



Rabbi Daniel Cotzin Burg, Alexander Grass Rabbinic Chair
Rabbi Kelley Gludt, Director of Congregational Learning
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July 23, 2020 ~ 2 Av 5780

Dear Beth Am Family,

Hillel taught “*Al tifrosh min hatzibur*, do not separate yourself from the community” (*Pirkei Avot* 2:4). Fostering strong community is at the heart of what we do at Beth Am, providing space for meaningful and purposeful human interaction. At no time during the year do more of us come together than the fall holiday cycle. Next week we mark Tisha B’Av which means Rosh Hashanah is just two months away!

Our Beth Am lay/pro team has been working hard to determine the best course of action for the High Holy Days in this midst of this global health crisis. We are motivated by the question: how do we continue to live Hillel’s value of community building while upholding the equally important Jewish value of ensuring health and safety for our members and our broader community/society? To arrive at the best possible answer we are listening closely to our COVID expert advisory group and speaking with friends and colleagues from across Baltimore and around the country, as well as you, our own members.

In the coming weeks, we will be sharing more details of our emerging plans. For now we want you to be aware of our current thinking so you can begin to prepare for what we hope and expect will be a unique and wonderful High Holy Day experience.

- We will not be holding in-person services this year. Instead Rabbi Burg, Ba’alat Tefilah Abby Woloff and Rabbi Kelley Gludt are working hard to create a virtual experience for our community that will be robust, dynamic and engaging. Service lengths will be shorter than usual and content will be adapted to best convey it through the medium of live streaming or other virtual platforms.
- We plan to have a small number of Beth Am’ers in the building (a minyan’s worth but not much more) for the purpose of helping us create and convey the service to you in your homes. These may include persons/people to sound the shofar, read the sefer torah, chant key berachot, etc. Unfortunately, we will not be able to open the service to worshippers in the normal sense. We must limit and control the number of people in the building, maintaining social distance precautions, to those who will help with the service. And we will not be able to offer other typical “honors” like opening the ark or reciting poetry this year.
- We are engaging a production company this year to help us maximize the virtual format and make the experience enjoyable and impactful for you and your families/friends who we hope

will join us for services this year. There will also be opportunities to see and hear from one another even during the holidays.

- Youth and family services will be an important component of what we do this year as it is every year.
- Many typical elements of our High Holy Day services will remain, albeit in a different format. Rheda Becker plans to deliver a new Martyrology this year. Rav Daniel will conduct a virtual Open Forum. We are planning a powerful guest presentation on Yom Kippur afternoon “At the Break.” Like services, you will be able to access these via your computer, tablet, or phone.
- Some aspects of what we do will feel less familiar. Unfortunately, we are unable to convene our choir. We may incorporate prerecorded video and (limited) instrumental music.
- We will also tackle through sermons and programs issues of social and racial justice that have become increasingly apparent in the past months and as we move toward the fall elections.
- We are exploring some exciting ways to: 1. Bring a bit of Beth Am to you before Rosh Hashanah 2. Invite you into our historic and newly renovated building during the month of Elul on a rotating basis. 3. Convene small, outdoor, physically distanced gatherings in various communities in the weeks leading up to the High Holy Days. More to come on these plans!

We can only change the public health situation by doing our small part to prevent virus spread and supporting more equitable solutions for societal ills. But we cannot change the fact of the COVID-19 which will be with us for the foreseeable future. We can and will continue to invest in our *tzibur*, our sacred community and all that it stands for. We thank you for your patience as we make hard but necessary choices. Looking back on this moment years from now, we hope you will remember with fondness and pride the ways Beth Am adapted Hillel’s ancient maxim for 5781, how we did not separate from you nor facilitate your separation from each other, but instead made possible the many points of connection we know are still available to us and explored innovative ways to expand our community, deepen our learning and embrace one another.

B’virkat Shalom,

Rabbi Daniel Cotzin Burg, Alexander Grass Rabbinic Chair

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David I. Rothenberg, Executive Director

Abigail Woloff, Ba’alat Tefilah

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