technology – ie livestreaming and pre-recording?
7. What are the downsides of technology?
8. Did people adapt halacha to deal with the problems?
9. What are the implications for understanding diverse expressions of Judaism
10. How will this impact in general on the level of religion in communities?
11. What have synagogues learned about communication?
12. What are the implications for ongoing synagogue attendance?
13. Will some of the technology remain part of synagogue life?

14. What are the implications for youth
15. What are the implications for the employment of full time or High Holydays cantors?

Meeting held on 24th November 2020 on behalf of European Cantors' Association

Geraldine Auerbach introduced **Russell Grossman** as Moderator in the session designed to follow up the previous meeting (COZ 6, July 28 2020) that discussed plans to cope with services and community relations over the last Yamim Noraim as affected by covid-19 restrictions.

Benny Rogosnitzky, Park East New York together with Yitzhok Meir Helfgott.

This was both 'best and worst year'. Manhattan was deeply affected by the Pandemic. Fear kept people away. Normal attendance of 900-1000 was reduced to 100 for Kol Nidre.

Masks made it hard to recognise who was who in the congregation. The choir was not used, services were abridged. Latecomers missed the services that lasted 2 hours.

Attendees were very full of praise. Atmosphere and appreciation of members' efforts made atmosphere special and under circumstances 'very emotional'. A particular elderly lady who was not confident to enter shul stayed outside and had comfort in watching arrivals.

? Implications for future use of cantors?

At end of Nov he found role of cantors enhanced, and long services may not come back (3.5 hours on shabbat). Less talking – due to masks and social distancing, congregation was engaged more in prayers. Benny is optimistic of cantor's continued role.

? Did cantor wear mask?

Cantors were tested pre-service. Mask was worn only when someone was near – e.g. petichah.

(Russell commented that he was surrounded by a 'plastic box' – and concerned that it might have entrapped any virus from baal shachrit)

Eric Moses, Beth Shalom. Toronto

Toronto 'Conservative' tends to be on the more orthodox side. It will be hard to go back to very traditional conservative model. Some congregations waited 6 months before Zooming.

Beth Shalom invested heavily in technology. Eric had sound engineer and camera full face. Peak number 60 of normal up to 3,000. A safely distanced quartet was used and the congregation appreciated the efforts made.

Taking path of least resistance makes it too easy. Eric feels that repeated years of services such as Kol Nidrei on zoom will not be sustainably religious.

The loss was that a Chazan requires feedback in communal experience. Kavana needs to be shared.

People commented that they enjoyed internet 'shul hopping'. Some shuls just relayed 'as is' where some spent big budget on technology.

Eric was not supportive of giving only high-lights – that is not a 'davening'. 'All the sugar and no coffee'

The unwanted precedent was that people that could have come to shul will watch on line and 'community' is lessened. Sustained involvement and family togetherness will be lacking and disadvantageous.

The shul did shofar blowing in parks in neighbourhood. Very effective and attracted many.

This was very positive, but should not replace coming to shul and it mustn't become too easy to not go to shul.

Personal feeling was that it is important to have shul services. And new paradigm needs to be curbed.

Marsha Dubrow – B'nai Jacob, Wellington, Florida

This meeting is important for its assembly of cantors and other Jewish music professionals.

Her experience is as a Cantor and also a Rabbi serving a Conservative synagogue in New Jersey for twelve years. Now Emerita, living in Florida, Marsha accepted a High Holy Day pulpit at small congregation that has under 250 members.

Community did not know beforehand if they would use sanctuary or larger community center. Made it difficult to both commit to hiring Hazzan and planning/preparing for services until August. Also the Rabbi had no experience in conducting High Holiday services.

They decided on a hybrid service, in the synagogue for reduced number of older adults and some families with kids over 12 yr old, with distancing and masks, and all others on Zoom. Gabayim and torah readers also were in sanctuary and worked from their places. Marsha required to wear mask all time. This impeded concentration on davening. Also plastic screens were used for her and rabbi. Several zoom set-ups, one in rear and one each on cantor and rabbi, but totally static. Minimal technical assistance. All went smoothly.

Yizkor moved back to before Avodah to keep people on Zoom engaged. Yom Kippur service was 4 hrs and felt too long. The congregation is not educated regarding nusach, but insisted on full Conservative service with extended nusach. Services formats according to RA proposal.

?Future effect? May not have much of an impact because this was unique situation. The situation may present a future financial dilemma – improved technology or chazan for small communities?

[Marsha also wrote:

Thank you so very much for including me as a panelist in today's review of our very diverse High Holy Day experiences. I enjoyed hearing about the big shuls and what they were able to accomplish with big budgets, as well as the shuls that used prerecorded cantorial and choir material. My own view is that smaller may be better for cantors. It's quite difficult to be engaged with prerecorded music and one doesn't get to experience the real time spontaneity of the moment, either live in shul or on Zoom. The real question ultimately is how do we sustain our synagogue communities into the future if the Zoom mechanism becomes de rigeur for services.

Shuls have been going out of business over recent years in greater and greater numbers. Also there are many mergers. I was offered a rabbi/cantor position near to me in FL, but it was at a congregation that had just merged from two, one, Reform, one Conservative. I declined. Imagine what I'd have had to deal with this year with that kind of configuration including separate prayerbooks that they had no intention of replacing! I still think that congregations need to survey their members. Ultimately that's more important than what the cantor thinks from a marketing perspective. After all, they are 'customers,' and **customer retention is the biggest problem in today's synagogues.**}

Albie Chait, Leeds, UK

? Was it meaningful?

At Leeds RH and YK 'unbelievable': positive, enriching, close to congregation.

Response to adversity increased effort and catalyst. Judaism became important and people reconnected more than ever.

Services were held outdoors., they used pedestrian fences to demarcate areas and a high stage Albie says it felt like Glastonbury (outdoor rock festival). The enthusiasm was special and created different very positive experience, families stayed together. Indoor services were also held with up to 140 max per service. Neilah was unique.

Has had sponsorship to enable technology – members view with each other to ‘sponsor’ the services. They made a fuss of sponsors to involve them “pour encourager les autres”.

Re online services – they were off the scale! Up to 20,000 over RH and YK. He had several original arrangements made for a number of pieces for string quartet accompaniment played before shabbat and the Saturday night before Kol Nidrei – this proved a very special. Weird uplifting experience!

? effect on cantors?

Albie is rabbi as well as cantor. Covid has been great opportunity to engage so many people in music and prayer as never before. Normal pre-covid attendances were 30 – 60 Friday night a good shabbat 250. Much more during covid. Alby thinks role of music and cantors has been greatly enhanced.

Lorry Black – LA San Fernando Valley, Temple Emanuel Beverley Hills.

Lorry is Musical Director at this very large shul. He is neither cantor nor rabbi.

Their unique factor was that the shul was already set up for on line, being not unusual for shul services and use of social media.

High Holidays were daunting but resources were at their disposal. Effort was put in to make services organic and effective, involving 3 days of shooting, professional quartet, a real album made up in advance. Camera siting etc was all professionally designed and thought out in advance.

Families brought in to make it feel communal. Many winners, clean and engaging, text on screen,

? how do members interact with other congregants?

Missing element was social interaction with neighbours in shul.

The congregation reacted incredibly well and positively. Most services were available wide-stream and some kept for only members. Zoom has reinforced and interested members not before interested.

Nathan Goldman – Stuttgart

Yom Kippur service was in a rented theatre 300 people. Nathan was unhappy with using theatre of dubious history. Skipped only pes Des, finished YK around 1.30

Nathan did every service through the day – had 2 hours for Neilah. During Avodah vehacochanim and the inspiration from the tefillah overcame his reservations about site. Davenning supplanted the environment.

On Yom Kippur he had the pleasure of his son’s bris in the shul – 200 attended – more than at services!

? Has it affected future of cantors ?

In the orthodox world, chazonus was in a very poor state. Nathan remains optimistic. People like to come to shul, In Germany, chazan is also baal koreh, so important for shuls. It is important for a chazan to have beautiful nusach, not necessarily to sing big cantorial pieces. Nathan recommended that aspiring chazanim train as a baal koreh as a positive career move.

? why did you have to do all the services?

The baal minchah was so bad Nathan supplanted him! i.e. there was insufficient knowledge of the appropriate nusach within the congregation to reduce Nathan's involvement.

Debbie Katchko-Gray - Ridgefield Connecticut

Her rabbi wanted high powered audio sound. Recorded 52 pieces in a renowned historic studio where Paul Simon, Diana Ross and Beyoncé had recorded. Families were shown on zoom whilst watching. Debbie enjoyed being there and watching whilst not actually singing.

Kol nidrei service used a cellist, Debbie used a recording of her father's Kol Nidrei for the 2nd rendition. For the 3rd she was able to sing Kol Nidre through a video recording. She was grateful not to have had to do it live as she was crying from hearing her father sing and her mother play the organ for the second Kol Nidre. She had dubbed recorded harmony on to father's recording.

Debbie conducted all services on Zoom while her Rabbi was in the sanctuary for the service.

It remains very important to maintain close relationship with congregants. They have a very effective monthly 'Prayerathon' after services on Friday night where they sing six different versions of prayers like Lecha Dodi and Adon Olam and invite the congregation to vote for their favourites.

A survey of congregants has been conducted.

As an example of what was available to her community, Debbie showed a studio recording of 3 versions of Adoshem, Adoshem with piano and clarinet accompaniment.

Deborah says

It was wonderful being on the panel with you yesterday! Thank you for bringing cantors from near and far together to share and learn from each other.

For those who asked about the Katchko Kol Nidre my grandfather composed, my father sang, my mother played the organ and years later I added harmony, here it is! I believe I sent the wrong one yesterday! I also wrote about it for Times of Israel and included the essay.

www.cantordebbie.com

www.ourshirshalom.org

www.womencantors.net

follow me on twitter! @KatchkoGray

<http://stitchnkvitchacantorslife.blogspot.com>

Instagram cantordebbie18

Jeremiah Lockwood - Beth Shalom San Francisco Music director

Is working to boost the position of chazan in Jewish music and services combatting under developed knowledge of shul music, nusach etc. He is trying to 'embrace the shards of traditional music.'

The Rabbi is not happy with recording on shabbat/ yomtov so has pre-recorded services that have been put on the community's YouTube channel.

It is hard to ascertain success with keeping people involved. Jeremiah is 'on the fence' about the compromise and its achievements.

His Rabbi has not embraced Facebook live – does not like dependence on technology – prefers real life and hopes to get back to 'real life' are strong.

Another community in New York is using his liturgical compositions and is keener to use Facebook.

Jeremiah has enjoyed seeing other broadcasts and connections around the world as a scholar of Jewish Music.

Jeremiah also wrote [On a separate note, an article/playlist I wrote and curated for the Krakow Jewish Culture Festival was just published on their website. I'd be thrilled if you took a look.

https://www.jewishfestival.pl/en/category/news/#jeremiah-lockwood-zloty-wiek-kantorzy-i-ich-duchy-2_101948_0_0]

Alex Klein

The role of professional chazanim is especially relevant at these 'zoom times'. Holding multiple services to avoid large numbers at each has led to requests for more chazonim.

He stressed that knowledge of nusach etc is essential for zoom programmes.

Summary

Russell Grossman– has found this period a great opportunity to delve into other traditions and gave thanks for the eight different viewpoints that we have just heard.

Rabbi Michael Dushinsky, Prague.

For the last 12 years he has taken services at the Ashkenazi minyan in Marbella

This year he was in Prague. Most of the country used Zoom.

“Dushy” had to do shachrit and musaph in Altneushul. Also succot all services, very unusual with up to 25 attendance. Some were afraid to come especially the older members for yizkor.

He suggested recorded 3 x kol nidrei and high points of Yom Kippur be made and used after Rosh Hashanah.

Russell commented – regarding frightened congregants not coming - that in several orthodox shuls yizkor has been held on line before yom tov.

Mark Kligman wrapped up and thanked all contributors for their thoughtful contributions to this event

Report by Robert Brody