

Making Room for Moms in *Shul*: A Checklist *By Karen Miller*

During three rounds of three-day *yamim tovim* this year, my husband and I had plenty of time to juggle the somewhat conflicting desires of tending to our young children, and at the same time trying to achieve a meaningful *davening* experience (and in some way attempting to expose our children to what a meaningful *davening* experience can be). We arranged our own babysitting for the extended *davening* of *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*. However, this is not an ideal which I would like to depend on regularly since it means my children do not get exposed to *shul*, and that *shul* does not become a family experience.

I therefore think *shuls* and communities need to put more thought into how to accommodate parents of young children. For this reason, my husband and I (in consultation with a few friends) have compiled the following checklist that rabbis and people grappling with this issue can refer to when attempting to enhance the *shul* experience for this section of its constituency.

I know too many mothers who stay home on Shabbat morning or only make it to *shul* for *musaf* because they find that the *shuls* do not tolerate or involve their small children inside *shul* and also do not provide proper childcare outside of *shul*. Mothers like me, along with their supportive husbands, who need this situation to change can suggest some of these ideas to their rabbis or *shul* boards. JOFA seems the natural forum in which to discuss this issue.

Does your *shul* provide any or all of the following?

1. Staggered *minyanim* so that fathers and mothers can alternate between looking after their children and *davening*.

2. A nursing room exclusively for breast-feeding mothers (including a closeable door, a comfortable seat, possibly access to some drinking water).

3. Groups carefully designed for children of different ages. The youngest children need close supervision, toys and snacks. There should be age-appropriate *davening*, *divrei Torah*, *berakhot* and educational stories interspersed with games. This daycare should begin close to the beginning of *tefillah* time.

4. Enthusiastic inclusion of children in the main *tefillah* (for instance, allowing children to accompany their father to the *bimah* for an *aliyah*, bringing children up to the *bimah* for *Anim Zemirot* and *Adon Olam* and allowing children to open and close the ark).

5. Sensitivity to children in the way *davening* is conducted (the entire service should not be unnecessarily extended because children just cannot sit for such long periods of time).

6. A separate *minyan* (or *musaf* service) designated for this part of the constituency, which does not mind the noise generated by children. Some *shuls* have *Tot Tefillah* for young children together with their parents.

Since not all *shuls* have the resources to accomplish many of the above suggestions, another possibility would be to have a *toranut* schedule, where several parents could alternate running a Shabbat morning program for the children.

JOFA is interested in hearing your ideas for how to make “more room for moms in *shul*”. Please send your suggestions to jofa@jofa.org so that we can publish them in a future JOFA Journal, or share your views by joining our Women and Synagogue discussion group. To join, visit our website www.jofa.org, and click on “discussion forums”.

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