

## **Making Our Homes our Sanctuaries**

With the current health pandemic, and restrictions on group gatherings, our kitchens have become our classrooms, our basements are our yoga studios, and our dining rooms have become our offices. Where then, is *our sanctuary*, in which *we gather as a congregation*?

The rabbis asked this same question right after the destruction of the ancient Temple in Jerusalem. Without a localized place of worship, how could the people of their time pray together? We are the inheritors of their answer: our homes become our “*mikdash m’at*,” miniature sanctuaries, our holy places.

Our current challenge is to create a sacred space at home while we are in front of our computers, on Zoom or live streaming our services while we feel together as a *Sha'arei Shalom* community. What can help us create both that spiritual mindset and that spiritual refuge?

We are not able to gather in large groups in our usual physical gathering space for the High Holy Days. We will all certainly miss being together in person, with the power and presence of large crowds standing close, singing in harmony all our familiar and moving tunes. But we will be “together” safely — in our own homes and/or in small outdoor groups. This year, we have a unique opportunity to create sacred space in our homes — our own *mikdash m’at* — for the High Holy Days and beyond. The following suggestions are meant to help you enhance your High Holy Day experience at home, while we “gather” together to create a communal atmosphere for us to share as a community.

1. Choose your prayer space carefully in advance by spending a few moments of individual contemplation/family discussion. Don’t wait for the last minute!
2. Once you have chosen your space, you might say a blessing or *kavannah* (“intention”) to mark it as your *mikdash m’at*. Suggestions of verses and blessings are below.
3. What chair(s) will you sit on? You might add a cushion or festive pillow, or drape it with a tallit, special piece of fabric, or scarf.
4. Change where you put your computer from a workspace to a contemplative space by covering the desk or table with a white tablecloth, white runner, or white placemat, and adding a vase of flowers.
5. Find meaningful objects to grace your space. On *Rosh Hashanah* you might include holiday objects like candlesticks and a *kiddush* cup, apples and honey. On *Yom Kippur* you can place cherished mementos, family heirlooms, and photos of loved ones to surround you. If you own a *shofar*, put it where it’s visible.

6. If possible, move the computer space back so that you are “watching” the screen more than “manipulating” it. If possible, consider connecting your computer to a larger TV screen so it feels less like a work device.
7. Try to limit or disconnect auditory distractions. Turn off your e-mail and text message notification sounds, and/or close your e-mail program and other applications so you can be fully present during the service. Let our Virtual sanctuary be your only open window on your screen! (And please consider leaving your cellphone in another room during services.)
8. *These are our High Holy Days.* Consider wearing clothing that makes you feel as if you are entering a spiritual space. *Kipah* and *tallit* are welcome if they help you express a connection to this special worship.
9. If you own a *machzor* (the High Holy Day prayer book) you might wish to have it with you, just like on past High Holy Days. As you feel its cover and edges and flip its pages, remember the times you’ve used it before—who you sat near, what moved you in the service, the first time you used it, etc.  
However, **please note, our prayers (with transliteration) will be shown on our Virtual Sanctuary Screen**, so if you do not have a *machzor*, that’s fine. **All you need (save for your heart and soul) will be provided.**

We all appreciate the time and effort it takes to make your *mikdash m’at* a reality. Think of it as a “work in progress”! May it add joy and meaning to your holiday making it as warm and personal as possible in our unusual times.

*Shana Tovah,*

Rabbi Eric S. Gurvis

*I offer my gratitude to my colleague and friend, Rabbi Elyse Goldstein of City Shul in Toronto for allowing me to adapt her guidelines.*

## Verses and blessings to help create your sacred space/*mikdash m'at*

### 1. Numbers 24:5

מה־טֹבוֹ אֱהָלֶיךָ יַעֲקֹב מִשְׁכְּנֹתֶיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל

How good are your tents, O Jacob, Your sacred places, O Israel!

### 2. *Birkat Habayit* (home blessing):

בְּנֵה הַשַּׁעַר לֹא יָבוֹא צָעַר  
בְּזֹאת הַדִּירָה לֹא תָבוֹא צָרָה  
בְּזֹאת הַדֶּלֶת לֹא תָבוֹא בְּהִלָּה  
בְּזֹאת הַמְּחֻלָּקָה לֹא תָבוֹא מְחֻלּוּקָת  
בְּנֵה הַמָּקוֹם תְּהִי בִּרְכָה וְשָׁלוֹם

Let no sorrow come through this gate.  
Let no trouble come in this dwelling.  
Let no fright come through this door.  
Let no conflict come to this section.  
Let there be blessing and peace in this place.

### 3. Exodus 20:21:

בְּכָל־הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אֶזְכֵּיר אֶת־שְׁמִי אָבוֹא אֵלֶיךָ וּבִרְכֶתֶיךָ

In every place where My name is mentioned, I will come to you and bless you.

### 4. Exodus 3:5

כִּי הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה עוֹמֵד עָלָיו אֲדַמְתִּי־קֹדֶשׁ הוּא

Indeed, the place on which you stand is holy ground.

### 5. Psalms 121:8

יְהוָה יִשְׁמַר־צֵאתְךָ וּבֹאֶיךָ מִעַתָּה וְעַד־עוֹלָם

Adonai will guard your going and coming, now and forever.

### 6. *Pirke Avot* 1:4

יְהִי בֵיתְךָ בֵּית נֶעֱד לַחֲכָמִים,  
וְהָיָה מִתְאַבֵּק בַּעֲפֹר רַגְלֵיהֶם, וְהָיָה שׁוֹתֵה בְצִמָּא אֶת דְּבָרֵיהֶם

Let your house be a house of meeting for the wise, sit at their feet, and drink in their words.