



## Alyth in a time of pandemic Rabbi Josh Levy, Alyth AGM, 21 June 2020

It is easy to forget what the whirl of those two weeks in March, just three months ago, was like.

The waves of decisions, coming one after another as the government moved towards lockdown: postponing the Weekend Away, moving *tefillah* online, closing the kindergarten, furloughing staff.

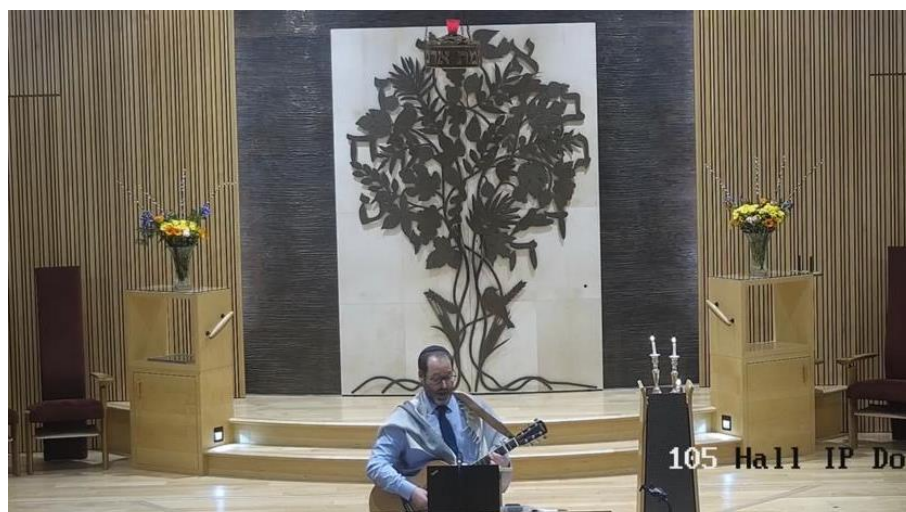
It is easy to forget that we were having to do something that no one in history had ever done before – steering one of the largest synagogues in world Jewry through a global pandemic. At that stage we were having two full trustee meetings a week.

To give a sense of the pace of that change. This is the Leo Baeck Hall on the morning of Shabbat 14 March.



Not only did we celebrate a Bat Mitzvah with guests (our last normal-ish Bar or Bat Mitzvah), but we even had a Kiddush – a special one with individually wrapped food.

Just three days later, a special email from the trustees explained that the building was now closed and we were moving online. And the following Erev Shabbat, I stood alone in the Beit Tefillah leading Kabbalat Shabbat (rather tearfully, you might recall) – into the live stream and into a laptop computer sat on the reading desk.



In the following week's JC (27 March 2020), I was asked to write a short piece on what the week had been like:

# Adapting to a changing world

## COMMENT RABBI JOSH LEVY



▶ LAST FRIDAY, I stood in the Alyth [North Western Reform Synagogue]beit tefillah – which in a normal week would

have 300 people in it for erev Shabbat – to lead a service to an empty room.

In the corner of my eye was a monitor, showing members of the community joining from their homes.

I could see families crowded around their computer screens; couples holding hands; people sat alone. After the service ended, many stayed online, waving to one another.

It was one of the most beautiful things I have ever seen.

At the end of an extraordinarily challenging week, I watched and wept at the sight of our community gathering and being there for each other in a way different to ever before.

It is impossible to know exactly how many joined over Shabbat, though we

know many hundreds were with us.

In response, we have upgraded our capacity to enable 1,000 computers to join for future Shabbat services, knowing that these moments of gathering are going to be more important than ever.

This is just one of the ways the coronavirus pandemic has forced us to reimagine our synagogue life.

Over the past week, we have enabled our staff team to work from home; set up new communications and care-lines; begun to convert our regular prayer, learning and community activities for adults, families and children online. We have started to develop new programmes to enable members to gather in different ways, empowering them to start their own groups using our technology.

We are working remotely with bnei mitzvah, who will now read Torah for the first time with their community online. We know this is going to be a long journey so are working to ensure that what we offer is sustainable and uplifting as we move further into this difficult period.

Alongside all of this, we are prioritis-

ing care and responsive support for members. An amazing 200 members of our community volunteered within 48 hours and we have begun to phone all our members over the age of 80 and those we know have other needs.

The practical challenges of an effort of this scale are huge. Our main task is to identify and support members who cannot access our online programmes, as well as providing urgent pastoral care as we accompany our members through hospitalisation and illness.

Speaking to colleagues, I know that Alyth's story, though it may be different in scale, is far from unique. Synagogues across the country are transforming to respond to our new reality. We have had just one week to build new models of care and learn how to make this new communal life possible.

Together rabbis, professionals and volunteers are striving to ensure that the joy of Jewish life and the support of community flourish in these extraordinary times.

*Rabbi Josh Levy is minister of Alyth in Golders Green*

I want to highlight a section which speaks in its breathlessness to the extraordinary nature of those few days:

“Over the last week, we have enabled our staff team to work from home; set up new communications and care-lines; begun to convert our regular prayer, learning and community activities for adults, families and children online. We have started to develop new programmes to enable members to gather in different ways, and empowering members to start their own groups using our technology. We are working remotely with B'nei Mitzvah, who will now read Torah for the first time with their community online...”

Alongside all of this, we are prioritising care and responsive support for members. An amazing 200 members of our community volunteered within 48 hours, and we have begun to phone all of our members over the age of 80 and those we know have other needs. The practical challenges of an effort of this scale, in this context are huge.”

Partly for the historical record – for whoever comes to write the history of Alyth on our 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary, I want to speak to each aspect of those few sentences – recognising that I have only 15 minutes to speak to an unprecedented period in the life of our community, and will inevitably miss things out.

First the core operations of the synagogue:

Within that first week every member of the staff team was set up working from home; phone lines forwarded, computer access provided and so on. From Day One of the lockdown, I introduced morning and evening staff meetings and regular management check-ins.

I am incredibly grateful to the professional team for everything they have done to keep Alyth going over the past three months. The team have approached this experience with commitment and resilience and I am very proud of them all.



I am also especially proud of our care response, steered by Lynette and Sarah from the professional team, working with Ruth Smilg and Rachel Elf as core volunteers.

Within the first couple of weeks, we had reached out to every one of our over-80s to help them adjust to lockdown, and thereafter anyone under age 80 with a known vulnerability. In those first weeks we made regular deliveries – food, siddurim, matzah for Pesach. I want to pay tribute to the Alyth Cycling Community for the role they played in looking after people in this way.

To give a sense of scale, we are still, three months on, in regular contact through our buddy system with 254 of our members. That is 10% of our adult membership still receiving care support. Many of our volunteers continue to provide closer 1-1 support for those they have called.

And we are still – as in this picture – putting together occasional emergency food parcels from the shul.



At the heart of this were our core volunteers. I am especially grateful to those who held the special Careline during the initial weeks.

But it has been a community effort.

Another sense of scale: The Barnet Community Help Hub – for a borough of 385,000 people - recently celebrated that it had enlisted 617 volunteers. In our community response, in total 241 of our 3,500 members volunteered to help with the care programme. More than we could actually find roles for.

And that doesn't include those in our community who continued to volunteer independently. Our Refugee Drop-In may have been unable to meet, but the level of care and engagement that the volunteers in that programme have continued to offer is worthy of note and of our gratitude also.

Programmatically, along with a couple of other Reform and Liberal communities, we have led the way in transforming into an online community, recognising the extra importance of Alyth in our lives at this time.



Services, parallel minyanim, Pesach, study, young family activity, our education programme, teen social activity, our annual Iftar, our Tikkun Leyl Shavuot – all went online. And, of course, all of these needed reimagining for an online offering – you can't just replicate – as we discovered early on with regular after action review.

We have taken now 12 young people through online B'nei Mitzvah. And I am in awe of them all for having adjusted so well, an example to all of us.

We have introduced new programming. And the effort has not just involved the professional team. I'm grateful to the JMM group for moving online so beautifully, to the leaders of Shacharit and weekly Ma'ariv, Craft and Cuppa, Ballet in the Bathroom (we are still working on Pilates from the Pantry), and all those who have given an Online Lecture.

It is impossible to know how many of our members have attended our activities in total as households don't always sign on with identifiable names, and many now watch on YouTube, but a very conservative estimate, based on the households that we can identify is that probably 1000 of our households have had contact with the community over the last three months, as well as many guests and visitors.

As we have done so, we have had to grapple with technology. We set ourselves the goal of getting better week on week, which I am pleased to say we have done. I am especially grateful to the staff and volunteers who act as hosts to keep us safe, and to Adam, who has held this aspect so beautifully.

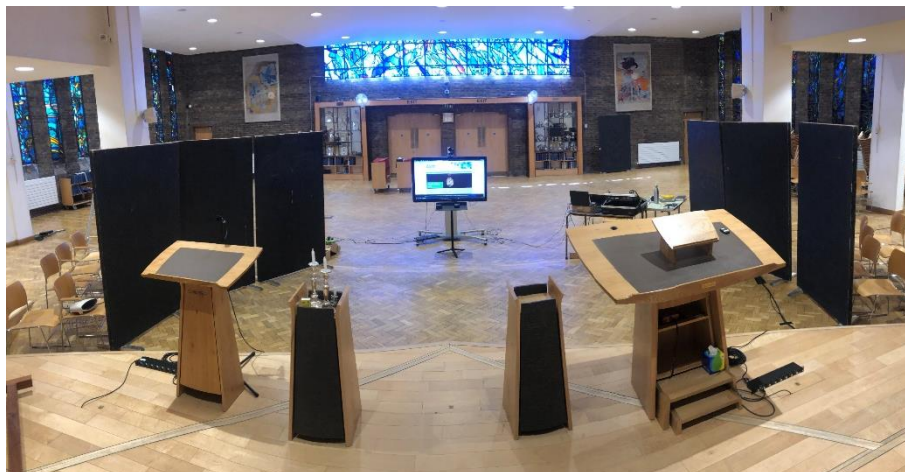
So, a little insight into how it works for services. This is what you see:



And this is what we see:



A slightly wider view (the boards helped a little with the sounds in the early stages – they also help to make the space feel less empty).



And this is what Adam sees as he juggles the sound and Zoom/YouTube pictures. This was last Shabbat before the morning service:



We also have a second 'studio' set up for parallel services in the Leo Baeck Hall:





Of course, sometimes it is a little bit more basic. This is Rabbi Hannah leading Storytime Live, our pre-Shabbat activity for young families on a Friday afternoon:



At the end of May we faced an additional challenge, the reopening of our Kindergarten. As rabbi of Alyth, a trustee of Shofar, the daycare centre in which we are a stakeholder, and as a governor of Akiva I have had the privilege of watching amazing professionals face an extraordinary task, one which I don't think the media have really shown. One day the risk assessment documents alone (each one 10-plus pages of detailed work) should be matters of historical record. So I want to recognise the amazing work that Tor has done in enabling our kindergarten to reopen, and of Sharon Lee in reopening Shofar.

This has not just been an educational challenge, but also a logistical one which has also involved detailed thinking about how we use the building. To enable the Kindergarten to reopen we had to create it as a separate entity from the rest of the Alyth building. Coming in to the Alyth building today, you would first notice that the forecourt has been divided to create a separate entrance.



To keep the kindergarten distinct, this division continues into the building as well, with a new, temporary wall to create an entirely separate space.



You will notice the ladder and the paints in the foreground. We are using the opportunity of lockdown to tidy up some of the communal areas of the building.

This is the new, we hope temporary, wall close up. It was put up with the aim of being able to be taken down with the minimum of damage to the walls of the building.



All the other doors which connect the Kindergarten and the rest of the building have also been sealed up for this period. This is the door through from the photocopier room/back kitchen:



We have also needed to remove any soft furnishings or toys from the Kindergarten area, creating a small challenge of storage.



So where are we now?

The first thing to stress is that lockdown still applies to places of worship. We are not legally allowed to open for anything other than individual prayer, and all life-cycle ceremonies except for funerals are forbidden. We expect some loosening of regulations over the coming weeks, but it is important to recognise that the question cannot be, 'When can we go back to normal?', but 'How can we continue to create a Jewish life that is as positive, meaningful and inclusive as possible for our situation now?'

This reflects the particularly challenging (from the perspective of the virus) features of our communal activity. What we now know is that there are two ways this virus is transmitted. The first is by touch, and that we can deal with, with a lot of effort and a lot of cleaning products. This is the other half of the kitchen island right now!



The other way is by aerosol transmission. And what we now know is that there is especial risk associated with a few things which are relevant to us: being indoors, being in poorly ventilated spaces, spending long periods of time in the same room as someone who has the virus, and finally that the risk is elevated by activities that involve amplified exhalations like reading out loud and in particular singing.

So what comes next will not look like normal. Whatever opening up we can do is unlikely for some time to be what we yearn for.

To give an example, a few years ago, a group of us went on a trip to Israel in which we spent Shabbat morning in a shul in a place called Gezer, the home shul of Rabbi Miri Gold. Last week, they opened up for Kabbalat Shabbat. And this is what it looked like, the rabbi standing alone, wearing full mask.



It is worth comparing with the picture from when we were there which also reminds us of how hard it will be to carry out our normal activity on the bimah with social distancing.





And this was the congregation – all wearing masks, socially distanced (for those who went on that trip, just to say that the 20 of us would not all have been able to get in their Beit Tefillah at the present time).



As a community we have additional challenges because of the nature of our building (no large doors opening onto the outside in our Beit Tefillah) and, of course, we have a challenge of scale. So even when regulations are relaxed, it will not be straightforward. We have some serious, and very challenging decisions ahead for the trustee board to lead us through. These will involve difficult tensions and compromises. Any gradual reopening will not allow for the kind of communal gathering that we are used to, that makes our communal life so special, a return to our normal, synagogue-going lives.

Among the most challenging will be the High Holy Days, which cannot look like it normally does. In common with all Progressive communities in this country, we will use technology as our main way of delivering this year's High Holy Days. We will do so with great creativity and imagination to ensure the most meaningful High Holy Days we can for this year, and will work hard ensure that all of our members can access them.

A few 'thank you's' from me:

First, again, to the staff team, and to my clergy colleagues for their extraordinary work through this period.

To the Trustees, who have steered us through with amazing dedication, commitment and seriousness.

An especial thank you to the four designated officers – Russell, Noeleen, David and Caronne – who have worked so incredibly hard over the past months. Noeleen has held our HR challenges, supported Tor, and worked to make this morning happen on behalf of the Trustee Board. And a particular tribute to Russell and David for the last two years of service as Chair and Vice Chair.

For all of them, I am pretty sure that a rabbinic resignation followed by a global pandemic were not what they signed up for. I am very grateful that they are willing to put themselves forward for another year.

Finally, a huge thank you to everyone who has sent hundreds of messages to the professional team, which have been a source of real strength over the last months.

And, as I have said before from the bimah, thank you for taking this so seriously. As clergy we have seen how important this has been. Many of our clergy colleagues in other shuls have not been as lucky as us.

Our lives, including our Jewish lives, have much more disruption to come, and we will need to continue to be resolute and wise, thoughtful and serious over coming months.