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Crafting Communal Worship on the Web: The Impact of COVID-19 on Congregations, Cantors, and their Musical Teams

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DISCLAIMER

I have written this thesis during the height of the pandemic, from March 2021 to February 2022. The pandemic is still ongoing and anything written in this thesis is a reflection of the pandemic up until submission of the thesis to the Hebrew Union College library. The true impact of the pandemic on synagogue life, communal worship, and clergy teams is still evolving, and the full extent of the effect will not be known until more time has passed. This research may serve as a guide or resource for those researching the evolution of synagogue worship, hybrid programming, or livestreaming in the years to come. I have written this thesis as objectively as I could, knowing that I am a participant in this topic as well as an active observer.

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Last but not least, I want to thank my partner in life, Connor Pearsall.

Abstract

The art of crafting a Jewish prayer service is one that requires a mastery of balance, honed by clergy as they traverse the ever-changing spiritual landscape of the synagogue, discovering the musical identity in place there. The role of the cantor in selecting the settings for prayer during worship, at first glance, may seem rooted in a desire for a certain aesthetic, picking melodies just for the sake of performance. Following other contemporary studies on the subject, I will argue that there is a multi-faceted, spiritual, and intellectual process behind crafting the music of a Jewish prayer service. How do all these considerations shift when crafting a service for online worship? I will conduct interviews with cantors across denominations on how they strive to achieve this balance within their worship services, pre-pandemic and now, and their priorities within the framework of service planning. I will interview lesser-heard voices including congregants who were directly impacted by this switch to livestreaming and the people who were responsible for the behind-the-scenes technical logistics of the online transition. I will research the impact this medium and this time has had on our congregations, and how each congregation I engage with throughout my research found ways to craft community during this time. I will then investigate how these priorities have shifted or changed in the framework of the pandemic, as online worship took over with all its limitations.

Introduction

On March 11th, the front page of every news source stated what so many had dread since first hearing the word 'Coronavirus'—*WHO Declares Coronavirus a Pandemic.*[1] For many Americans, the news coming out of China about the exponential spread of a virus seemed like a distant problem, something that would hopefully be contained in the place from where it had originated. Sooner than most predicted, the coronavirus was uncontainable due to international travel, and the whole world would soon be impacted by this highly contagious virus.

COVID-19 is a severe acute respiratory syndrome, unknown to the world prior to December 2019 when it first appeared in Wuhan, China and then spread to the rest of the world over the months that followed. The unique characteristic of this virus was that many who carried it had zero symptoms, and these asymptomatic carriers were passing it on without any knowledge that they were infected. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the virus has mutated as it was rapidly passed from person to person, becoming more deadly and even more contagious than the initial iteration of the virus.[2]

As it became clear that the virus was highly contagious, lockdowns across the world brought daily life to a halt as people retreated to their homes in order to 'stop the spread.' Religious institutions had to produce a substitute for worship in their sacred spaces, pivoting in unique ways to carry on crafting community and maintaining rituals even without being together in the same physical space. Rabbis, Cantors, and spiritual leaders of all kinds had to adapt quickly to the online medium, figuring out what worked

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[1] Vanelli M. Cucinotta D, "WHO Declares COVID-19 a Pandemic." Acta Biomed. 2020 Mar 19.
[2] "Basics of Covid-19." *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/your-health/about-covid-19/basics-covid-19.html.

for them technologically and spiritually when reframing worship and prayer through this new lens. At the same time, clergy had to navigate the anxiety and fear of this virus, which was impacting everyone's lives and creating unending challenges in every domain of life, attempting to balance their own personal and professional lives as the two began continuously overlapping. Clergy had to act as a spiritual guide and pillar of strength for their communities through this time, even when they too were hurting from isolation and from fear of the virus.

Knowing all of this from my own experience at my student pulpit, I was inspired to investigate through this thesis how exactly cantors shifted the worship at their synagogues, how these adaptations were experienced by congregants, and how the efforts of technology teams rose to critical importance. Prior to the pandemic, worshipping and praying in our synagogues had been rooted in the communal experience, singing together in one voice, and collaborating with volunteer choirs, bands, and musicians. Now, cantors were challenged to re-imagine what worship would look like on the internet.

Thankfully, some Jewish worship services were already being regularly broadcast online, and the technology did not need to be created anew for this massive shift to livestreaming. Indeed, some synagogues were already set up for livestreaming success. Within this thesis, I will also explore the narrative told by synagogue audio/video professionals, who made sure services were widely accessible and engaging in the way they were filmed and streamed to the masses. I will further explore the origins, the benefits and the downfalls of livestreaming as seen by cantors, congregants, and the tech people responsible for its ability to work every Erev Shabbat.

Pre-pandemic, cantors were very much attuned to strategies that encourage communal singing, involvement and participation in services. Once the pandemic took hold, clergy relied on their congregants' ability to mute themselves in order to avoid a cacophony of background noise and competing voices during prayer. I wondered, to what degree did these pre-pandemic considerations translate to the online worship of the pandemic? Before the pandemic, cantors considered the architecture of the synagogue space: where the leader was in relationship to the congregation, their physical levels, their proximity to each other, and the seating arrangements. Did these considerations have equivalents in Zoom room sanctuaries?

At the same time as it was challenging, some clergy found the work of creating community during the pandemic to be fulfilling and rewarding. One of them reflected to me that they felt the most fulfilled in

> the moments of joy and playfulness of Shabbat, the connecting with people which I could play a part in facilitating. That I could help people and myself feel a sense of loving presence and return in a time of confusion and isolation, and I would say even darkness, hopelessness, fear. Coming back, returning again each week and needing to see each other, seeing each other sing, and learning Torah together.[3]

Throughout this project, I will amplify the voices of those who were most involved in creating and receiving music in online Jewish worship. And I will also amplify the voices of those whose lives and work were both deeply impacted by this transformational time.

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[3] Interview with Cantor Benjie Ellen Schiller, Zoom, July 20, 2021.

Chapter 1: The Power of Communal Prayer and Singing Together

When the COVID-19 pandemic first began, I was in my third year of a cantorial program highly structured around communal singing, praying, and learning together in person. Quarantining had a significant emotional impact on me and my classmates. In my research, I was comforted to find our faculty were also troubled and deeply concerned by how this lapse in our education would play out as part of our larger cantorial formation. Cantor Benjie Ellen Schiller, professor of cantorial arts at Hebrew Union College: Jewish Institute of Religion, describes how important communal singing is to cantorial education:

> This process involves singing with and for one another, whether in class, individual coaching, communal prayer services, or other learning settings. Needless to say, it has not been easy to keep this work alive and thriving during these past months. Students have needed to record their voices over a pre-recorded instrumental accompaniment in order to build electronically engineered pieces. Together we have watched videos of synchronous prayer services and talked about the theory and technique of cantorial leadership. Yet at the end of the day, our students need to *practice what cantors do*: sing with people, lead prayer, engage the congregation. To continue to grow artistically and spiritually, they need to sing with a piano or guitar, in a choir, and with their teachers and fellow students, *in real time.* They need to hone their ability to listen to the congregation

and respond in thoughtful and dynamic ways. These are exactly the qualities our people need from our prayer leaders in this time of uncertainty and loss.[4]

I will never forget the first DFSSM choir rehearsal that we tried to have on Zoom after the pandemic began, as Professor Joyce Rosenzweig desperately tried to conduct our 20 unmuted screens to sing a piece of music. It would simply not work due to the delays and lag. Something so integral to our classes, our education, and our worship had been taken away from us: the ability to sing together was gone.

The ability to sing and speak together as one community is crucial within many frameworks of prayer. When the pandemic began, prayer leaders needed to figure out how to create community in a medium where community members could not hear each other during worship. Singing together was even seen as a dangerous activity that could threaten lives.[5] I was moved to write a sermon on this topic when given the chance to drash on Parashat Mishpatim this past February for my internship at Central Synagogue. I was struck by how the Israelites answered Moses in *kol echad,* "one voice," that they would live their lives by the commandments which he had shared with them. I addressed the congregation, reminding them of the pivotal role of the congregational voice in our services.

> So much of what is fundamental to our services in Judaism is the voice of the congregation. Hearing your voices, all of our voices together whether it be in the responsive readings, the collective Amens, the singing of the Shema or the chanting of the V'ahavta, THAT is what makes this community so rich and

[4] Schiller, Cantor Benjie Ellen. Singing Across Space: The Limitations and Possibilities of Virtual Worship. Scriptions, 2020.
[5] Simpkin, Kelsey. Singing unmasked, indoors spreads COVID-19 aerosols, study confirms. www.colorado.edu. 9/17/2020.

> vibrant on a Friday night. Don't get me wrong, the amazing musicians and clergy contribute, but without that congregational voice, many may have questioned what we were to do without that *kol echad*, in the absence of that communal voice. Pre-pandemic, Central was a place where the congregational voice was welcomed, encouraged, and sought out, but now, because of technology we were asking people to no longer have their voices heard by the rest of the community.[6]

Many published works describe the process that goes into engaging the congregational voice and crafting community in song. We will explore these works and the key tensions of crafting communal worship that are inherent within them, that we might better contextualize the intellectual overhaul cantors and prayer leaders had to perform when shifting to the online medium in which voices could not be heard. The authors of these works are the practitioners themselves, who have witnessed the change over time occurring within the context of communal prayer and who draw conclusions made over years of cultivating sacred spaces for their Jewish constituents. Throughout this survey, I ask the question: How does our leadership within worship and our crafting of prayer services change and adapt when the communal voice is taken out of the equation completely?

Cantor Benjie Ellen Schiller has written and spoken a great deal on the power of communal moments within worship. In an address to cantors given in 2006 entitled "The Many Faces of Jewish Sacred Music", Cantor Schiller details the power of singing as a vessel to usher new community members into Jewish ritual life, serving as an entrance of

[6] Jenna McMillan. "Finding Our Voices in the Wilderness." Central Synagogue, February 12, 2021.

sorts for them to feel a part of the community.[7] Schiller states that many community members who consistently pray together often express to clergy their desire to be included in the worship, and that cantors are now striving to meet this call by including the congregational voice at every possible moment in the service, rather than the cantor singing at them. She dives into the possible reasons why a congregant may express their desire to be involved in the singing of the prayers, active participation which is sparked by "sociological, psychological, or spiritual reasons." Cantor Schiller remarks that,

> They tell us that they feel welcomed and accepted within our community when we invite them to sing with us. Moreover, singing prayers has become their entrance into Jewish ritual life as well as their gateway into learning Jewish sacred texts. Through singing Hebrew or English words, made possible either by soaring melody or simple nusach (prayer modes), they feel empowered to pray as Jews, in a way that undeniably links them with the larger Jewish community and affirms their Jewish identity. Singing gives them the sacred key that allows their access to Jewish sacred tradition. If the regulars are giving us this message, we can only imagine how first timers feel![8]

Cantor Schiller, writing 15 years ago, imagines that in the future, communal singing will be rampant within our communities, singing refrains as a group, indulging in choral settings for cantor and congregation, and partaking in lyric melodies that are easily accessible and relatable for the average congregant. She envisions a new stylistic wave of more traditional chant, which cantors will teach their congregations in both Hebrew and

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[7] Dr. Ron Wolfson, Welcoming: How to Transform Your Congregation into a Sacred Community, (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2006), 103.
[8] Schiller, 2006.

English. Schiller further contends that cantors will bring in more diverse repertoires from different ethnic Jewish traditions. To me, many of Schiller's predictions have come to pass in recent years.

Schiller also details her "new vocabulary of sacred music," which will help to enlighten us regarding what different moments we need within a prayer service to make it spiritually meaningful. Schiller details her prayer framework for crafting community in prayer through her "5 M's:" **M**ajesty, **M**eeting, **M**emory, **M**oving Along, and **M**editation. Majesty, or that within our services which evokes a sense of grandeur, is often felt on the High Holy Days, when the liturgy is often sung with full choir and organ, and the words and melody connect us to something greater than ourselves. Meeting is described by Schiller to be "moments in which we become aware of the larger community and literally meet other souls through prayer. When all voices join to create a resounding chorus of prayer, when every voice contributes its sound to the whole, a new expression of prayer is born."[9] Just by reading Schiller's words, it is possible to get goosebumps from the inherent power of singing together she describes, where new possibilities and new levels of worship are unlocked, the soul set free by voices interlocking together. Schiller states, "Today our people call out to be included. They ask us to enrich their sense of meeting."[10] How much have we lost a sense of "Meeting" while worshipping remotely?

Another of Schiller's worship music categories, moments of Meditation, are those inherently more contemplative and reflective, when we look inwardly at what we need to pray for and explore our own connection with God. While certainly possible over Zoom,

[9] Schiller, 2006.
[10] Schiller, 2006.

I imagine that this particular "M" was harder to attain for many people. 'Moving Along' are those moments in our services that create momentum from one prayer rubric to the next, connecting together big pieces of liturgy and ushering us into the next ritual experience. Moments of 'Memory' happen when prayer leaders use music to link living worshippers to their departed loved ones. In Chapter Four, Cantor Schiller speaks to how these M's were impacted, either strengthened or weakened, by the shift to Zoom.

For Professor Merri Lovinger Arian, singing together is an incredibly powerful, spiritual experience unmatched by much else in our worship services. As part of her textbook *Leveling the Prayer Field,* she shares anecdotes from her multi-faceted career which show that music creates community.[11] Arian discusses her time as a song leader in Jewish summer camps, describing the communal response to the music she sang in a very physical, embodied way. "Whether it was the highly spirited 'A-minor medley' of Israeli folksongs that brought the community to its feet, dancing hand in hand, or the more mellow section of the repertoire that had people rocking back and forth, arm in arm, music embodied the community."[12] In these terms, it seems that the community-building response to such music is an embodied one, joining arms with those next to you, singing together in unison or harmony, and dancing together. The music itself facilitated moments such as these. Could this facilitation work on Zoom as well, where individuals are together on a screen yet socially distanced and isolated in their own homes?

Professor Arian later describes music in prayer as a beautiful fabric, weaved throughout the worship in a way that is integral to the prayer experience, unable to be isolated or extracted from the communal worship itself. "The melodies we sing in

[11] Arian, Merri Lovinger. *Leveling the Prayer Field.* Transcontinental Music Publications. 2018.
[12] Arian, *Leveling the Prayer Field,* 4.

worship are inseparable from the prayer experience itself. It is in the understanding of the significance that these melodies can have that one can best utilize the myriad of musical melodies that exist. For how one selects, performs, and teaches music within worship will surely impact the strength of the sacred community we seek to create."[13] Sacred community, she says, benefits from a prayer leader who is knowledgeable about the power inherent within sacred melodies, in touch with what purpose they serve in the context of worship, and who knows how to frame them and fit them together. As I read this part of Arian's book, it reminded me how intentional song selections strengthen worship communities and could even do so for an online community.

When Arian writes, "I learned how music had the capacity to help individuals transcend their solitary existence, helping them feel a part of something much greater," I wonder how prayer leaders might best use worship music to bring together socially isolated congregants. Are the right, well-matched song selections enough to do what Arian discusses, even when offered by a single unmuted voice through a screen? Can music make us feel a sense of human community across a vast digital divide?

In chapter 2 of L*eveling the Prayer Field*, Arian shares with us what she believes is the purpose of music within worship through a series of "5 E's:" "To **E**nhance and **E**levate the prayer moment, to **E**ngage the congregation, and to **E**ducate and **E**nlighten the congregation through new interpretations of the liturgy."[14] Similar to Schiller's 5 M's, Arian provides a framework for crafting the music of t'fillot. Enhancing and Elevating the prayer moment, to her, entails intentional musical interpretation of the fixed liturgy. In so doing, one can deepen the Hebrew text's meaning. And when the fixed liturgy

[13] Arian, *Leveling the Prayer Field,* 5.
[14] Arian, *Leveling the Prayer Field,* 7.

seems inadequate to the moment, the intentional prayer leader might insert additional text from outside of the liturgy to bring an appropriate level of enhancement or elevation to the communal experience.

When engaging the congregation, Professor Arian advises that a prayer leader not just since the melodies in an artistic way but also consider "inviting the congregational voice to join in the singing of the melodies," which "engages them on a whole other level."[15] Arian likens this phenomenon to a passenger getting a chance to be in the driver's seat for the first time, going to a familiar place. At first, they realize they don't know how to do it alone. But, the next time, they remember the way. "By giving voice to the congregation, you manage to put them in the driver's seat, hopefully enabling them to more easily find their way into the prayer."[16] She discusses the power of *niggunim*, wordless melodies that can provide this opening for the congregational voice to be effectively engaged. Arian's fourth and fifth "E's," Educating and Enlightening the congregation, may not be all too different during a global pandemic. She emphasizes the importance of choosing musical settings which transmit the essence and the meaning of the words, awakening the community to what the siddur really has to offer. I suspect that the first 3 "E's" detailed here are heavily impacted in the online medium, but the latter two may have transcended the challenges of the pandemic. As we will discuss in a later chapter, I asked several prayer leaders whether they still sought to teach new melodies or instead retained familiar ones. We will evaluate then whether these "5 E's" withstood the challenges of the online medium, or if they faltered with the technological limitations.

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[15] Arian, *Leveling the Prayer Field,* 8.
[16] Arian, *Leveling the Prayer Field,* 8.

A relatively recent publication by Joey Weisenberg, *Building Singing Communities,* is especially useful to a 21st century prayer leader trying to engage the voices of community members.[17] Weisenberg echoes many of the same things Arian and Schiller touch on regarding the importance of communal singing and engaging the congregational voice. He writes that "singing brings us closer to each other in a community, and teaches us how to listen to each other on many levels despite what may seem to be our vastly different backgrounds and world-views."[18] He recognizes the power inherent in communal singing, our bonds and connections strengthening as a *kahal* while transcending our perceived differences. Not only does worship singing strengthen the community, he says, but it also links us to our communal past, interweaving our narrative with those of our ancestors who too engaged in the world of Jewish music. It allows us to let out our emotions, mark Jewish time, and more.[19]

In his first few chapters, Weisenberg details the importance of building a "singing core" and also of considering the architecture of the davening space. He begins with a quote from the Koretzer Rebbe, "Sometimes a singer cannot reach the higher notes. Another man comes to his aid and sings in a loud tone. This gives to the first man, also, the ability to raise his voice. It is a result of the communion of two spirits, wherein each becomes a partner in the other's strength."[20] Our singing communities are strengthened by the individuals that come together to make up the whole. And the singing energy of a community is taken to the next level, he says, when a congregation adds "a core group of

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[17] Weisenberg, Joey. *Building Singing Communities*. Hadar, 2011.
[18] Weisenberg, *Building Singing Communities,* v.
[19] Weisenberg, *Building Singing Communities,* vi.
[20] Weisenberg, *Building Singing Communities,* 1.

singers who stand close together, directly surrounding the ba'al tfillah."[21] When I read this guidance, I could not help but laugh. It is so straightforward and so obvious that this would aid in getting a group of daveners to sing together in the same physical space, yet it has become something so difficult to do in a world with a virus which is transmitted at a rapid rate from person to person.

Weisenberg emphasizes getting as close as possible to the people next to you, combining singing energies as one and let them fuel off each other, building the connections between singers and community members. He discusses standing close together in order to emphasize the importance of singing in real time, for those singing to "sing together in ways that allow them to respond to each other's musical subtleties."[22] Not only that, but he states that if community members are not listening to each other, standing close and noticing the subtleties of those singing around them, the melodies being sung will never reach their full potential. Weisenberg's warning serves as sad reminder for those leading communal prayer on Zoom during the pandemic, who may have felt like something was missing. This missing link, I think, is the energy cultivated from communal singing.

Later on in his book, Weisenberg gives recommendations on the physical nature of the ideal davening space. He explains that a closeness between prayer leader and congregation is fostered when the prayer leader is in the center of the group, and the first step towards achieving this closeness is getting rid of the bimah entirely. "A tall frontally-oriented bimah immediately detaches a leader from his singers and from his

[21] Weisenberg, *Building Singing Communities,* 3.
[22] Weisenberg, *Building Singing Communities,* 3.

congregation."[23] Upon shifting to online worship, one could argue that the bimah was indeed effectively ditched, putting us all on the same level on our screens. Yet, there were still ways to elevate the prayer leader to the forefront of the service, spotlighting their video, making sure the participants could not unmute, elevating their own voices above those attending the t'fillah. Weisenberg goes on to advocate for removing the pews, whose rigid, fixed nature preclude individuals from moving around much while sitting in them. Ironically, he also calls for the worship service to move from a big space to the smallest room to be found. This advice, too, grates on the ears of people who have been in a pandemic which has necessitated physical distancing.

Sound systems too, according to Weisenberg, should not be used if at all possible. His reasoning almost foreshadows the whole Zoom ordeal that all clergy went through during the pandemic.

> Sound systems work against real-time musical communication. True, they do let people *hear* the leader, but what they are hearing is a "latent sound;" namely, by the time they hear the singing, it's already happened, and the congregation can't respond in real time. Imagine trying to sing together with someone through an online video camera, or on the phone: While a sound system in a big room may provide a quicker connection than a distant phone connection, it still lets people engage only after the fact, which means that the communication will be at best slightly detached from real-time.[24]

Weisenberg himself recognized years ago the difficulties and challenges of trying to sing with someone using technology that is not equipped for real-time communal

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[23] Weisenberg, *Building Singing Communities,* 9.
[24] Weisenberg, *Building Singing Communities,* 10.

singing. It is in no way ideal to sing with a disembodied voice emanating from your laptop speaker, and there is nothing that can match up with the beauty of voices singing side-by-side in a physical, holy space. However, this fact did not stop clergy from creating new ways and strategies to engage their congregational members through the screen in a time where it was simply unsafe to sing together in worship.

We have now learned through the wisdom of three practitioners of prayer themselves what it truly means to sing together in harmony within the context of our synagogue worship. We know that pre-pandemic, cantors and other prayer leaders employed specific strategies to engage the congregational voice, knowing the community-building possible through engaging in these holy melodies as a group. Professor Merri Arian supplied us with her 5 E's to think about when crafting worship, to better harness the power of communal music in prayer. Cantor Benjie Ellen Schiller gave us a prophecy for the future that communal music will be more important than ever, as well as her 5 M's of worship which provided a starting framework for making congregational worship spiritually fulfilling. These 5 M's, whether they were enhanced or inhibited by Zoom worship, were changed forever once we made the transfer to the online medium. Joey Weisenberg emphasized even further what we were missing when moving from the shul to the desk chair, sitting in front of our laptops. He detailed the importance of the physicality of our worship, of standing next to each other to bring out our singing voices, and of the worship space architecture lending itself to real-time communication and connection.

Now that we have contextualized the power of communal singing, the emphasis placed on singing together in the same space, and the sacred quality our synagogue

spaces afford us, we will now look to the how synagogue leaders responded to the onset of the pandemic in March 2020. We will specifically examine responses from cantors in order to understand how the Jewish worship music was impacted during the online switch. In addition, we will hear from the congregants who were on the receiving end of all these changes, who accompanied the tabernacle of communal prayer from the fixed location of the synagogue to the liminal space of the internet.

Chapter 2: Engaging the Congregation through Prayer and Song Across Denominations During the Pandemic

When I began to construct a narrative for how cantors, prayer leaders, and music directors alike pivoted during this time of technological limitations and anxieties surrounding health and safety, I knew we needed testimony from the leaders themselves in order to better comprehend their intellectual overhaul which began in 2020. In this chapter, I lift up the voices of cantors, prayer leaders, music directors, and congregants from diverse Jewish backgrounds. Each voice describes a time of struggle, of triumph over stark challenges unlike any which have been faced in recent memory, and of creativity and reimagining our worship services. Later on, I return to Professor Merri Arian and Cantor Benjie Ellen Schiller for a discussion on how their frameworks for creating and planning services withstood the test of the pandemic, both in written form and from lending their voices to subsequent interviews and panels.

Each person I interviewed answered a specific set of questions based on their own backgrounds, their synagogues, and their role within them. Even though the answers varied, there were overarching themes throughout each interview. This chapter will sort the research and interview data which I gathered into subheadings including: *Initial Approach to Online Worship, Evolution of Online Worship, Spiritual Highlights and Challenges, Strategies for Online Engagement in Worship, Shift in Role of the Cantor.* The final section contains congregants' perspectives. The prayer leaders I interviewed include Cantor Daniel Mutlu of Central Synagogue, Cantor Benjie Ellen Schiller of Bet Am Shalom Synagogue, Cantor Joshua Breitzer of Congregation Beth Elohim, Cantor Neil Michaels of Temple Israel-West Bloomfield, Cantor Azi Schwartz

of Park Avenue Synagogue, Cantor Jonathan Comisar, faculty at HUC-JIR, Professor Joyce Rosenzweig of Congregation Beit Simchat Torah, and Professor Merri Arian of HUC-JIR.

Among the questions I posed to these interviewees were: How were prayer leaders impacted by the pandemic? What were challenges and opportunities that arose through this unique online medium of worship? As prayer leaders gathered data and learned through trial and error, how did their synagogue worship evolve? What specifically did prayer leaders do to engage the congregation when the odds were against them? Lastly, how did prayer leaders suffer spiritually, and what raised their spirits? In a later chapter, we will focus on the medium of livestreaming itself, citing the work of technological workers behind-the-scenes, as well as the opinions of the prayer leader panel on the effect of such technology.

Initial Approach to Online Worship

While eventually most congregations found their way to Zoom as the video conferencing platform of choice, the early days of the pandemic saw many kneejerk technological solutions to the sudden need for social distancing. Each prayer leader I spoke with had quite different approaches to worship in March 2020, each providing an interesting narrative for how synagogues pivoted, how their choices reflected their values, and how they would begin to further their communal connections during those challenging days. Cantor Schiller certainly seemed to experience less change than most experienced during this time, due to the accessibility of her shul to her home, and the fact that she shares the bimah with her husband, Rabbi Lester Bronstein. I asked Cantor Schiller what it was like for her and her synagogue community in the early days of the

pandemic, including how they adjusted in what was a chaotic beginning for most. “How did we pivot? Well for one, it was less challenging than for many because my husband and I lead together. The spontaneity at a given take, the harmony, the planning, and then changing the plan in the moment, all of that we could take from what we were doing before.”[25] Schiller’s initial experience can shed light on what synagogues with smaller clergy teams might have been able to accomplish if the planning was right and the COVID safety protocols were observed. This clergy duo was able to lead consistently from their sanctuary for the entirety of the pandemic, which in my research was a rare find. While it was common that some clergy teams attempted to continue to lead from their holy space of the sanctuary at the very beginning of the pandemic, few teams consistently did so throughout the pandemic due to any number of variables.

Cantor Schiller also recalled that they were one of the very first synagogues in the New York Metropolitan Area to shut down in-person worship. “We switched to Zoom very soon into it. We were one of the first congregations in the entire New York area that shut down, and that’s because one of the first people in New York to get COVID had been in our circles.”[26] She explained to me that while her and her rabbinic partner were streaming from the sanctuary with all the lights, microphones, and technology configured for optimal streaming, congregants were joining on Zoom to tune in to the livestream. Also, many congregants preferred to simply call in and listen to the audio livestream, rather than figure out the videoconferencing technology. Bet Am Shalom ended up having an audio livestream contingency throughout most of the pandemic.

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[25] Schiller, 2021.
[26] Schiller, 2021.

To get a sense of how larger clergy teams responded to the onset of the pandemic, I interviewed Cantor Daniel Mutlu, senior cantor of Central Synagogue in Midtown Manhattan. In a sense, Central Synagogue was already well set up for success due to their investment in livestream technology years before March 2020 (to which Central's tech expert Jesse Lauter will speak in a later chapter). Cantor Mutlu told me of Central's initial attempt to continue leading services in the sanctuary itself, socially distanced from each other. After an initial two-week period, they transitioned to the clergy leading from their respective homes as New York City went on lockdown. Zoom became their platform of choice for sharing services with their congregants. Cantor Mutlu recalls some of the initial concerns they expressed while still leading from the sanctuary, including making it as safe as possible for the clergy and musicians on site. "There was a real balancing act of not having it [the worship] look ridiculous, not having it look like we were just a pair of eyes with a mask on."[27] Masking at a social distance from their community would not serve their worship ideals. The need to convey full facial expressions, thereby connecting emotionally with congregants, was a significant catalyst for the Central clergy to lead from their homes.

From my firsthand experience of the majestic sanctuary within Central Synagogue, the extensive technology they use to amplify their voices, the music of their instrumentalists, and the expensive camera equipment that helps them to livestream, I wondered aloud to Cantor Mutlu what it was like to switch to the backdrop of their homes rather than that of the austere *aron hakodesh* usually behind them. At the beginning of the pandemic, he told me his concern was "how do we provide a high-

[27] Interview with Cantor Daniel Mutlu, Zoom, March 2, 2021.

quality service when our homes are not equipped like Central Synagogue is equipped with sound, lighting, and the technology we take for granted already fixed within the sanctuary. Also, the fact that we couldn't be accompanied by a band anymore and make music with others in real time [was a real concern]."[28] For a large synagogue with a wealth of resources like these, the switch to Zoom was both a noticeable change as well as an overwhelming challenge to maintain the same quality of worship as in pre-pandemic times.

Cantor Neil Michaels of Temple Israel in West Bloomfield, Michigan had a vastly different approach in the beginning of the COVID lockdown. Yet the very beginning of the story he shared with me is remarkably similar to that of Cantor Mutlu's:

> When the pandemic hit, we really had no time to think, we only had time to react. I think what was most crucial on all of our minds was figuring out ways to really be there for our members. We put together a small task force, and because we were already streaming our services, it wasn't like we had to reinvent the wheel. We immediately said, "Let's do a service from our sanctuary with just a few of us so we can continue to maintain that connection." From there, being in our physical space at temple, things began to deteriorate and shut down.[29]

As soon as the lockdown was implemented, the clergy team at Temple Israel sought to craft their Shabbat services a little differently than the average synagogue. "We had to go from being in the temple to figuring out how we could create a virtual temple from our homes." He shared with me their initial approach, which was something they called 'cellphone services.' "They were largely us individually putting together the

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[28] Mutlu, 2021.
[29] Interview with Cantor Neil Michaels, Zoom, April 14, 2021.

components of our service for the week, both musically and rabbinically, liturgically, and having somebody from our team piece those together so that it was one cohesive piece." Instead of congregants zooming into services where the clergy provides live worship, just from their different homes, the clergy of Temple Israel decided to film their respective components of Shabbat services throughout the week, have an editor put them all together into one video file, and then stream the finished product every Friday at 7:00 PM on their YouTube channel. "At first it was really clunky and just us testing the waters, and then we realized, well we can do more here and there, so they started becoming more and more produced."[30] For context, Temple Israel has huge clergy and musical teams, and their 12,000 members surpass any other Reform congregation in America.[31] Their resources were clearly ample enough to support the high production quality necessary to make home-based videos capturing the same grandeur as that of their sanctuary. In the next section, we will hear more from Cantor Michaels about how Temple Israel's services kept evolving throughout the pandemic.

Cantor Joshua Breitzer of Brooklyn's Congregation Beth Elohim shared all about their technological struggles and successes during the beginning of the pandemic. CBE certainly valued livestreaming leading up to the pandemic for a variety of accessibility reasons, but their approach did not necessarily aid their efforts for online worship when the lockdown was taking place. "Up until the pandemic, we were using StreamSpot livestreaming from stable cameras in the worship spaces. Really wide angle, zoomed

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[30] Michaels, 2021.

[31] "Temple Israel About Us." *About Us | Temple Israel*, https://www.temple-israel.org/about-us. Web. 2021

out, here's the big room, you can see where the people are and the leaders are the focal point."[32] This mode of livestreaming was completely sufficient for their purposes pre-pandemic, as it was mostly for extended family who wanted to tune into the sanctuary for a Bar Mitzvah or those who were homebound tuning in for Shabbat services. Then, the pandemic hit. "We realized quickly when the pandemic hit that the hardware we had built into our worship spaces wasn't very conducive to Zoom and we knew we wouldn't even be in the worship spaces; we would be zooming from home."[33] The technology that CBE had invested in was fixed within their sanctuary, unable to aid the clergy when they were leading from their homes.

Due to this learning curve, Breitzer told me that right off the bat, there were a good deal of technological mishaps, resulting from the logistics of using Zoom, StreamSpot, and Facebook Live to broadcast their services. "There were a lot of technical snafus in the beginning of the pandemic, mostly because of [connecting] Zoom to Facebook Live. We set up Zoom to go to StreamSpot to go to Facebook Live from our individual devices."[34] CBE's struggle is indicative of the huge amount of legwork synagogues and clergy teams had to do to configure their devices, microphones, and video-conferencing platforms to cooperate, providing the best audio and visual possible for their congregants. For some, the technology came easier because of the key players on their teams tasked with logistical issues such as these. For others, they had to completely learn a new system of livestreaming.

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[32] Interview with Cantor Joshua Breitzer, Zoom, June 22, 2021.
[33] Breitzer, 2021.
[34] Breitzer, 2021.

Evolution of Online Worship

As with any skill, clergy had to hone their approaches to online worship to come up with best practices. Through trial and error, each synagogue ultimately reached their ideal conditions for online worship through trial and error. As I interviewed the cantors and prayer leaders, I asked them how their worship evolved over the pandemic as they began to get accustomed with the technology and at the same time, brainstormed more ways to engage community participation and raise the quality of their streaming.

Cantor Breitzer told me of CBE's evolution of online worship, which involved using the technology that was at their disposable to make their t'fillot more accessible and down-to-earth. "We started by having the clergy be the focal point of the screen and sending out a link to the virtual siddur, but when that proved to be a little too much for people to juggle, I started creating Google slideshows of the words, of the prayers, through some very raw copying and pasting of screenshots of the PDF of the siddur. That was sort of the formula that we kept until we wanted to take the screen share down when we wanted the focus to be the Torah or the b'nei mitzvah."[35] For the clergy team of CBE, the point of focus for the congregants tuning in online was a major point of discussion, having an evolution of its own over the course of their time livestreaming. At first, as Cantor Breitzer explained, the focal point was the clergy themselves, which made it harder on congregants who wanted to follow along with the liturgical text of the siddur. The focal point then became the text, the liturgy itself which has carried and centered our people throughout history. Cantor Breitzer also shared something they adopted early on that was incredibly unique throughout my interviews I conducted. "At

[35] Breitzer, 2021.

some point early on I started mixing into the slide deck sort of a *gemarah* on the prayer or pointing out the fundamental absurdity of what we were trying to do by getting people to sing together when my voice was the only on that could be heard. So, I started bringing in GIFs or memes to pique people's interest, to get them laughing, to get them engaged. It was a reminder that it's a little absurd, but it's down to earth, and we're doing the best we can to make this a sacred experience."[36] Despite the limitations of our focus online and using our laptops for substantial amounts of time, Breitzer succeeded in surprising and captivating those in attendance, grasping their attention with relevant memes and visual commentary sprinkled throughout liturgical slideshows.

Cantor Schiller described to me the technological evolution which Bet Am Shalom underwent. First off, they knew they had to enlist some help with the technology, including microphones, lighting, sound, and the streaming platforms themselves. "We had to tweak the technology to make it better, and we did. We had a whole cadre of people, congregants who worked on the sound to help us. But the basic plan was Les and myself in the synagogue. The microphones got better, we improved the lighting, we worked on the sound, learned more as we all did to pivot on how to best use the mics."[37] For Bet Am Shalom, other than the improvement of technology, this aspect of the worship stayed consistent throughout the pandemic as they stuck with the same general plan—both rabbi and cantor in the sanctuary, congregants and everyone tuning in on Zoom so they could see each other and feel like they were part of a community.

Another aspect of the evolution of online worship at Bet Am Shalom was the architecture of the space from which Cantor Schiller led every Shabbat. She and her

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[36] Breitzer, 2021.
[37] Schiller, 2021.

rabbinic partner consistently livestreamed from their sanctuary, so in many regards it was a familiar atmosphere. What changed most was the focus of the prayer leaders themselves. "What we were less comfortable with at the beginning and then grew to appreciate more was the frontal nature, the performative nature of being on a screen. The way our synagogue is structured, the chairs arrangement for a lot of the service we're looking at the *aron hakodesh*, it's a communal activity with the leader not being as performance-oriented, visually and otherwise."[38] Knowing that it was impossible to really do much about the way the community was oriented on Zoom and the fixed architecture of the sanctuary, they decided to rearrange their space in the sanctuary. "We realized we needed it to generate the energy. We did realize that we could generate that sense of '*da lifnei mi atah omeid'* not necessarily as much a performance, but more imagining ourselves praying in the space. We set the chairs up so we could actually imagine the people sitting with us in prayer."[39] The architecture of the sacred space, which as Weisenberg writes about is so crucial to encouraging the communal voice, remained of primary importance to Schiller even during the pandemic. This time around, the architecture was important because of her need for online worship to feel more prayerful and less performative, a shared experience rather than a show.

Cantor Schiller was also mindful that when she faced the *aron hakodesh*, she would be turning her back to the online *kahal*, potentially making them feel abandoned or not part of the davening. "I didn't face the *aron* for the Amidah, I didn't feel comfortable facing away and showing my back for the whole Amidah. What I did was kind of a 45-

[38] Schiller, 2021.
[39] Schiller, 2021.

degree angle so I could still be heard by the mic and that seemed to work well."[40] Schiller's considerations around architecture of the space, body language and choreography, instrumentation, and technology, served to help her synagogue's online worship evolve and continually improve through experimentation.

In a virtual seminar entitled "Passover in Pandemic,"[41] Dr. Gordon Dale, the ethnomusicologist on faculty at HUC-JIR, interviews a range of cantors, prayer leaders, and music directors regarding their synagogue's approaches to online worship and how they each made their portable online *mishkan* holy throughout the pandemic. Professor Joyce Rosenzweig, faculty of HUC-JIR and Music Director of Congregation Beit Simchat Torah, lent her voice to the panelists and described the thought process behind their online worship, what they prioritized, and how they went about executing it. For much of the pandemic, Rosenzweig, cantorial intern Samuel Rosen, and the rest of the clergy team led from their homes as so many clergy teams did. One noticeable change over the evolution of the pandemic was their technology—they upgraded all their tech including microphones, lighting, sound mixers, and more. They ended up hiring their regular sound person to be with them "in more robust ways," and the quality of their online worship significantly improved throughout the months and months they led from their homes. In a later chapter, their unique and exciting musical choices will be discussed.

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[40] Schiller, 2021.

[41] Dale, Dr. Gordon, director. *Passover in Pandemic*. *YouTube*, 2 Mar. 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=puc_f5V826o. Accessed 8 Feb. 2022.

In that same seminar, Cantor Azi Schwartz of Park Avenue Synagogue described how his synagogue also increased the quality of their online worship over the pandemic. PAS, a prominent Conservative Jewish synagogue on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, had committed themselves to livestreaming six years before the pandemic, but Schwartz mentioned on the panel that the goal of the livestreaming completely changed when people were not able to come to the sanctuary at all. Before, livestreaming for them was all about just showing what was happening in the synagogue to those select few who were not able to be there physically. Now, the goal had switched to truly bringing every congregant streaming from their homes into the sanctuary through the livestream. They would be transported, in a way, out of their offices, kitchens, and living rooms and into the sacred space they called their spiritual home. Schwartz described an evolution of their worship that took place due to their commitment to excellence with the technology, and going to great lengths in order to maintain their ability to sing together when it was virtually impossible to do so in real-time. PAS decided to build a studio within their synagogue space, connecting different rooms within it to allow for real-time communication between the spaces where each clergy member was located, one to a room. Most importantly, this allowed them to sing together, in unison and in harmony, without delay and with a successful transmission to congregants tuning in.

For another example of online worship evolution through technological upgrades, we turn back to Temple Israel of West Bloomfield, MI. The first step the TI clergy team took was to ensure continuous, paid work for their large musical team, including two cantors, a cantorial soloist, Jacob Spike Kraus who is musician-in-residence, and their large team of musicians and instrumentalists. Their solution was an app that many

synagogues used to combine individual videos and make them into one coherent video. Cantor Michaels recalls, "One of the cornerstones of our worship is collaboration, especially musically. So, we started investigating options for how to do that online and landed on an app called 'Acapella' [sic] which many people are familiar with now, but at the time it felt very revolutionary. We started using that app to include the various people on our musical team so we were able to preserve the element of musical collaboration."[42] From our conversation together, it was apparent that Cantor Michaels wanted to include everyone's voices and talents even in the online realm, and they went to great lengths and investigated all the options to do so.

Temple Israel put a lot of stock into the technology of their services, and as the year went on, the services got increasingly more produced. Initially, they were on Zoom, each clergy member zooming in and conducting services in real time with the occasional Acapella [sic] video thrown in. Eventually, they hired a director and video editing professionals to create a finished product for Friday nights. The produced videos would be put together throughout the week, edited together by a professional, uploaded to YouTube prior to Shabbat, and given a premiere date, 7 pm on Friday. Congregants went to the YouTube link at the time of the premiere and watched the high-quality video, with engaging visuals and professionally mixed audio. But they were not only doing these videos, they would alternate different mediums and revert to zoom occasionally for a more intimate experience. Later on, I will share Cantor Michaels' spiritual struggle with filming Shabbat throughout the week, and a congregant's reaction to these 'movies' they were creating.

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[42] Michaels, 2021.

The concept of a "Kabbalat Shabbat movie" intrigued me, and was unique among all the other prayer leaders I interviewed. Since Temple Israel has an extensive video archive, I decided to conduct a visual analysis of one such "movie." Looking closer at Temple Israel's YouTube video entitled "Kabbalat Shabbat 6/19/2020,"[43] I saw many ways in which Temple Israel's high production value made for a compelling online worship experience, albeit an asynchronous one. The video itself was a visual feast for the viewers, as the camera crew used interesting and multiple angles to highlight the clergy on the bimah, featuring each member of the team in diverse ways throughout the service. The cantors and artist-in-residence were featured on the bimah, whereas the rabbinical part of the team joined within their own individual clips, staged in various parts of the sanctuary or throughout the temple. It was clear from the beginning that they wanted to emphasize that they were back in the sanctuary that they call home, as the cameras panned over the golden *aron hakodesh* , showing the stained glass, the seats within the sanctuary, and the grounds outside the temple. These visuals remind me of Cantor Michaels' stated desire to acknowledge how much everyone missed their spiritual home and sanctuary.

As I went on analyzing the Temple Israel video, I remained impressed at their level of production quality. The visuals were high definition, there were multiple cameras and angles used, the audio was professionally edited and mixed, and it really seemed like each clip featuring music was akin to a "music video," just as Cantor Michaels described

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[43] TempleIsraelMI, director. *Kabbalat Shabbat 6/19/2020*. YouTube, 19 June 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eX1_b_OrZoo&t=1550s. Accessed 8 Feb. 2022.

in his interview. To my ears, the audio sounded as if it were recorded in a studio, and it made me wonder if the cantors and musicians were lip-synching with themselves. I also noted the precision with which all three *baalei t'fillah* turned around to face the *aron hakodesh*: they did so at the exact same pace and at the same time. All of these choices, I learned from Cantor Michaels, were at the behest of the director whom they hired to ensure a high standard of production quality. Immediately upon viewing this and interviewing the cantor, I knew I wanted to interview a congregant as well to hear how the different modes of online worship at Temple Israel were received by the community. Later on, I will share such reflections from two Temple Israel congregants Steven and Linda Weiss.

Within Temple Israel's "Kabbalat Shabbat movie," there were moments where the clergy members looked directly into the camera, mostly during their *iyyunim,* and there were other moments when they looked out into the space where the congregants would typically sit, mostly during the liturgical music. Watching these varieties of focus, I realized that every intentional clergy team would have to decide for themselves: do we look into the camera even though we cannot see our community members and try to connect that way? Or do we act as things are normal, looking out into the congregation as if they are there, imagining in our own minds that people are there? As described earlier, Cantor Schiller arranged the chairs as if it were a regular service in person, looking out and imagining herself guiding the kahal. When prayer leaders consider where they ought to focus during online worship, they help determine the nature of their own individual praying experience. Indeed, these issues were addressed and answered differently by each clergy person I interviewed.

Spiritual Highlights and Challenges

When hearing about spiritual leaders' efforts to provide their communities with excellent online worship and pastoral care during a turbulent time, I decided to ask them each a question about their own spiritual lives: What lifted you up spiritually during this time, and what were some spiritual challenges you experienced? I was especially interested in Cantor Michaels' response to this question, given his community's investment in cinema-quality video editing and the need to film Shabbat liturgy in advance of Shabbat itself. Cantor Michaels gave me his honest and very real assessment, saying,

> It really affected me in a difficult way…every day was Shabbat, every day was a never-ending cycle of figuring out what needs to be done next, and it felt like a treadmill I couldn't get off. So when the break finally came, I literally just had Shabbat. I closed my eyes and decompressed for 3 days and that was my Shabbat. It was deeply affecting and not just me, all of us. They saw the effect, the congregants, our lay leadership saw the effect and they said you all are burning out, you have to take a break. And we were happy that we were recognized, but it's hard also when there's so much going on and there's urgency to just leave it all behind. We were in a mode and we felt that it was so desperately needed, we had a hard time letting ourselves off the hook.[44]

Clergy burnout, present before the pandemic due to the 24/7 nature of the job, became an even more rampant phenomenon when boundaries became blurred, workloads became heavier, and the pressure to deliver every week on Shabbat using an unfamiliar

[44] Michaels, 2021.

medium put strain on clergy.[45] For Cantor Michaels, they worked throughout the week to provide a beautiful, professional Shabbat video that was put out on YouTube for all to see on Friday night, and the work that it conjured up was so much more than would be required for a regular, in-person Shabbat.

In contrast, Cantor Mutlu of Central Synagogue shared with me the many spiritual highlights and areas of growth he experienced thanks to the shift to online worship. When asked if there were positive aspects, he responded,

> Definitely silver linings, tons of them. First of all, being with my family on Shabbat was really special and my kids and wife would often participate in the Kiddush, so that was really fun. People really responded to that. They liked seeing clergy's personal homes and being invited to them and to be with their families… I also learned a lot, like technologically about equipment, how to mix for myself, how to create the best worship environment like being my own AV person, so that was a silver lining. I also loved to play piano, I never really had played much piano because we have Dave [Strickland, Central's music director], and you know, I never need to really like, walk down to the piano. But, there's a piano in our living room and I would often play it during services and that was a lot of fun, and definitely a silver lining.[46]

. From Cantor Mutlu's remarks, it seems that this period of quarantine was a blessing in disguise for someone so committed to leading his community in excellence, as he was able to spend more time with his wife and three kids. It was the spiritual

[45] Shellnut, Kate. The Pastors Aren't Alright: 38% Consider Leaving Ministry. Christianity Today, 11/16/2021.
[46] Mutlu, 2021.

rejuvenation needed for a person so stretched thin at times by the demands of being present for a large congregation.

Cantor Schiller also described in detail what lifted her up during this time, as well as what tended to bring her down spiritually throughout the pandemic. For Schiller, the connections made through Shabbat services provided a light within "the drudgery of week after week." The way Schiller described to me what she felt on a given Shabbat was beautifully articulated in her own words,

> …the sense of connection that I felt, of return to the community, being together without an agenda other than just to be together, to see each other, and pray. It particularly expressed itself in the clap of "Dodi Li," we never changed the "Dodi Li[47]" [melody] for a long time. The moments of joy and playfulness of Shabbat, connecting with people that I could play a part in facilitating. That I could help people and myself feel a sense of loving presence and return in a time of confusion and isolation and I would say even darkness. Hopelessness. Fear. Coming back, returning again each week and needing to see each other and seeing each other sing, and learning Torah together. It felt like home and I didn't have that in any other place, the communal meant so much to me in these ways. This is what got me spiritually through the pandemic.[48]

Cantor Schiller was able to find meaning and spiritual fulfillment in the moments of connection she felt on a given Friday night, whether it be through the clap that her congregation had deemed *minhag* during "Dodi Li," or by just seeing everyone singing and smiling throughout services. She also told me of an especially important grounding,

[47] Composed by Nira Chen.
[48] Schiller, 2021.

spiritual practice that helped her through this time, in which she would say a blessing each time she returned to the sanctuary for Shabbat services. That blessing was, "Thank God we've made it another week. We're still in good health, the world is still here." It was her own personal blessing of gratitude, and after services, she would always touch the mezuzah, reminding herself of the privilege of making it through to the next Shabbat.

Although Schiller was able to be spiritually uplifted during those moments, there were also exceedingly difficult challenges that the pandemic brought about for her. Immediately what came to her mind were funerals and shivas. She recalled conducting funerals with one person over the phone in a frigid winter. She remembers sitting shiva on Zoom, and realizing that when the cameras turn off, those who were grieving were suddenly completely alone. And lastly, the fact that many regular in-person worshippers never attended Zoom services. "A couple of the regulars just never showed up. Ever. These were stalwarts of the shul, just a few, but people I care about…the medium just didn't speak to them."[49]

Strategies for Online Engagement in Worship

Once the pandemic precluded communities from coming together corporeally, clergy teams had to brainstorm specific strategies that would engage their communities within online worship. They were accustomed to engaging congregants in the sanctuary, inviting them to put their phones away, to be present for the prayers and the music. They were not accustomed to having to engage minds, grasp attention, and encourage congregants to sing when they are in their own homes, staring at computers or TV

[49] Schiller, 2021.

screens. Each person I interviewed had different strategies to engage, whether that was through specific musical choices, taking advantage of the technology, giving honors to certain members of the congregation, and more.

Most of the interviewees decided to abbreviate services enough to accommodate short attention spans. Cantors Schiller, Mutlu, Breitzer, and Michaels all noted that they decided to do this early in the pandemic. Cantor Mutlu and his team at Central Synagogue made the hard decision to omit the Torah service on Friday nights, as it was difficult to maintain the sense of majesty usually evoked at this point in the service when there was no ark or Torah in their own homes. This decision was still in effect for almost two years of the pandemic, and as of February 2022 is back on special occasions or when guests are honored with the aliyah. Cantor Schiller also made the decision to shorten Shabbat morning services a great deal by tweaking the Torah service, cutting down on aliyot, and doing more of an overview of the Torah study rather than in-depth study.

At Bet Am Shalom, Cantor Schiller said that she was especially sensitive to the timing of things due to her own experience a part of the *kahal* at HUC-JIR. Yet as she describes, shortening services inherently means sacrifice:

> The time issue is an advantage, but it's also a challenge because we can't have the depth of the Torah study, of Torah reading, and there's just so much less spontaneity, so much less interaction, a moment that can became majestic that you couldn't even imagine. That's a great loss, just being together and experiencing it in time, in the moment, together. And also people's challenges sitting in their living rooms and kitchens. I found that for the HUC *t'fillot*, I'm in the same place I was for every HUC service [while she's being interviewed]. So hard to

> concentrate! We didn't have that challenge [leading] but everyone who streamed probably did. How do you concentrate in that space? Look—my phone is right here [picks up her phone and shows it to me].[50]

What did we lose when we shortened our services to combat the problem of attention spans? We will explore this question later as part of my interviews with congregants.

Another commonality that popped up in the interviews was the use of the chat to engage and interact with congregants through Zoom, Facebook Live, and YouTube. Joyce Rosenzweig, Music Director of CBST, described the chat feature as a particularly important tool to engage the congregational voice, as did Cantor Michaels. Cantor Breitzer beautifully described the outcome of the chat box feature, saying that at CBE they were

> using the chat box to create a running *gemara*, a running commentary on what we were doing, whether it was wishing someone a "Shabbat shalom" or saying a yishar koach for the rabbi who just finished a meaningful D'var Torah. Or, being able to follow up with someone via private message if they saw a particular name in the Mi Shebeirach list and they want to check in with that person. I liken that to the virtual equivalent of leaning over to the person next to you in the pew while not taking any focus from anyone else's experience.[51]

Whereas in the sanctuary a conversation between two congregants may be a distraction to those around them or to the clergy leading services, the chat allowed the people to engage with each other and with community without distracting others. Cantor

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[50] Schiller, 2021.
[51] Breitzer, 2021.

Michaels and the team at Temple Israel also realized the tool of the chat in engaging the congregational voice.

> We were all yanked out of our comfort zones and forced to engage with social media in a way that for many of us was an education. Ultimately, we realized that by meeting our congregants where they were, we could cast the net wider and provide an immediacy to their need to connect with us as clergy and also with each other by helping facilitate interaction through the chat, and that was great because it instantaneously gave everyone a voice. So, what were initially technical or logistical challenges, really became opportunities when we decided to embrace it. And it took a little bit of doing and I can't say exactly what the timeline was, but from April to June we kind of got with the program.[52]

Another aspect of engagement that was common among the interviewees was the selection of familiar melodies to create a comfortable, known space for congregants. This was a strategy used to create a fixed constant in community members' lives when so much else for them was in flux. Choosing familiar melodies from prior to the pandemic was important to Cantor Michaels, as well as to Professors Rosenzweig and Arian. Rosenzweig mentioned the importance of singing melodies that provided comfort to her congregation, including "Achat Shaalti" which they repeated over and over due to the meaning of the psalm, as well as the importance of keeping the choir alive even in the online medium, since the CBST choir was a regular part of services pre-pandemic. This often meant playing clips of the choir from previous years, the harmonies and the voices singing together providing familiarity and comfort to the online services.

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[52] Michaels, 2021.

Cantor Michaels described the importance of really making everyone feel that the online worship hadn't changed what was integral to Temple Israel and their community. This included making sure the melodies evoked that same feeling people would get before the pandemic in the sanctuary. "We all really wanted to feel like this is still our Temple Israel service, so yes, familiar was and is important."[53] Professor Arian agreed, sharing in her interview with Dr. Dale that before the pandemic, a major focus of hers was including new melodies and new interpretations of the prayers. In the online medium, however, she concluded that familiar melodies were what spoke most to her congregants. "Learning new music is reinforced when you are in a room surrounded by others also trying to learn, neighbors bolstering each other's voices. This just isn't achievable when everyone is on mute in a Zoom room."[54]

Many cantors, such as Cantor Mutlu and Cantor Jonathan Comisar tried to engage by highlighting as many voices and as many community members as they could on the virtual bimah. In Dr. Dale's seminar, Cantor Comisar described how important it was to elevate every voice due to the nature of the livestream always being fixed on the focal point which was often the cantor or the rabbi, whoever was leading the service. He also spoke about engaging community members in ways that helped them check in with their bodies and spirits, going outside the fixed liturgy and welcoming in meditation, breathing, mindfulness, and explicitly expressing gratitude. Comisar described the importance of just exhaling in a time when we all were so tense and afraid of the unknown.[55]

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[53] Michaels, 2021.
[54] Arian, 2021.
[55] Cantor Jonathan Comisar, 2021.

Cantor Mutlu, on the other hand, emphasized all the tangible ways the Central team decided to involve congregants in Friday night services. They asked people to be virtual bimah guests, as they would have done pre-pandemic, honoring them, and asking them to do announcements. They also had people light the candles in their homes on camera, honoring them in that way, and invited congregants to be virtual 'Jews in the Pews', showing them in the livestream in their individual boxes on Zoom, dancing and singing to the music. They organized watch groups so that smaller groups within the larger community could chat and watch services together, making it more intimate and personal. Lastly, they made the decision to look directly into the cameras, prioritizing the perceived personal visual connection with their congregants looking back at them through their screens.

Other cantors strategized within the liturgy itself, emphasizing certain prayers that were particularly poignant for the time, cutting other ones which seemed extraneous to an online medium. Cantor Breitzer spoke of his decision to specifically emphasize and bring out the words of "Asher Yatzar," a prayer within the Birchot HaShachar section of morning liturgy which describes the miracle of the human body. He explained to me the thought process he and the CBE team went through during the High Holy Days and beyond as they pondered the liturgical choices for each service.

> For the High Holidays this past year, 5781, we did go through the outlines and cut some things that wouldn't detract from the authenticity of people's High Holiday experiences to account for attention spans. We did adjust the focus of the Shabbat morning service on the *Birchot HaShachar* [morning blessings] rather than the P*'sukei D'Zimrah* [verses of song] simply because that section focuses more

> on singing together, and we couldn't be singing together in the same way we had done before. We thought it would be more meaningful and appropriate to focus more on the little blessings our liturgy includes that we experience each and every day. Including "Asher Yatzar" which was something we hadn't put a tremendous amount of focus on before, but again felt relevant and meaningful, *highly* meaningful as it turns out for people to include in their prayers.[56]

Cantor Schiller spoke to me about her specific choice to include more English in the online medium, whereas most of their services was in Hebrew pre-pandemic, and much was davened on their own. It did not feel as comfortable to have those silences when you cannot feel your community davening next to you, so she bridged the silence with instrumental music on guitar. She and her rabbinic partner thought a lot more about the Hebrew-English balance than they used to, as they considered the accessibility of their online services:

> We put in English sometimes when we had just had Hebrew, we really worked on access in that way and we worked on making it poetic and flowing. For instance, there's a moment in the *Mei'ein Sheva*, right after "Magein Avot," that we now do, we've done it for months now, Les reads it in Hebrew, and I chant the English, so we interpolate the Hebrew and English together.[57]

Due to the specific challenges of not being together in the same room, not being able to daven together side by side, and not being able to hear each other, every prayer

[56] Breitzer, 2021.
[57] Schiller, 2021.

leader I interviewed made liturgical choices which they would not have done had the community been praying together in person as usual.

Shift in Role of the Cantor

Cantors' roles transformed during the time of the pandemic, as they took on new responsibilities while crafting online community. Other parts of their jobs, which had seemed core to their work pre-pandemic, no longer seemed as necessary. Cantors Mutlu, Michaels, Schiller, and Breitzer all had unique responses in how their roles as cantors shifted throughout this time.

Cantor Mutlu told me of the expansion of his role in many ways, adapting new technological skills, becoming more of a stakeholder in synagogue and worship decisions throughout the pandemic, and furthering his guitar and piano accompaniment skills. Central Synagogue is a place where the cantor is constantly supported by large group of musicians, including a pianist, violinist, woodwinds, and even a four-person vocal quartet. When that was all taken away in quarantine, he had no choice but to hone his own accompaniment skills, sitting down at the piano and figuring out the sheet music, or bringing out the guitar. For many cantors, this may have been in their toolbox already, but for some who were blessed with a musical team for Shabbat, this was an uphill challenge. In addition to improving his self-accompanying skills, Cantor Mutlu also spoke of his heightened technological literacy. "I think, again the obvious is that in a lot of places the cantor is already the audio-visual manager for better or for worse, with or without the experience. So, this forced me and a lot of other people to add to our resumes and our skillset. Audio editing, recording techniques, understanding equipment, video

editing…"[58] Many cantors in synagogues without a person designated to handle the technology of the worship had to start from nothing, learning everything there was to know about microphones, audio and visual editing, Zoom settings, and more.

Cantor Michaels described feeling the huge weight of the challenge to create community virtually. He explained to me that what had been a job based in human connection and relationships had become a job mostly focused on preparing the various audio and video elements for Shabbat or other online events. The time-consuming work was crushing for Michaels, as he had to individually prepare 12-15 elements of worship throughout the week.

> The most challenging part for me was the lack of collaboration, even though we had played with Acapella [sic]. It became so time intensive to work with the app to edit, produce the 12-15 pieces of t'fillah and music on a weekly basis that both myself and Cantor [Michael] Smolash were really becoming burned out. At the same time we felt strongly that this is the cornerstone of what we do and we wanted to make sure that it continued. We settled in with understanding that that was not always going to be possible and that we would take turns, and that's where Zoom became sort of a boon for us where we could individually do different things but both be there together. The internal part for me was that I felt lonely, and craved the community that we weren't able to create in person. At the same time, it has been a growth experience because I've had to learn how to create community virtually and push myself to be present more for people in a time where I think I was used to having the moments built in.[59]

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[58] Mutlu, 2021.

For Cantor Michaels, the cantorial role shifted immensely, and at times the solitary nature of the new challenges made him feel lonely. However, his new need to go out of his way and be creative to foster connections and maintain congregant relationships challenged him in a way that helped him to be even more present for his community.

Cantor Breitzer had a unique take on the pandemic role of the cantor, as he described to me his process of honing his faith and his focus during this time. While other cantors may say that their ultimate focus was to get their congregants to engage with the music through singing in their respective homes, Breitzer had a different focus for the worship.

> I had to hone my faith that what I was doing once we set into the rhythm of Zoom as our primary medium of worship was actually working for people. I realized that there was no way I could know for sure that people were singing along in the same way they would be if we were in person. Because I was trying to focus on anticipating the next slide and thinking about what has to come next, in the service I wasn't necessarily looking to see if people's mouths are moving. I know in my experience as a Jew in the Zoom pew, I know if I'm encouraged to sing along, it's very rare that I'm actually singing along. I'll move my mouth to make it look like I am singing along but, oftentimes I don't feel particularly moved to for whatever reason. It might seem hypocritical of me to expect the same of my community, but what I realized is that it didn't really matter. I should use this as an opportunity to hone my faith and my focus. I've learned to become really

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[59] Michaels, 2021.

> intimate with the little green light at the top of my laptop, not only to just use it as a point of focus but also to whom I'm singing. I find that if I'm always looking there, I can be that much more present especially if I'm doing the same melodies from week to week, which is normative for our community because we sort of have a flow of melodies that work for us.[60]

Cantor Breitzer realized the ultimate goal cannot be to make every person on Zoom sing and engage in that way with him. Rather, the goal was for him to be engaged and present, to potentially foster connection with those attending the service virtually. Instead of fostering that connection through eye contact in the sanctuary, Cantor Breitzer found the next best thing when leading virtually, which was to seem as if he was engaging with those watching by becoming 'intimate' with the little green light next to his camera. This is similar to the strategy of the Central clergy when they made the decision to look into the camera each service to maintain connection. The role of the cantor for Breitzer shifted in what his focus was while doing his job and the ways in which he had to go above and beyond to maintain relationships. For worship music, he also described the shift in what he could do during services since communal singing wasn't a concern. He was freer to choose the key best for his voice, to bring out and emphasize certain words, or to change the tempo without worrying about its impact on the congregational voice.

Cantor Benjie Schiller also noticed a shift in the cantorial role, in that the cantorial work has never been more important. For her, she saw the services as a "lifeline of hope" for many of her congregants and for herself, and the fact that clergy got the

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[60] Breitzer, 2021.

opportunity to cultivate this feeling and bestow it upon others made her believe that the cantorial role was even more emphasized. Schiller commented that some of the social aspects of being a cantor, such as schmoozing with congregants in the hallway or at the oneg after Shabbat services, were no longer possible. In place of them, however, was an awareness that still being present for congregations, as well as fostering human connection between them, were both increasingly important during this challenging time.[61]

The Congregant Perspective

In my research, I interviewed both the cantors who had to rework prayer and worship music as well as the congregants who experienced it. I reached out to three individuals on the basis of their involvement at their respective synagogues, and their tenures of membership prior to the pandemic. Steven and Linda Weiss gave me insightful feedback about their time at Temple Israel, West Bloomfield spent virtually as well as in person before the virus. Ed Saslaw is a dedicated community member of Central Synagogue in Midtown East, Manhattan. Both interviews offered unique perspective on clergy efforts to engage during the pandemic.

Steven and Linda Weiss, a married couple who are regulars at Temple Israel worship services, shared with me their candid feedback about the online engagement they experienced during the pandemic. Prior to the online transition, the Weisses made sure to go to Friday night services 3-4 times a month, only missing services if absolutely necessary. When the pandemic hit, they told me their interest in engaging with synagogue events, classes, and worship only increased, as they were craving that sense of

[61] Schiller, 2021.

community amidst their feeling of isolation. When services went online, Linda remarked that "It made it easier, it made it a lot more convenient. But, it wasn't [the same as] being there."[62] To Steve and Linda, the convenience of the online medium didn't detract from the feeling that they were still in their living room, sitting on their couch instead of in the grand sanctuary at the synagogue surrounded by friends and community members. They appreciated the flexibility of livestreaming services from home, yet were still accustomed to long-ingrained ritual choreography An exchange between Steven and Linda speaks further to this tension:

> Steven: It was flexibility that made it really helpful, I loved the fact that I could watch and participate in services in my shorts and my T-shirt and I find myself occasionally in the part of the service where they ask you to stand up, I keep sitting, I like my recliner! I'm essentially lazy.
>
> Linda: But you always stand for Kaddish.
>
> Steven: We always stand for Kaddish. We always held hands toward the Kaddish. So we loved the flexibility, but to what extent are we part of the service?[63]

During our interview, Steven mentioned the issue of sacred time and coming from a more traditionally observant Jewish background. He began to ask himself if he was truly a part of the minyan when he was livestreaming from his own home.

> Let me ask you something though. Since my schedule is so flexible I'm able to watch Friday night services sometimes on a Saturday morning. Am I part of the minyan? Because it's not when it's actually happening. It's interesting. For

[62] Interview with Steven and Linda Weiss, Zoom, June 10, 2021.
[63] Steven and Linda Weiss, 2021.

> example, on Zoom, let's say there was a night where we were participating with a different synagogue, but then we wanted to see Temple Israel because I had a yahrzeit that was for my father. But since we weren't doing it in real time, was I really saying Kaddish for my father? Or did it not count because I was saying it alone by myself at home? It's an interesting theological question.[64]

Is it possible to participate in services at a different time than when they were streamed, and still be a part of the minyan? Are you even in the minyan, regardless of the time you watched it, if you are alone in your own home? This was an inner conflict for Steven, who was raised in an observant Jewish home and eventually joined a Reform synagogue at Linda's request. Steven also felt conflicted by knowing that Temple Israel's Shabbat services were filmed in advance, as Cantor Michaels mentioned before. In reference to these, Steven said,

> I didn't like that. It wasn't so much a religious objection to getting it ready early, it was more that I didn't feel as much a part of it. Sometimes it was filmed as much as three days in advance, and they ran into problems when the sermon was recorded on Wednesday but something pivotal happened between then and Shabbat, the rabbinic attention in terms of educating people suffered, and once in a while, that bothered me. Sometimes it was obvious they were filming on different days and the cantor was just putting on the same shirt for each video, and that was a little distracting when I caught it.[65]

Even though Steven took issue with the nature of Temple Israel's pre-recorded Shabbat services, he had overwhelmingly positive feedback about how the clergy handled

[64] Steven Weiss, 2021.
[65] Steven Weiss, 2021.

the pandemic and the online transition. He was impressed by their ability to pivot and expressed immense gratitude for how they did their best to keep the community active and alive. The clergy's efforts made a stark difference for both Steven and Linda, yet they worry about how they will be perceived in the future. "I think the clergy in Detroit across the board did an incredible job. I compliment them for that. Going forward, one of the challenges is that they will be perceived as even more superhuman than they were before because I think, they were very present on Zoom—between classes, speakers, and services they were terrific."[66] Will the boundaries between the personal and professional lives of clergy be increasingly blurred after the pandemic? Will clergy be pulled in many different directions after having been so visible and present for their congregations during the quarantine? Steven brings up interesting questions to ponder when considering the impact of the pandemic on Jewish clergy's work/life balance.

Ed Saslaw, devoted congregant of Central Synagogue in Manhattan, sat down with me to discuss his involvement in Jewish communal life over the course of the pandemic. He has had a busy schedule due to all the online events he engages in, so I was surprised that he could spend time with me for the interview. When I asked Ed if he felt a powerful sense of community from his online engagement with the synagogue, he told me, "I'm shocked that it happened and I shouldn't have been. I should have somehow anticipated how great this would be. Especially during the period where we were so isolated from being in person, I never saw anybody EVER except for in this

[66] Steven Weiss, 2021.

way."[67] For Ed, who had little to no in-person interaction with others during quarantine, the online programming at Central Synagogue was that "lifeline of hope" which Cantor Schiller discussed earlier. The way he filled his need for social interaction was through online livestreaming of services, Zoom events organized by Central clergy, and writing in the chat at these various programs, schmoozing before and after. He spoke to me about his involvement leading up to the pandemic, and how he really wanted to be there every day. It was too challenging because of the physical distance he lives from the synagogue. He had been a longtime advocate for livestreaming minyanim, Torah study, and other programs which he believed would bring in more participants who don't live near 55th Street and Lexington Avenue.

> It's not the prayer part which I like, saying Kaddish is okay, but just chit-chatting with people that I know beforehand and being with people even if it's just on a screen has been a plus. That was not done at all before the pandemic. I whined to Jesse Lauter[68] about it maybe 87 or 88 times, and then Rabbi Salth's dad died and he started whining so I thought 'OK, now I have rabbinic whining on my side,' but nothing happened. Now, I can do a Wednesday Torah study and be taught by Rabbi Berman and as you know, she could teach the world anything and it's just great.[69]

Ed remarked that his requests for minyanim to be livestreamed went unanswered until the pandemic made it necessary for all to participate in the prayer service. The pandemic brought about some changes to synagogue life that had been long in the

[67] Interview with Ed Saslaw, Zoom, June 13, 2021.
[68] Jesse Lauter is head of the audiovisual team at Central Synagogue and will be a focus of a later chapter.
[69] Saslaw, 2021.

making, including making events and prayer services accessible to all. During this time Central Synagogue also added closed captioning to their services, which hearing-impaired congregants had been requesting for years. We will discuss this change further in the next chapters.

When asked specifically how the Central clergy had made an impact on him during this time, Ed told me of their significant efforts to form small groups for those who wanted more frequent online company. Rabbi Nicole Auerbach of Central played a pivotal role in empowering these groups to create their own rituals and norms and invited Ed to take on a leadership role within the group.

> So my concrete example would be that in Elul, Rabbi Auerbach and Lauren Dickel started these various groups, one of which is a Havdalah group, and I was running it! We decided that we love it, that the group liked doing this Saturday night. We had maybe the longest Havdalah—we went two hours long. We made it a ritual and we just stayed on for a long time. I would say Rabbi Auerbach did say that that was her goal for it to continue on even though Central wasn't going to push it, but we've been together for almost a year now and it's great. I mean there are people there; Alissa Ballot, I feel like she's one of my closest friends and I have never met her, ever![70]

The unique aspect of this ritual time online was that community members would engage with and even befriend people whom they had never met before. They created community even though they were physically miles apart. The length of the Havdalah

[70] Saslaw, 2021.

ceremony, as Ed describes, indicates how much Central congregants craved social interaction, even if it were through a screen.

Ed also shared his thoughts with me regarding what he sees as the advantages and disadvantages of livestreaming. To him, the greatest advantage was obvious: there was no commute. He had spent years commuting over an hour to Central, and the commute to his laptop saved him valuable time in his day. But for Ed, the disadvantages outweighed the ease and flexibility of attending services online:

> I say the biggest one is, my speaker is here, I put it on my TV, the sound is beautiful, but it doesn't come close to what it's like from the third row, looking at the back of Dave Strickland. It's not just how much I love the music, which I do as you know, it's the overwhelming, enveloping part of it, you just can't get that without other people around and the swarm of music that just lifts you up, almost physically picks you up. I really miss that. I think I miss that more than anything else. The architecture, the beauty of the building, I definitely miss having people around. I miss the camaraderie and the company. The sense of the collective.[71]

Ed Saslaw had a positive perspective on the pandemic and his time online with Central Synagogue, but still idealized the memory of being in the physical sanctuary and all the intangible experiences associated with it. From his testimony, it seems that even with the most expensive microphones, a superior audiovisual team, and the highest quality equipment for listening at your home, in the end there is still nothing like the all-encompassing nature of live music.

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[71] Saslaw, 2021.

Not only did Ed participate in Central Synagogue events, but those of other synagogues as well. He told me of his usual routine on Friday, tuning in to 5 different congregations' services to see the leadership of Central's past cantorial interns and of friends with whom he has crossed paths in the larger Reform Jewish community.

> I think I'm up to five synagogues now. Well starting at 1:30 I watch Cantor Zoe Jacobs in London because she was our previous cantorial intern. I have come to love that service a lot. I go to Shaare Emeth in St Louis because of Lucy Greenbaum....I also go to [Temple DeHirsch Sinai] in Seattle where Chava Mirel is at, I try to do Westchester Reform Temple because of Danielle [Rodnizki], you can see a pattern here. And now I'm adding Temple Israel of Westport for [Julia Cadrain]. Yes, I've branched out.[72]

The advent of synagogue livestreaming has allowed individuals to branch out from their own congregations, explore what other communities have to offer, and celebrate Shabbat with back-to-back services at different spiritual homes. Ed Saslaw serves as an example of someone who took full advantage of the technological advancements synagogues undertook during the pandemic. We will now explore perspectives of some people responsible for the audiovisual technology of the synagogue.

[72] Saslaw, 2021.

Chapter Three: Synagogue Livestreaming and the Transition to Online Worship

Prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the most substantive study of livestreaming in communal Jewish life was limited to Orthodox communities. According to Andrea Lieber, Associate Professor of Religion at Dickinson College, research of 'digital Judaism' has been disproportionately conducted on the Orthodox Jewish community. To her, the time has come to widen that scope to liberal Jewish communities in order to better grasp the impact of technology on American Jews.[73]

In her article, Lieber focuses on the ironic contradiction of what she calls "digital detoxing" on Shabbat while simultaneously livestreaming worship services. She argues that "today's networked communities are more fluid, more flexible and driven by the desire of individuals (as opposed to groups) to pursue connections based on their specific needs and interests."[74] The way communities are forged and sustained, she says, has shifted due to our increasing dependency on our mobile devices, the onset of social networks and their mode of connection, and this in turn presents both challenges and opportunities for synagogues in their engagement. Lieber suggests that technology is allowing for new and exciting ways of crafting Jewish community, bridging together tradition with innovation.

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[73] Isetti, Giulia, et al. "Networked Individuals: The Virtual Reality of the Sabbath in Twenty-First Century American Judaism." *Religion in the Age of Digitalization: From New Media to Spiritual Machines*, Routledge, Abingdon, Oxon, 2021.

[74] Lieber, Andrea. "Networked Individuals: The Virtual Reality of the Sabbath in Twenty-First Century American Judaism." 3.

So, how does this relate to the COVID-19 pandemic and the questions posed in this thesis? As Marshall McLuhan once stated, "The medium is the message."[75] Livestreaming became the only option for transmitting prayer from the synagogue to congregant homes as they quarantined due to fear of contracting the virus. And it allowed for worshippers to have more accessibility, flexibility, and even freedom to "shul-hop" in digital space. Lieber cites the experience of one such worshipper, Stephanie Butnick, who is also the co-host of the podcast *Unorthodox*, "As listeners know, I live stream…I toggle between Central Synagogue, and then if it's too 'organy', I'll switch to Lab/Shul with Rabbi Amichai Lau-Lavie…and then when that gets too much, I go back to Central where I love Rabbi Angela Buchdahl…It's kind of like 'choose your own adventure.'"[76] Butnick also recognizes that there are limitations to the medium, saying that "it's different when you stand in a synagogue and you are there, you are hungry, and are…taken to this other place by just the fact of your fasting and your being among all these people…yes, you lost that…It's like Peloton versus a Soul Cycle class. You're doing it on your own. It's a very different spiritual experience."[77] Livestreaming of services provides the option for viewers to switch from shul to shul, figuring out which service speaks to them most. However, as Butnick states, there is something about physically being in the sanctuary, truly in the prayer with no distractions. This sentiment hearkens back to the comments of both congregants whom I interviewed.

To get a more behind-the-scenes look at the technology that goes into the crafting of online worship, I spoke with the head of the audio-visual department at Central

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[75] McLuhan, Marshall. Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man. The MIT Press. Print. 1964.
[76] Butnick as quoted by Lieber, Andrea. Networked Individuals: The Virtual Reality of the Sabbath in Twenty-First Century American Judaism. Print. 10/15/20.
[77] Butnick, 2020.

Synagogue, Jesse Lauter. Lauter was hired specifically by the previous Senior Rabbi, Rabbi Peter Rubinstein, to fix their livestreaming program and to make it something the synagogue could excel at doing. Since this technology was initially outside his expertise, Lauter did research by studying famous rock bands and how they streamed their concerts. Specifically, Lauter took pointers from the band Phish. "Phish was the first popular rock and roll band to livestream their concerts for their fans and they had a company that did it for them called *Nugs.net*, and in a lot of ways they were the pioneers of livestreaming in the world. They're a major company that does a lot of rock and roll bands from Bruce Springsteen to Pearl Jam to Metallica, and Phish was their first client. Having that resource and being able to speak to them, they were able to basically say this is how you do it. I went to conferences, met vendors, and so forth"[78] Once you have the resources, he told me, you would only need to take a few steps to set up the system before it would be fully operational.

What challenged Lauter most in the beginning of his tenure at Central Synagogue was the sanctuary itself. In addition to installing state-of-the-art livestreaming technology, Rabbi Rubenstein had directed him to ensure that the presence of the equipment would not distract any congregants from their praying experience. Fortunately, a relatively recent facilities restoration made it somewhat easier: Obviously, we know that the Central Synagogue fire[79] was an unfortunate event, but fortunately for us at least with it there was a reconstruction, including conduits, which is how you run a cable

[78] Interview with Jesse Lauter, Zoom, June 8, 2021.
[79]The Central Synagogue fire took place on August 29th, 1998 started by a workman's blowtorch during renovations. McFadden, Robert D. "Fire Heavily Scars Landmark East Side Synagogue." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 29 Aug. 1998,

without making it exposed. So, we have a lot of capability to run a large amount of cables through the walls now because of the reconstruction of the synagogue. It still doesn't make it easy whenever I add new things and if I add something like a new screen, it seems deceivingly easy but in reality it's really hard to do that properly."[80]

Rabbi Rubinstein wanted to find a way to adopt this top-notch livestreaming technology to engage the broader congregant community who no longer lived in New York or could not make it to the sanctuary, without detracting from the actual goings-on within the sanctuary on a given Shabbat. The directives given to Lauter were seemingly simple, yet if not accomplished, hundreds of community members would be affected. "Most of my work over the years, I was given something, there was a little bit of infrastructure, told to build on it, and to allow complete and total access to everyone around the world, making them feel like they're at Central Synagogue."[81] As Lauter collaborated with various clergy on this livestreaming project, it became apparent that the emphasis should be on the service itself, rather than obvious special effects. "I kind of view it as a very documentarian stream, like we're not very flashy, whereas I see some synagogues put up graphics constantly, I don't want people to be distracted."[82] The livestream at Central has developed over the years that Lauter has been in charge, expanding their use of technology and implementing new tools to help those watching feel that they are truly there. Even though Lauter and Central's audiovisual team have an intricate setup in place, their goal is ultimately for participants to not even notice the production.

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[80] Lauter, 2021.
[81] Lauter, 2021.
[82] Lauter, 2021.

When asked about how livestream technology creates connections for remote worshippers, Lauter shared,

> It's something I oftentimes forget that I'm a pretty critical part of that, and I'm reminded when I get notes from people, especially around the holidays, it's very heartening and endearing to hear from people. It's a reminder that for a lot of people this is their source of spirituality and this is their sanctuary and their congregation. And I know I'm the conduit for it because if the stream's not working, then they don't get to go to shul.[83]

One distinct opportunity that came to Lauter with the onset of online-only worship in 2020 was the introduction of livestream closed captioning. Hearing-impaired congregants had long been requesting such accommodation, and they were finally granted it, despite the inherent challenge for Lauter in providing both Hebrew and English captions. Even with the additional work, Lauter was proud to be able to implement closed captioning as a means of greater inclusion. Another sort of technological inclusion brought on by the pandemic was a surge in virtual choir videos. Synagogue choirs could not closely convene in the same physical space, since scientists had deemed singing a super-spreading activity and large distances between singers was necessary. Most synagogue choirs either went on hiatus or recorded their audio separately within their own homes, acquiring a sound engineer to splice their audio and video together to make one cohesive piece. To get his perspective, I interviewed Edon Valdman, an audio engineer whose freelance career skyrocketed as he was hired by many New York area synagogues to create choral works for them during the pandemic.

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[83] Lauter, 2021.

Describing the process of making virtual choir videos, Valdman conveyed how tedious, time-consuming, and labor-intensive the work was that he was accomplishing for synagogues. “I did three videos for Shaarey Tefilah for Hanukkah. One video was kids and teen choir, one video was adult choir and pro singers, and a third video with everyone in it. I clocked 68-69 hours work on all three videos combined in two weeks, and I had to do videos for Shira Kline’s concert simultaneously over that time as well.”[84] Valdman studied audio engineering as an undergraduate but taught himself video editing through trial and error. He was also hired by Hebrew Union College- Jewish Institute of Religion to create virtual choir videos, along with supporting cantorial students’ desire to include choral music in their online recital and practica presentations. When detailing his process, Valdman launched into a multi-step, tried and true system that he had developed over the past two years, featuring numerous software programs and plans for many different scenarios. The more choir members and the more they are featured within a song, the more time it takes for him to synchronize and edit the audio. “To give you a concrete example, I was doing one recently where there were 40 people in the choir, there were 3 choruses, they were each slow and stretched out with 4 or 5 phrases. I worked on the vocal line part of this process alone for this one song for two days, eight hours a day...the vocal line is the hardest part of the process.”[85] He often started projects by asking the client how many participants there would be, how many instruments, and the length of the song. From there, he would send a Dropbox folder with instructions to each person, telling them which device to use, what settings to use when recording, and links to the track and the sheet music. Once the videos were submitted, Valdman would spend two

[84] Interview with Edon Valdman, Zoom, December 15, 2021.
[85] Valdman, 2021.

weeks or more cleaning up the audio, studying the score, synchronizing it, mixing the voices by voice part and then the instrumentalist tracks, and making the visuals to accompany the audio.

When asked to comment on the uptick in virtual choir videos and the purpose they were serving for congregations, Valdman had a lot to say about the meaning they hold for communities.

> It's really tough to not have communal singing. That's a huge part of Judaism and Jewish prayer and the Jewish experience, whether it's singing together at the table before or after a meal, or in synagogue during prayer. When everyone is on Zoom, it's not a platform conducive to singing in groups. It became the only way to do group singing and so it adds that kind of meaning back in.[86]

Valdman also drew a lot of meaning out of the connections he was making with each client or synagogue, and he believes in the possibility of these connections made during the pandemic to evolve and persist.

> Part of my process that I didn't describe is that I'm always really involved from the get-go, I try to be, I want to be. Not on a production level, but I really enjoy just talking with the people I'm working on these things for. I don't think I've done any of these video projects at all where we finished the project and the client was like 'Cool, thanks, talk to you never!' A lot of people were so thankful that they now had this concrete video that they had done together with their people. Some would say, 'we've never sounded so good!' and they have something they

[86] Valdman, 2021.

> can look at and say 'wow that was us'. Working for a synagogue, you become a part of the community."[87]

The crafting of online worship would be incomplete without mentioning the surge in virtual choral videos, since they allowed for communal singing and performance to endure when it was not safe to sing together in person. And audiovisual technicians in many ways served as the unsung heroes who made communal singing and communal worship still possible during the darkest of times.

[87] Valdman, 2021.

Chapter 4: The Medium and the Music: *The Impact of the Internet on Synagogue Music*

The style and quality of synagogue liturgical song were both impacted by the transition to the online medium of worship. Many of the cantors whom I interviewed told me of their struggle to maintain the quality of the worship music while streaming from their homes. For many, it was a huge shift for the congregation because musical teams were not able to collaborate in the same way during the quarantine. Many enlisted the help of audiovisual technicians, such as Edon Valdman, who would make choral videos that featured all of the members of the musical team. Others decided to hone their own guitar and piano skills, incorporating them within the context of the worship service, becoming more independent as worship leaders.

For a place like Central Synagogue, the clergy team knew they had an uphill battle to maintain the caliber of the liturgical music they had been providing on any given Friday night in person prior to the pandemic. With multiple cantors, music director David Strickland, a professional quartet, string instruments, woodwinds, organ, drums, and more, Cantor Mutlu knew that replicating this musical texture in the online medium would be considerably challenging. Through the use of familiar melodies and involving the musical team through edited videos, they sought to create a short-term solution, all the while hoping to return to the grand Central sanctuary as soon as they safely could. Once their Covid taskforce deemed it safe, members of the clergy team returned to the sanctuary for services, without congregants, and with musicians masked and distanced. It was a priority to have all musicians in the same space once again, collaborating and making the music that congregants know and love.

In the beginning of this thesis, I shared the teachings of Cantor Benjie Schiller on the 5 M's inherent within every worship service—Majesty, Meditation, Moving Along, Memory, and Meeting. All 5 M's are feelings cultivated and invoked by the repertoire chosen to represent our sacred liturgy in song. Curious to hear her thoughts, I asked Schiller to describe the impact of the pandemic on these 5 M's, and how liturgical music was ultimately impacted. She shared her thoughts on how four of the five were impacted. Meeting suffered the most.

> The Meeting suffered because we couldn't hear each other's voices. My husband and I were at the synagogue leading together and we tried to engender a sense of participation, access, aliveness, invitation, through our manner of singing, the choice of keys, and everything but that was hard, because we couldn't really get the energy of hearing the voices around us, and that's the essence of meeting.[88]

Audibly joining voices together in real time was impossible in an online medium, making access to this 'M' particularly challenging within the context of synagogue music. Cantors made musical choices based on the demands of livestreaming from home or alone in the sanctuary, shifting keys to encourage congregational singing, inviting verbally for people to join in the singing, or giving visible cues during the songs to cue participation.

As for Majesty, Schiller expressed her desire throughout the pandemic to evoke a sense of it at times through the music she selected.

> I hope there were moments of majesty. That comes from having a moment in the service that lights up in a certain way something grand--the momentum is

[88] Schiller, 2021.

> different in an online service. I erred on the side of less majesty and more meditation; I didn't want to sing AT people. There were moments of majesty in a different nature-- an example would be after some terrible moment like George Floyd or what went on in Israel, some great strife, the music that I sang, like the nign after the Amidah, or in the place of the meditation, even if it was something communal, I would start it out in a way that had a majestic quality. To rouse people![89]

Cantor Schiller suggests that in these times of great strife and political turmoil, a moment of majesty within our liturgical music often provides a moment for congregants to let the music of our ancestors wash over them. However, frequent moments of majesty became less important in this medium, as she expressed that it did not feel necessary to sing 'at' people, rather, she was inclined to engender a sense of invitation through song.

Another way Schiller found to invite people in through song was through recognizing the importance of meditative moments:

> Meditative I think was very powerful for people, suspending time, slowing things down a little, providing an ambience of open-ended prayer and contemplation through the music, the gentleness that even over the microphone can be evoked and the permission to breathe, to take time, to reflect.[90]

While some of the M's suffered due to the medium, the meditative quality of music and worship was needed more than ever in a time of uncertainty, fear, and loss. For Schiller, she chose to evoke this feeling through the quiet dynamics achieved through the

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[89] Schiller, 2021.
[90] Schiller, 2021.

technology they employed, the gentle quality of her voice, and picking settings of music that warranted more contemplation.

Another 'M' that Schiller believes cantors paid more attention to during the pandemic was 'Moving Along'.

> Moving Along is really important because we need to be conscious of time, of dynamics, and of Zoom, not taking too much time. People's concentration is limited, people's time is limited. The energy of the service is important, you want to give a sense of momentum and of moving through and not overdoing it. As cantors we struggle with this, we want to create a lot of meaning, singing that piece again, but also, we must think about the whole. Moving along was more important than ever.[91]

As has been discussed, many clergy who crafted worship for the online medium were acutely aware of the need to shorten services. An element of momentum helps to provide participants with the feeling that there is a throughline to the service, and that it would conclude in a reasonable amount of time. When each prayer seems to lead towards the next and worship leaders bridge the melodies together, they reassure the worshippers that they are all moving somewhere and at the right speed.

Professor Merri Arian, who in Chapter 1 shared her "5 E's" framework for cultivating worship, developed additional principles for the prayer leader facilitating online services. The first principle she associates with the phrase, "*Da Lifnei Mi Atah Omeid*," ("Know before Whom you stand"). This phrase is often seen displayed above the Torah scroll ark in sanctuaries Arian described this principle as having two

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[91] Schiller, 2021.

components; knowing that the prayer leader is serving God during the worship, and that the prayer leader is also serving their congregants' needs and trying to connect them to God through the music, the liturgy, and the Torah within the worship.

Arian's second principle was that congregants needed to feel seen and heard more than ever in the online tabernacles created in response to the pandemic. Since congregants largely needed to be muted during online worship, Arian described that she needed to "find ways to literally pierce the screen" in order to cultivate community and make sure that this principle was accomplished. (Arian, 2020) She listed some strategies to do so, such as making sure Zoom gallery view was always employed while she was leading services, rather than having her be larger than everyone else in speaker view. She talked about the need for congregants to interact with and see each other during the most isolating parts of the pandemic, and gallery view was her small way of accomplishing that. What allowed her to stay in gallery view and for people to see each other was her commitment to sending PDFs of the liturgy to all members so that she did not have to share her screen during the service. Giving the PDFs out to faithful members also provided a tangible, hands-on element to an online service that otherwise would feel like a passive activity, like watching TV.

Arian's third principle was to make sure the worship was relevant to her congregants' lives in real-time. It was important to speak about the issues which were actively affecting their everyday lives, relating it to liturgy and Torah, and using the music to help heal and emotionally process their daily experiences. Arian also spoke about using familiar melodies in order to provide comfort and encouraging those in

attendance to sing "full-throated in their living rooms" since they would be less inhibited in their own spaces.[92]

In a few instances, however, introducing new melodies and musical textures seemed to speak to this same principle. Cantor Breitzer spoke about introducing Congregation Beth Elohim to Yosef Goldman's setting of "Gesher Tzar M'od" after Shabbat morning sermons by way of staying relevant to what the congregation was thinking about and concerned about: The lyrics, adapted from a teaching of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, translate to "The whole world is a very narrow bridge and the main thing is to have no fear at all." Breitzer felt the meaning of these words would bring comfort to people feeling scared during the social unrest of the pandemic. By choosing this musical setting of that text, he wanted to portray the message

> ...that we're all in this together and to remember that we're not alone and to not be afraid, and that provided a lot of meaning in the first few months when the George Floyd protests were happening. That provided people an important moment to connect the parasha with what was happening in the current moment, in the world right at this moment, and to bridge us into the concluding moments of the service.[93]

Musically, a lot changed and evolved for the congregation of Bet Am Shalom in White Plains. Cantor Schiller stated,

> One of the major ways we pivoted, normally before COVID we had very little instrumentation, no piano, guitar on a random moment. Most everything else was a cappella, communal singing in a large prayer hall where there's a lot of

[92] Arian, 2020.
[93] Breitzer, 2021.

> reverberation of sound. We added guitar—a lot. We wanted to keep the energy of the service alive and in the davening moments didn't let the guitar take over. We became more and more comfortable with guitar, and it helped! It provided this background sound, filled out the sound of the congregation through the guitar.[94]

At Congregation Beit Simchat Torah, music director Joyce Rosenzweig knew she did not want to compromise on the diversity of liturgical settings which was so integral to their worship experience. Whereas so many communities decided to stick with what is familiar to the congregation for several reasons throughout the pandemic, Rosenzweig wanted to keep their commitment to highlighting different composers, different music traditions within the context of Jewish liturgical song, and to providing special music on days such as Kristallnacht in order to enlighten and engage the congregation. Joyce shared her process preparing for these online services, which consisted of "hundreds of piano tracks" that she would record in her own time throughout the week for the cantorial intern Sam Rosen to work with prior to the service. While working with a piano track might seem fairly easy, it took Sam considerable time to work out the timing of the track and where his voice fit in to the tempo chosen by Joyce when she made the recording. In real time, a pianist can follow the vocalist as they are in the same room, making eye contact, connected through the song flowing between them. But with pre-recorded piano tracks, Joyce and Sam had to spend extra time to really talk through the liturgical music before the recording was even made, talking through phrasing, the various tempos throughout the piece, dynamics, and more.

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[94] Schiller, 2021.

Many extra steps were needed for collaborative musical pieces to possess the "real-time" quality that Rosenzweig says they were eventually able to achieve. In order to achieve it, , Rosenzweig actually played the piano in her apartment with the camera angled towards her, yet the audio was completely muted. Rosen was the one playing the piano track she had worked on throughout the week, and his voice completed the finished product in real-time. This way, Rosenzweig remarked, "the energy of real-time was there."[95]

The online medium forced cantors, synagogue musicians, and music directors to think outside of the box as they were thrust outside of their comfort zones and tasked with engaging a community on mute, potentially with their cameras turned off. It seemed like an insurmountable challenge, yet many developed unique strategies to build community through music during an unimaginable time.

[95] Rosenzweig, 2020.

Conclusion: Looking to the Future of Jewish Worship

What does all of the information gathered here mean for the future? What are we taking with us as we move beyond the pandemic? What was illuminated for us during this time that may change synagogue life forever? All of the people I spoke with had ideas relating to the permanent change in our communities, sharing their observations on what has already changed and what they suspect might live on when the pandemic is hopefully a distant memory.

Steven Weiss, congregant and lay leader of Temple Israel West Bloomfield, predicted that this pandemic will have been extremely transformative for synagogue life and that its impact would be enormous. Weiss wagered that the way Reform communities leaned into the technology and the online medium during this time has the potential to create "a tug of war between the Orthodox movement and the more liberal movements of Judaism. The chasm between the Orthodox Jews and the Reform Jews may grow even more as a result."[96] As mentioned before, Weiss was also very attracted to the newfound flexibility of attending services from his recliner at home, wearing T-shirt and jeans. As for the future, he stated with a grin, "I think there are going to be lots of folks who will be happy to go back in the synagogue, but I think the attractiveness of flexibility and the attractiveness of [being] in your home and you don't have to get dressed... I think it's going to have an impact."[97] Weiss also spoke of the transition in our history from a sacrificial-based cult to a Temple-based religion, which he said ultimately enhanced Judaism. He believes we are at a similar crossroads now.

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[96] Weiss, 2021.
[97] Weiss, 2021.

As for Ed Saslaw of Central Synagogue, he left me with a hope and a prayer for the future of Judaism and for his synagogue. “All I can do is hope, I hope that much of the livestreaming of various types on Zoom and on Facebook, survives.”[98] His fervent expression of hope is derived from the distance he lives from the synagogue. If he could, Saslaw stated he would be at the synagogue full-time. Now with the technology Central Synagogue has invested in, he is able to livestream and participate fully in classes, services, and events without making the long trek to the city.

Cantor Neil Michaels of Temple Israel believes that a hybrid synagogue, toeing the line between virtual and in-person, is definitely here to stay.

> For sure virtual Judaism is here to stay and that we have for better or for worse created a monster that will perpetuate for a very long time because there is a convenience for people, and also because there’s an opportunity to reach people differently. Even things we were doing in well in person, for example our Intro to Judaism class, that’s a class where we had a nice group of people, it was in person, all of the varying clergy teaching different topics, but our reach when we do it in a virtual way is three times as much.[99]

For Temple Israel, the increase in accessibility made adult education classes grow in size and reach. Attendance practically tripled and congregants were thrilled to be able to attend from the comfort of their homes and at times that were more convenient for them. Cantor Michaels wagered that they could never rescind this offer and go back to the way things were, as the positive feedback and larger outreach due to the virtual access was immense.

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[98] Saslaw, 2021.
[99] Michaels, 2021.

Cantor Breitzer of Congregation Beth Elohim also believes multi-access services are here to stay, and he is interested to find out which times of year lend themselves more to virtual access, and on which other times of year congregants will feel compelled to be in the sanctuary physically.

> For instance, I think people if given the opportunity to go to the High Holy Days this year, they will do so. But if on any given Shabbat they happen to be away, they might find it more convenient during vacations or summer weeks to be able to tune in via Zoom and feel like they are able to participate as well as they can when not physically in the room.[100]

Another time that he predicts will be more conducive to join together on Zoom is for the Shalosh Regalim and particularly the Yizkor services that accompany them. If a festival service coincides with a weeknight, then a Zoom service may be better than opening the building for very few people to attend an hour-long service.

For Cantor Benjie Ellen Schiller, there are three aspects that are here to stay for better or for worse. The first is multi-access services and livestreaming, as many also said. The opportunity for distant family members who may be abroad or far away to tune into their cousin's bar or bat mitzvah is an incredibly positive outcome of our technological shift within the synagogue. The second is our intentionality with our worship, specifically in regard to the length of services. Schiller believes the way we were conscious of our congregants' attention spans during the period of online worship will linger and impact how we think about crafting our worship in the future. Lastly, she

[100] Breitzer, 2021.

spoke of how the pandemic has influenced her thinking of community and singing together, appreciating now so much she has taken for granted.

> What we've learned is how precious it is to be together in sacred community and not take it for granted. To appreciate the energy, the beautiful sounds, the cacophony, and the aliveness of being together. And also our sacred spaces and how they engender that, and how it's not our kitchen table and it's not our desk, it is a sacred space and what is it there for, and it's waiting for us. It felt like our sacred spaces were waiting for us to come back, I felt the love of that sacred space.[101]

Schiller beautifully described what we were missing during this time of virtual Judaism, and how we can never forget the feeling of being next to one another, singing, praying, and breathing together. The sacred space of our sanctuaries is even holier now after the separation, and the image of the sanctuary waiting and welcoming us back with love is an image filled with comfort and relief.

[101] Schiller, 2021.

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Narrative Summary for HUC Library

This thesis, entitled Crafting Communal Worship on the Web: The Impact of COVID-19 on Congregations, Cantors, and their Musical Teams, was written by Jenna McMillan for partial fulfillment of the requirements for Cantorial Ordination at the Hebrew Union College: Jewish Institute of Religion. It includes an introduction, four chapters, and conclusion. This thesis will provide context and detailed narrative for those pondering the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on congregations, cantors, and worship. This thesis details the evolution of online worship during the pandemic and features firsthand quotes from cantors and prayer leaders in the field regarding their strategies for online musical engagement during this transitional time. It will essentially be a snapshot in time, for those wanting to reflect on the transformative change that congregations and clergy went through when the virus imposed upon them. The thesis reflects on strategies for engagement through prayer and song prior to the pandemic, and how the strategies would have been impacted by the pandemic. It then pivots to the firsthand experience of clergy, congregants, and prayer leaders as they navigated to switch to the online medium for worship, and the evolution of their strategies employed. There is a chapter featuring the expertise of two technicians of prayer who lent their voices to the project, sharing their thoughts on livestreaming, visual tefillah, and virtual choir videos. From there, the thesis dives into how the music was impacted and the approach to crafting prayer was forever changed when in the online realm. This thesis relied upon personally conducted interviews with cantors, prayer leaders, audiovisual teams, congregants, and more. There were many secondary sources used as well, regarding the crafting of prayer and livestreaming. Whoever is reading this, thank you!