

NEWS&VIEWS OF REFORM JEWS

WHAT WORKS

Personalizing the High Holy Days

“The High Holy Days only ‘work’ when people have done the spiritual work of preparing for them,” says Rabbi Laura Geller.

This past year, Temple Emanuel of Beverly Hills created an opportunity for congregants to do that work. Every temple member was invited to send in a story of a moment in their lives when the High Holidays were particularly meaningful. Carey, for example, wrote of her mother’s kugel (noodle pudding), which she makes for the daughter who never knew her grandmother. Jeff described his High Holiday experience as a 13-year-old surrounded by his paternal grandfather, father, grandmother, and mother—all gone now. Still, he reflected, “those warm feelings have been deeply embedded in me. I can draw upon them every High Holiday season.”

On each of the twenty-nine days of the month of Elul, one person’s story was sent by email to every member of the congregation to help prepare people for the upcoming Days of Awe. The stories were also printed in a booklet distributed to the congregation on Rosh Hashanah. Several rabbinical sermons then focused on the power of personal stories to illuminate spiritual journeys, and congregants were given the opportunity to share their own stories with one other.

“Our Elul Reflections have profoundly deepened our sense of community,” Rabbi Geller says. “Many people said that in synagogue they looked at the congregation a little differently...first of all because they realized how diverse and interesting the



ACTION Cyber Innovations

→ We often think of our synagogues as havens from the frenzy of the outside world, places in which we turn off our cell phones, pagers, and beepers. In reality, though, many Reform Jews, congregations, and institutions are turning toward technology to develop innovative practices that enrich worship, enhance sacred space, educate, and build community, within the synagogue and beyond.

Facilitating Worship

Ellen Muhlfelder, a member of Temple Beth El in Charlotte, North Carolina, was in the hospital during the High Holidays of 5768, but that didn’t stop her from seeing and hearing her congregation’s Kol Nidre service. “It was very satisfying,” she says. “I was so terribly sick; it just made me feel better.”

Since 2006, Temple Beth El has offered Internet streaming of evening High Holiday services (www.beth-el.com), giving people who are ill, out of town, or without transportation the means to feel a part of the events. A congregant who’s a professional videographer records and uploads the services, and also burns them onto CDs and DVDs to be distributed to area nursing homes and assisted living facilities. “We’re reaching people who wouldn’t otherwise have High Holidays,” says executive director Sara Schreiberman.

At Temple Emanu-El in Birmingham (www.ourtemple.org), wall-mounted cameras recording through a dedicated video server regularly broadcast all events held in the sanctuary or chapel—services, weddings, funerals, b’nai mitzvah, lectures, and concerts—allowing homebound congregants, college students, out-of-town members, family, friends, and all others who are

interested to “be there.” Among those making virtual connections are an estimated 2,500 people in some 15 different countries who watched this past year’s High Holiday services.



VISUAL WORSHIP SHABBAT AT WOODLANDS COMMUNITY TEMPLE, WHITE PLAINS, NY: PRAYERS AND THE SERMON ARE ILLUSTRATED AND PROJECTED ONTO SCREENS AT THE FRONT OF THE SANCTUARY.

The two temples are not alone. Temple Israel of Greater Miami (<http://www.templeisrael.net>) and Central Synagogue in New York City (www.central-synagogue.org), among others, stream worship services in real-time over the Internet. Temple B’nai Shalom in Fairfax Station, Virginia (www.tbs-online.org) has been podcasting services for the last three years. “Even elderly grandparents of our students are plugging in,” Rabbi Amy Perlin says. (To read more about her congregation’s experience, see “Cyber Judaism” on page 34.)

Enhancing Worship

One Chanukah and Shabbat evening in 2006, Rabbi Billy Dreskin of Woodlands Community Temple in White Plains, New York (<http://wct.org/index.cfm>) projected images, words, and music onto two wide screens at the front of the sanctuary—and the temple’s “visual worship” was born. Nowadays, every two to three months, congregants and visitors alike enjoy a visual worship Shabbat at Woodlands—with all prayers, in both Hebrew and English, as well as the sermon (plus illustrations) projected onto the screens