

Bringing the **SYNAGOGUE** into the **HOME**

Central Synagogue's Pivot to a Virtual Congregation

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AT CENTRAL SYNAGOGUE, WE OPEN OUR TENT AS WIDELY AS POSSIBLE, believing that the more people who participate in Jewish life, whether through Central or another Jewish community, the better. As the coronavirus pandemic forced much of the world to shut down, Central, with its physical location in New York City, pivoted quickly to a fully virtual congregation. We had already been livestreaming our Shabbat and other worship services and had a vibrant community of participants who had been worshipping together virtually for years, so it wasn't a far leap for our community. We now have people who used to spend every Friday night in our sanctuary engaging with others from around the world via computer, and our Facebook page has become a source of connection and community for many during the pandemic.

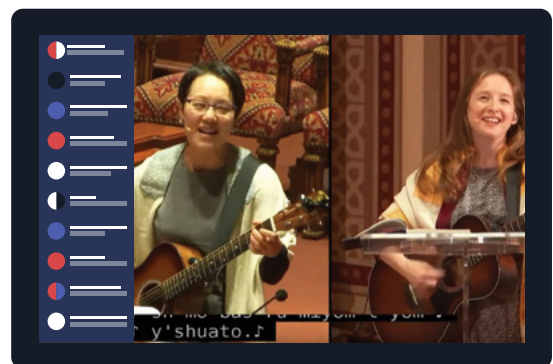
But we've had to be creative to face challenges along the way. We are constantly reimagining the worship experience through new music, addressing current events, and finding ways to increase participation from our community, even in a virtual world. During High Holy Day and Shabbat services, we often have different groups of congregants serve as "Jews in the Pews" via Zoom, and we show our congregants at various points throughout the service. One of my favorite moments came during Sukkot when families joined with *lulav* and *etrog* and danced. The joy could be felt through the screen.

Though we've had great success in the last year, the switch to a virtual congregation has been challenging for our little ones. While we already had the structure in place for online worship, we had little experience engaging children and families in a virtual world.

Early on during the pandemic, we realized that our littlest kids get the most out of using Zoom for short programs (nothing replaces in-person school) as opposed to watching over Facebook or our livestream. They love seeing each other on the screen, being spotlighted, dancing to the music, and putting things in the chat (even if they can't type). Seeing one another face to face, even through a digital screen, has proved critical for keeping our family community connected with one another.

We have also looked for ways — both safely in person and online — for our families to do service and give back. We gathered outside to pack Thanksgiving meals and did socially distanced gardening in a community garden. In addition we baked together on Zoom, donating the cookies to Central's Breakfast Program, which offers meals to those in need. We wanted to make sure that, even in a pandemic, we could continue to offer families opportunities to help and build community with one another.

These service opportunities have also reminded Central and our families that even when so much in the world changes, the fundamental Jewish values of community, *tikkun olam*, and openness and welcoming remain the same. And we want people to know that Central Synagogue is here for them, no matter what.



Central Synagogue prioritizes accessibility so that all people can participate in worship services in whatever way is most comfortable and convenient for them. You can find our closed-captioned livestream Shabbat and High Holy Day services on our website (centralsynagogue.org), Facebook page, and YouTube channel as well as via cable TV on the Jewish Broadcasting Service (JBS) or by calling in to our phone line. To learn more about Central Synagogue's youth and family engagement services, visit our Facebook page at facebook.com/censynyfe.

Central Synagogue is a member of the PJ Library in New York Partnership Network, providing high-quality experiences for families with young children in New York. To learn more about PJ Library partners across New York, visit newyork.pjlibrary.org/resources.