

The Herald News

Temple Beth El offering blended model for observing High Holy Days holiday

By Charles Winokoor

Herald News Staff Reporter

@cwinokoor

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FALL RIVER – What makes this Rosh Hashanah different from all other Rosh Hashanahs?

The simple answer is COVID-19.

Fall River's Temple Beth El on High Street, like many other synagogues and temples across the country, is offering congregants the option of watching Jewish new year services from the safety of their homes.

The two-day Rosh Hashanah holiday on Saturday and Sunday will be broadcast via Zoom video and audio conferencing, as will Yom Kippur, known as the Day of Atonement, ten days later.

Congregants can attend services in the main sanctuary but only if they previously reserved seats; non-members have paid a nominal fee of \$25 per holiday.

Social distancing will be the rule and shouldn't be a problem, according to Temple Beth El President Steve Silverman.

Silverman notes in the September issue of the temple's monthly bulletin that he expects about 50 people "at most" to show up for each of the three days of services that bookend the 10-day High Holy Days marking the Jewish New Year.

Seating capacity in the 90-year-old temple is just over 600, but state guidelines for the prevention of the spread of the coronavirus stipulate that indoor seating be limited to 40 percent, which translates to roughly 250.

Families can sit together but must keep at least six feet apart from other families and individuals.

“It shouldn’t be hard,” said office manager Marie Twomey, who noted that just more than 100 people turned out last year for the first day of Rosh Hashanah, which typically draws the largest crowd.

She said everyone who attends services in person will pick up a prayer book from a table in the lobby assigned to them so that they can keep it at their seat over the 10-day period.

“The books haven’t been touched in a year, so they’re clean,” Twomey said.

Rabbi Mark Elber and his wife Cantor Shoshana Brown said they’ve had plenty of practice lately conducting online services.

Elber says he’s been using his home study room to conduct weekday morning Zoom services.

“Half the screen is on the prayer book, and half is on the computer,” he said, referring to the person on the other end watching and participating.

But Elber says services for the High Holy Days, unlike the weekday morning services during the month of Elul, will not be participatory.

He and his wife are also shortening services to just two hours to minimize the possibility of spreading the potentially deadly virus.

“I guess we’re going to have to wave at the people instead of shaking their hands,” Brown said, referring to the conclusion of each day’s service.

The rabbi and cantor said unlike previous years they’ll be the only ones allowed on the bimah, which is the elevated stage-like platform that contains the holy ark and its collection of torahs.

That means no one can perform what’s called “aliyah” whereby congregant sit on the bimah and wait to open and close the ark or read passages from the torah.

Unlike last year, the rabbi will be the only person to sound the shofar.

Elber says he's even considering placing a face mask over the end of the shofar, which is either a ram's or antelope's horn, when he blows it — so as to eliminate any chance that fluid from his mouth is emitted into the air.

And there certainly won't be a traditional breaking of the fast, which normally is held with a buffet meal in the building's lower level, at the close of Yom Kippur services.

The first five, front rows in the sanctuary have been roped off to minimize any possibility of spreading the coronavirus between the rabbi, cantor and congregants.

From the age of 12 until he was 90, with two years off for military service, Bill Chebot blew the shofar at Temple Beth El.

Chebot, now 92, said he'll be watching the holiday services from his home computer in Somerset.

He says it's better than nothing but is no substitute for being in the temple.

"I'm not too happy about that. I like to participate and not just sit there," said Chebot, who is a widower.

But he understands why precautions have to be taken.

"I don't want anybody coming into my house," Chebot said. "These are unusual times."

Chebot still drives, but he said the only time he ventures out on weekdays is to go to The Jewish Home skilled nursing facility in Fall River, where someone brings a Kosher lunch meal out to his car for him to take home.

Retired internist Dr. Harvey Reback, who also lives in Somerset, said he's been on the fence about attending services, but is leaning toward going to temple.

"She'll probably convince me to go," he said, referring to his wife Elaine.

Reback, 85, says that his wife delivered prayer books to elderly congregants living in town.

Chebot said he was one of those recipients. And even though he has his own prayer book, he appreciates the gesture.

“I didn’t need it, but they’re a wonderful couple to do it,” he said.

Reback said that sitting at home on a computer can’t compare to being in the same room as the rabbi, cantor and fellow congregants.

“Some of the spirit of the holiday is going to be missed. It’s a shame, but what are you going to do?” he said.

Cantor Brown said Temple Beth El is providing The Jewish Home with the Zoom link in case any of their residents wants to log on and watch the High Holy Days services.

“Before this they didn’t have the option of participating in our services,” she said. “So I guess you can call this a small silver lining.”