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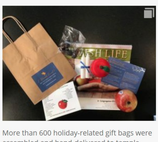
Congregation B'nai B'rith Reimagines High Holidays During Pandemic

SOURCE: ANN PIERAMIO FOR CONGREGATION B'NAI B'RITH

September 16, 2020 | 11:59 a.m.

For the first time in Congregation B'nai B'rith's (CBB) 92-year history, the synagogue will shutter its doors during the busiest and holiest days of the Jewish calendar.

As the High Holy Days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur approach (Sept. 18-28), Jews around the world will be ushering in the new year (5781) from home. Clergy and leaders of Congregation B'nai B'rith have been working for months to ensure that the Days of Awe, as the holiday period is known, remain meaningful to the synagogue's 800 families.



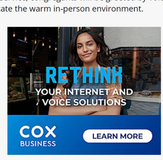
More than 600 holiday-related gift bags were assembled and hand-delivered to temple members. (Courtesy photo)

"It is going to be utterly unlike any High Holy Days we have ever experienced in our lives," said Rabbi Stephen Cohen in a letter to congregants. "We need to figure out how to connect with each other, in spite of the physical distance between us. And to figure out how to create for ourselves a spiritual experience using the tools that we have: technology, music/religious texts, Jewish creativity, our community and our soul."

Since March, the temple has turned to technology to offer worship, lectures, programs and classes through various platforms, including livestream, Zoom, and Facebook Live.

The High Holy Day services will be held via livestream, with an innovative format conceived by Santa Barbara Middle School media director David Teton-Landis and Dos Pueblos High School teacher John Dent along with his team of students. The tech team will integrate songs from the cantor and CBB choir, teens reading from the Torah, and the sounds of the traditional shofar blast.

Upon entry into the virtual service, congregants will be greeted by volunteers in pre-recorded videos, in an effort to replicate the warm in-person environment.



The temple has made all 384 pages of the prayer book accessible for download or purchase and created a CBB Road to the High Holidays interactive, personal practice guide. In addition, more than 600 gift bags have been assembled and delivered to temple members, providing holiday-related items including shabbat candles, prayers, honey sticks and apples for a sweet new year.

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Families with young children will receive additional holidays-at-home kits and interactive story sessions and activities, allowing parents to enjoy adult services while children have their own age-appropriate programming.

Rabbi Cohen encourages congregants to get creative, making their at-home service eventful.

Susan Rakov, a longtime CBB member and former religious practices trustee, shares ideas in a post to congregants stating she will create a sacred space — not her work desk — to stream the service. In addition, she will dress in white, the customary clothing that symbolizes purity and marks the importance and solemnness of these highly reflective days.

Not all of the observances will be virtual. The synagogue is offering time with the Torah, allowing members to sit with family or a small group of nine or less people in front of the open Ark to reflect, pray, contemplate, or simply sit in silence.

Rabbi Cohen or Rabbi Daniel Brenner will greet participants with a written set of suggestions of things to think quietly about, or even to speak about, out loud, yet they will give each pod privacy. The Ark will be set up outside, in a sheltered space, and all visits will be compliant with COVID-safety protocols.

The opportunity to hear the shofar in person will also be offered as congregants are invited to drive through the temple's parking lot at preselected times and listen to the unique sounds of the individual shofarot. The shofar invites reflection, inspires awe and awakens Jews from a spiritual slumber.

"This year's Days of Awe are a unique opportunity to open ourselves to the power and wisdom of our tradition," said Rabbi Cohen. "Together, even at a distance, we travel back to a place of humility and vulnerability, creating the possibility of personal renewal and transformation. And we leave open the possibility that we may experience the most meaningful High Holy Days of our lives."

For more information on how to access the Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services and programs visit www.cbbsb.org.

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Welcome to Noozhawk Asks, a new feature in which you ask the questions, you help decide what Noozhawk investigates, and you work with us to find the answers.

Here's how it works: You share your questions with us in the nearby box. In some cases, we may work with you to find the answers. In others, we may ask you to vote on your top choices to help us narrow the scope. And we'll be regularly asking you for your feedback on a specific issue or topic.

We also expect to work together with the reader who asked the winning questions to find the answer together. Noozhawk's objective is to come at questions from a place of curiosity and openness, and we believe a transparent collaboration is the key to achieve it.

The results of our investigation will be published here in this Noozhawk Asks section. Once or twice a month, we plan to do a review of what was asked and answered.

Thanks for asking!

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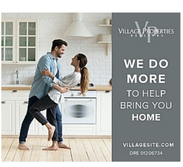

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