

MAKOM: FINDING A PLACE FOR OUR GROWING GIRLS

by Aliza Sperling

Is this a familiar story? A young woman studies for her Bat Mitzvah and does a wonderful job reading from the Torah and/or delivering a well-thought-out, interesting *d'var Torah*. Yet the next year, when you look around the synagogue, she is not there. After her time in the spotlight, she stops attending services and uses her talents elsewhere. Without a forum (besides the important exception of women's *tefillah* services) in which to participate in synagogue life, she looks to use her abilities in places where her talents are always welcomed and appreciated.

At Ohev Sholom in Washington, DC, our goal is to make sure that our girls grow up with markedly different experiences. Our rabbi, Shmuel Herzfeld, recognized early on that we needed to find avenues for our growing girls' participation and leadership within the shul throughout the year, and not only at the time of their *B'not Mitzvah*. We did not want our girls to grow up feeling isolated as their male counterparts prepared to lead synagogue services and read the Torah for the community on a consistent basis, while they watched from the other side of the *mehitza*. We were afraid that this experience would lead them to seek spiritual fulfillment through other avenues, resulting in a true loss to the synagogue and the Jewish community. Equally important, we did not want our boys growing up to think that girls do not have a place in the synagogue or feeling religiously superior to them.

To integrate girls' talents and leadership into shul life, we launched Makom: Finding A Place for Our Growing Girls. Makom's goal is to give girls the tools to increase their participation and sense of belonging in an Orthodox synagogue. Ultimately, the program seeks to provide girls with an important role in the synagogue as Torah scholars and educators. We are indebted to the Legacy Heritage Innovation Project and the Tikkun Olam Women's Foundation, along with several individuals, for helping fund Makom.

The Makom program consists primarily of two *Shabbatot* a year in which girls of all ages do all the teaching in our shul. A teenage girl delivers the main sermon before *Musaf*. Other girls deliver *divrei Torah* in between *aliyot*. Girls also teach the congregation at a special Friday night dinner and at *se'udah shlishit*. Young girls, starting from age 5, deliver *divrei Torah* in the youth groups. Any teaching that takes place on a Makom Shabbat is done by our girls.

The Makom *Shabbatot* are amazing. Girls deliver beautiful *divrei Torah* with confidence and poise. They focus on the *parashah* or a *mitzvah* and, in their own unique styles, tell us exactly what they think about it and the lessons they have drawn from their study. Leading up to the *Shabbatot*, we have monthly *melaveh malka* study sessions for preteen girls and their mothers or the significant women in

their lives. Usually, these sessions involve some text study and a hands-on project like baking hallah or making a craft. In addition, a speech coach leads public speaking workshops for the girls to assist them in delivering their *divrei Torah*.

What are the effects of the Makom *Shabbatot*?

- Unlike other programs that provide separate activities and study sessions for girls, the Makom program brings the girls into the congregation and spotlights their abilities there. In this way, the entire shul sees the girls in a position of leadership and understands how important they are to the well-being of the congregation. The girls too realize that their abilities are needed and desired by the entire congregation.
- In the Makom model, girls begin to teach the youth groups when they are five or six years old and may already teach the main congregation when they are age seven. As a result, when they become preteens or teenagers, these girls are not self-conscious or embarrassed to teach the congregation. Our aim is to create a culture where it is normal and expected for girls to get up in front of the congregation and teach.
- A girl's Bat Mitzvah celebration is no longer the only time in which she is expected to participate in shul or deliver a *d'var Torah*. Instead, it is part of a continuum of girls' participation and leadership in the shul. In this way, we hope to avert the phenomenon of the girl who celebrates her Bat Mitzvah and then drops out of shul.
- The impact on the congregation is profound. Rabbi Herzfeld has said that Makom generates the most overwhelmingly positive feedback of all our programs. Grown women break down in tears, remembering their childhood shul experiences and marveling at how things have changed. Little girls watch their older friends and picture themselves standing in front of the congregation one day. Men and boys learn from the incredible insights of the girls and adjust their expectations of what girls can and cannot do.

The Makom program is obviously not the answer to women and girls' ritual exclusion from shul. At times I worry that the program actually promotes their ritual exclusion by giving them a specifically non-liturgical role in front of the congregation. It is not my aim to create a culture of separate spheres in which men and boys participate ritually and women and girls participate only through teaching Torah.

Despite these doubts, I do believe that Makom is a valuable way for our girls to become Torah scholars and leaders in the shul. These girls are our future, and it is imperative to show them—and the rest of the congregation— how much we value their knowledge and leadership in shaping the Jewish lives of the next generation.

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