Guidance for Messianic Congregations on Distance Learning

As more of your congregation's programming is going to the virtual world, don't leave your children and youth programming behind! Families need, now more than ever, a way for their kids to stay connected, stay learning and stay engaged with their faith and community.

Sparks of Messiah Online Torah School has been delivering quality Torah education via distance learning for almost two years and we would love to share our experience with you. We will help you, step by step, as you create a great distance learning program for your congregation.

Central Place

The first consideration is where you are going to put information on your distance learning program. You will want to have a central place, whether it is your congregation's website, a Facebook group or a blog you set up just for this purpose. This will be the place you put activities and resources you want the families and kids to access during class. You will also want to provide general information about the time of the class and how to access the live class session. Be mindful, if you want to restrict your live class sessions to only families in your congregation, you will want to email or text the information to them so it isn't available for the wider Internet world.

If your families have easy access to a printer, it is okay to post activities you want them to print and have access to during class. For example, you might post a worksheet or guided notes the kids will fill out during class. If you are going to do this regularly, make sure you have established the expectation for families to check before class to print

anything they will need. It is usually a good idea to post these required materials at least the day before class to give families time to print them out.

Setup text reminders through a free service like Remind.com to help families remember class times each week. Families are juggling a lot throughout their day and class times can sometimes slip their minds. A nice feature of Remind is it allows you to schedule texts to go out at a later date, so you can schedule all your text reminders at one time and not worry about it again. Schedule the text reminder to go out about 30 minutes before class starts to give families time to get everything setup and ready to go.

Live Classes

Though there are many services out there for live video conferencing, we have found Zoom to be the best service for conducting the live class session. It has the features you want and even has a free version if you can keep your classes under 40 minutes (which is their meeting time limit for free accounts). If you need more time, it is very affordable at about $15 a month.

Pro Tip: Create a PowerPoint with slides as a visual for the students, even if you aren't going to lecture or have them take notes. It is a good way for you to keep on track and provides anchoring points for the students throughout the lesson. This is similar to having the class agenda on a whiteboard in a physical classroom. Zoom allows you to easily share your screen and have the PowerPoint slides visible to you and your students throughout the class session.

Adapt to Teaching Virtually

There are many similarities and some stark differences in conducting a class virtually as opposed to in person and it will take some time to get used to the differences. To help make the transition to distance learning, consider rolling things out in two phases.

Phase One: Develop and Teach Simple Lessons

When you are first offering distance learning classes, you will want to allow time for your teachers and students to become familiar with using Zoom. In the first couple of class sessions, you will have to devote some class time to explicitly teach students how to mute and unmute themselves, access the chat function and review class expectations.

To facilitate this gradual roll out of your distance learning program, consider having your first couple of class sessions consist of one teacher-led activity and one student-centered activity. Simple teacher-led activities include a lecture with students taking guided notes, telling a story, reading a book or watching an informational video together. To check for student understanding follow the teacher-led activity with a student-centered one. Simple student-centered activities can be a class discussion, draw a picture of what they just learned and share it with the class, ask trivia questions based on the lesson or write a summary of what they learned.

Stage Two: Develop and Teach Lessons Using All The Distance Learning Tools

After some time, teachers and students will get into a routine and feel comfortable with using Zoom. When you get to this point, then you can start to use the more advanced distance learning tools that Zoom has to offer. These tools will allow you to facilitate even more engaging lessons and expand the student-centered activities you can choose from.

One of the features you will want to become familiar with is the ability to put students into Breakout Rooms. These mini-video conferencing sessions allow students to work together in smaller groups. When they are in the Breakout Room, they are able to access the same controls the teacher is able to in the main session. This will allow the students to work collaboratively, share their screens and even work on a virtual whiteboard together.

With the ability to use Breakout Rooms, you can plan student-centered activities like small group discussions, reading a passage together and answering questions, creating a skit to show to the class, collaboratively create a Google slide show on a topic and much more.

Another advanced feature you might have seen in the main session controls, is the annotation feature. This feature allows students to annotate any visual you share with them. If you create a slide in your presentation with a question, then the students can annotate their answer right on the slide you've shared with them. This allows for a higher level of engagement, as all students will be able to share their answer, instead of just calling on a few.

Conclusion

It will take a bit of planning, some learning of new skills and a drive to keep the kids connected, learning and engaged but you can do it! We, at Sparks of Messiah Online Torah School, stand ready to help you in whatever way we can. Please reach out if you have any questions and don't forget to check out our Distance Learning Initiative for Families at Home site (dl.sparksofmessiah.com), as we will have frequent updates on resources and activities you can use.

If you are looking for additional resources to use in teaching Hebrew, Torah, discipleship to Yeshua, Jewish practices and holidays, then head over to Behold! Messianic Jewish Education's Learn Maps.

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Appendix A
Settings To Turn On To Access All The Distance Learning Features

When you have signed into your Zoom account, go to 'Settings' on the left hand side.

You can leave most of the default settings but make sure you have the following features turned on:

- Host video
- Participants video
- Chat
- Private chat
- File transfer
- Screen sharing
- Annotation
- Whiteboard
- Remote control
- Breakout room

Appendix B
Tips and Tricks for the Live Class Session

We have learned a thing or two over the years about what works best for conducting a live class session and so we would like to share a few tips and tricks:

- **Unless a student is actively asking a question, answering a question or contributing to a discussion then they should keep themselves muted.**
  - The background noise can be very distracting, if a student is unmuted and the normal family things are going on around them.
- **Unless you are asking the students to work collaboratively, through the chat feature, then you should change the settings in the chat window, it is the '...' next to the dropdown menu of who the message is for, to 'Allow attendees to chat with → Host only.'**
  - Students will be distracted by messaging each other while you are teaching if you don't limit this.
- **Unless you are asking students to annotate the screen you are sharing, it is best to turn off annotations until you need them. You can do this by clicking on the 'More' button and then clicking 'Disable participants annotation.'**
  - You will remember to turn off participant annotations when you randomly see 'hearts' and squiggly lines show up on your shared screen.
- **If you would like to share a video or music from your computer, make sure you check the box 'Share computer sound' on the screen sharing window.**
  - If you forget to do this, the students will remind you pretty quickly.
- **If you have a tablet you can set next to your computer during the live class session, you can sign into the meeting with it and see what the students are seeing.**
  - This has saved me a few times when I thought I had shared my screen but hadn't.
- **It is good to include some kind of social time in each live class session. This can be a question of the week, a check in on how everyone is doing or even just some unstructured chat time.**
  - Students don't have the usual before or after class social time they would have at an in person class and it is important to provide that time for them in the live class session.