

Live Streaming Services at Bet Torah

One of the hallmarks of the Conservative Jewish movement is its focus on harmonizing Jewish values and traditions with modernity. In keeping with that focus, Bet Torah's Ritual Committee and Board of Directors have been reviewing how to take advantage of technology to enhance religious services for our entire Bet Torah community, including those who are unable to attend services at Bet Torah. To that end, we are pleased to report that, after considerable study and reflection, Bet Torah soon will be live streaming, on an eight-month trial basis, Shabbat, High Holiday, and festival services and potentially other Bet Torah programming. Anyone with a computer will be able to access those services with very little difficulty.

We know that for some, this change might raise a number of concerns. The Board was sensitive to those concerns, which is why it did not agree to proceed with this program until the Ritual Committee had carefully explored all aspects of live streaming in the Shabbat context and then reported to the Board. In the end, the Board and the Ritual Committee believe that live streaming will enhance, rather than detract from, our services, and will enrich the religious lives of those who would like to, but cannot, be with us in the sanctuary.

Some frequently asked questions and answers

1. What is live streaming?

Live streaming is a live broadcast of an event (a Shabbat morning Bar Mitzvah service, for example) that is transmitted across the internet. The audio (sound) and video (image) live stream event is captured by a camera and microphone, just like a television broadcast is captured by a camera, transmitted throughout the internet like any other internet-accessible program, and then viewable by any device that can access the internet, such as a computer or cell phone.

2. How is Bet Torah planning on using live streaming?

The plan is for Bet Torah to live stream Shabbat, High Holiday, and Festival services and potentially other events, such as Purim Shpiel.

3. Why is Bet Torah doing this?

One of the fundamental principles of Judaism is K'Vod Ha'Briyot, honoring the dignity of all creatures. As we learn from the Talmud, "it is better to cast oneself into a fiery furnace than publicly to put to shame one's fellow creature" (Bava Metzia 59a). There are congregants, and friends and family of congregants, who would like to but cannot attend our services in person. The homebound, the ill, those who, for a variety of reasons, cannot attend services, and those who will be far from Bet Torah at the time of a particular service will all benefit from live streaming. By implementing a live stream, we will be dignifying these people by enabling them to share in communal prayer, study, and life cycle events even though they cannot physically be present in shul. They will be able to see and hear what happens in our Sanctuary through the live stream. In this way, the technology of live streaming is no different than any other dignifying adaptive technology (*i.e.*, enhanced audio technology, mobility devices, closed circuit television, etc.) that enables everyone, no matter their circumstances, to experience Shabbat services. In the case of live stream, we will be literally revolutionizing the religious lives of those in our community who want to share virtually in the joy of communal services at Bet Torah but whose circumstances preclude them from doing so physically.

4. When will live streaming begin?

We hope to implement the live stream before Rosh Hashanah 5777.

5. Is live streaming a permanent fixture at Bet Torah?

For now, the live stream is being conducted on an eight-month trial basis. The Bet Torah Board of Directors plans to review the live stream program at the end of the eight months and determine whether there are any issues that might require its change or termination.

6. What does Jewish law say about live streaming Shabbat and High Holiday services?

From the perspective of Conservative Judaism, as interpreted by the Rabbinic Assembly and Rabbi Brusso, live streaming on Shabbat (and other days on the Jewish Calendar when our lives are subject to similarly focused mitzvot) is permissible. However, there are certain conditions that must be applied or the live stream would not be permissible. Most notably, there can be no intentional recording of the live stream because intentional recording is one of the 39 categories of Melakhah, creative work, that we are prohibited from doing on Shabbat. This means that while we will be transmitting the services that will be taking place, we will not be recording those services for any future use. Further, we will request that anyone accessing the live stream not record the service. In this way, the live stream is similar to our audio system that enables people at the back of the social hall on Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur to hear what is happening on the Bimah. The only difference between the transmission is that instead of traveling from the front of the sanctuary to the back of the sanctuary, the voices, complemented by faces, will be traveling from Bet Torah to other locations. If you wish further details on the Jewish law aspect of live streaming, we refer you to the attached report that was

prepared by the Ritual Committee and to the Rabbinic response that are referenced in the Report.

7. How will Bet Torah ensure that live streaming is done in accordance with Jewish law?

In the synagogue, the system will turn on and off automatically, before and after Shabbat. In addition, anyone who accesses the live stream will be required to agree to a short set of Jewish and secular legal requirements, such as no recording or re-transmitting the live stream.

8. Will I be part of the Minyan if I live stream?

You will not make a Minyan, but you will be able to meet your obligation to hear the Shofar and, if applicable, under certain circumstances, say Kaddish. In order for you to be able to meet your obligation to say Kaddish, (a) there must be a physical Minyan at Bet Torah, and (b) someone else must be physically present at Bet Torah saying Kaddish.

9. What consideration did the Board of Directors give to the decision whether or not to permit live streaming of Shabbat services?

First, the Ritual Committee spent many weeks studying a range of Jewish texts and Rabbinic opinions on the relevant topics, including the use of electronics on Shabbat, the nature of Shabbat restrictions, such as recording, and the Jewish value of K'Vod Ha'Briyot, or human dignity. Second, the Chairman of the Ritual Committee presented the Committee's findings to, and answered questions from, the full Board of Directors. Third, the Board discussed the issue and ultimately agreed to implement the live stream on an eight-month trial basis.

10. Do other Conservative Synagogues use live streaming, and, if so, did we consult with any of them?

Yes and yes. Many Conservative Synagogues live stream services, and the Ritual Committee consulted with a number of them, including Orangetown Jewish Center, a Conservative shul with an approach to Judaism and Jewish observance that is very similar to Bet Torah, as part of its review of live streaming. We found that there are a number of different ways to handle live streaming (some synagogues have a strict gatekeeping function, requiring the Rabbi or a lay committee to approve use, some have no gatekeeping function at all, and some have limited restrictions that are intended to ensure that the user is aware of the religious restrictions on live streaming Shabbat and Holiday services), but the basic experience are similar: a relatively small number of people take advantage of the live stream service, but those who do appreciate it being offered.

11. What sort of technology will Bet Torah be using to live stream?

There will be a small camera located in a remote corner of the main sanctuary, a very short segment of wire, which will be aesthetically masked or covered, and other technical gear located in a storage area outside the sanctuary.

12. Who can access the live stream?

Anyone will be able to access the live stream; however, each user must provide his or her name and email address and check off the appropriate boxes on the screen that will appear when signing on to access the live stream. Those boxes will ask the user to confirm that he or she will use the live stream in accordance with Bet Torah's use policy, which will be posted and which will focus on the Jewish legal aspects of live stream use on Shabbat. One of the advantages of revisiting the program in eight months is that it will allow Bet Torah to determine whether the system is being abused in any way. We learned from speaking with other synagogues that their experiences are uniformly positive, with very little or no violations of synagogue policy.

13. What are the requirements for accessing the live stream?

A computer and access to the internet. There is no fee for accessing the live stream.

14. Will I need some sort of password to access the live stream?

Yes. On a temporary basis, the password is being emailed to all Bet Torah members. In the future, the password will be sent to individual users who agree on line not to reproduce or retransmit the live stream.

15. How do I access the live stream?

You will go to a specified web page on the internet and follow the instructions there.

16. Will any of the live stream equipment will be visible in the Sanctuary?

Yes, the camera and a very small length of wire will be located in the back corner of the sanctuary in an unobtrusive location. We intend to disable or mask any lights, blinking or otherwise, on the camera.

17. Do I need any special brand of computer?

No. You only need a computer that will allow you to access the internet.

18. What if I'm not so good with computers?

Yes, you will receive easy-to-follow instructions. If you still need additional assistance, please let the Office know, and someone will help you get set up.