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CREATING A MEANINGFUL PRAYER ENVIRONMENT II: FINE-TUNING THE SHABBAT SERVICE

Jordana Schoor

As a high school Tanakh teacher and a mother of young children, I chose to orient my comments to those facets of my life and make concrete suggestions.

One of my students, Sarah, runs the Shabbat group for toddlers at our shul. She does a great job—she is fun, responsible, and has an intuitive understanding of 3 year olds. This is fantastic, but as I drop my sons off each week, I feel pangs of guilt—is my *tefillah* more important than hers? Why am I allowed the privilege of being child-free for a couple of hours while she is caring for my children? What kind of message are we sending teenagers, especially girls, about their role in the community, the importance of *tefillah* and the like? While some group leaders attend *hashkamah minyanim*, there is still something extremely bad in the educational message being sent to these teens in important years of their religious development.

My suggestion is the following. Hire non-Jewish babysitters. Most of us do it during the week and certainly on *Yamim Nora'im*. Have them care for the children—play games, read books, sing songs. . . Additionally, we should hire a couple of real educators, young teachers, university students—or even have parents rotate—that will serve as the educational component of the morning. They can lead the *davening*, teach about *parashah* for 10 minutes, and then move on to another group while a non-Jew passes out the snack. To think that the young woman I spend my week teaching Torah to is wiping my son's nose downstairs while *kedushah* is being recited upstairs just seems ridiculous to me.

With that said, I would also like to add some suggestions for the Shabbat morning experience. To sum it up, I think we need to work on spiritual community building—to create bonds, based on religious values—in addition to the

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community building of hospitality committees; we need real avenues for people to grow religiously from one another.

One of the first steps to doing that is to have shuls become intergenerational experiences and communities. Most of us spend our lives in an almost one dimensional world –if its with coworkers of a similar bend, parents with children the same age—we are limited to our worlds and a small range of experiences. But our community of believers is much wider than that. And I have plenty to learn from the elderly woman down the pew who has much more life wisdom than I, and she has what to learn from me, and even from my teenage students. Rather than *davening* with our friends, we can really grow from ensuring that our communities are open to a range of people. And even if we never say a word to that elderly man we see in shul, the experience of *davening* together is an experience that I think really highlights the unity of God and His Jewish people.

But I would like to go a step further. To create a real community we need to talk to one another and we need to talk about *tefillah*. I propose that shuls set up something like *havurah* groups. I would be excited by the notion of showing up at shul at 8:30 on a Shabbat morning and talking with fellow daveners for half an hour about davening. One week we could learn a passage in depth to enhance our *kavanah*, one week someone can share what he thinks about when they recite certain words and requests, one week we can practice meditation. I would love to know what works for others in enhancing *tefillah*. Whatever the 10 or so of us decide will enhance the way we relate to Hashem and one another, we can give a try. The content of the discussion will facilitate our growth and the concept of uniting as one will also facilitate our growth.

I would recommend that the group be as varied as possible, while still maintaining a level of comfort for all. I would want to see different generations and genders giving to one another. I would love my sixteen year old student Sarah to be involved in whatever form most comfortable to her, and even to have my four year old know that *tefillah* is not just about the songs he sings in school but that *Ima* and *Abba* talk to people about their relationships with Hashem.

It will not be an easy feat. Group therapy takes years to forge bonds and I do not foresee being able to break down the social barriers that have been constructed over millennia.

But:

As a woman it will give me a voice.

As a teacher it will give me a chance to teach .

As a student it will give me a chance to learn.

As a mother it will help me show my children the value I place on *tefillah* and on relating to other people in a meaningful way.

As a friend it will give me a chance to understand, empathize, grow and daven for someone else.

As a lover of Hashem it will give us a chance to unite in that emotion.

Berov am hadrat melekh—the glory of the king is expressed in the multitudes—I do not think that is just referring to a number count, but I think that the voices of the community built can break down the walls barring us from encountering God.