

THE SILENT REVOLUTION: How One Shul Put an End to Talking During Tefillah

BY DANNY FRANKEL

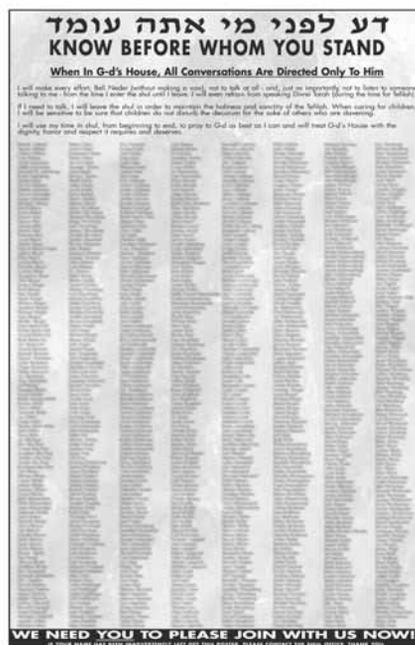
*Young Israel of Woodmere's
Joseph K. Miller Main Shul*

Three years ago, we sent a survey to our shul members asking what they thought was the most pressing challenge facing our congregation. The overwhelming response: the incessant talking during *davening*.

In fact, some of the members of the Young Israel of Woodmere had actually left the shul and others had taken their personal *semachot* to other shuls because of the nonstop talking. It became obvious that this was our number-one problem and resolving it had to be our number-one priority.

The Young Israel of Woodmere's Joseph K. Miller Main Shul attracts an average of 700 people on a regular Shabbat. More than 500 *mitpallelim* attend one of our additional Shabbat

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The shul's "Letter of Commitment to Tefillah and Proper Decorum," signed by over 1,000 shul members, helps maintain proper shul decorum.

morning *minyanim*. Thus, changing the shul culture was no simple task: for many of our members, talking during *davening* had become a firmly engrained habit.

Furthermore, it seems that once a shul begins as a "talking" shul, it is exceedingly difficult to transform it into a non-talking shul. Change of any kind is difficult—a change of this magnitude, especially in a shul of this size, borders on the impossible.

Oftentimes, the question is asked, How can people who are "*yirei Shamayim*," God fearing, continue to talk during *davening*?

I have heard all kinds of reasons as to why this problem persists, and most are valid.

I also believe that, often, what many feel is a decorum problem may actually stem from a *tefillah* problem. If people were more involved in and connected to their *tefillot*, if they concentrated more on what they were in shul to accomplish—via *tefillah*, *Keriyat haTorah* and the *haftarah*—

then their conduct in shul would be vastly different.

In June 2005, our shul began a process that has resulted in a dramatic transformation of our shul culture. Once referred to as a “shuk,” or marketplace, our shul is currently a *makom tefillah*, place of prayer, where *ba’alei simchah* can enjoy their *semachot* without feeling embarrassed in front of family and friends. In fact, visitors who had not been to the shul for some time have told us that they thought they were in the wrong shul when they came to visit, so baffled were they by the change that had transpired.

Is our shul 100 percent non-talking? No.

Is our shul dramatically improved and different than it was? Yes.

Do we aspire to be 100 percent non-talking? Absolutely.

With great reservations, I have agreed to write about our shul’s experience with the hope that other shuls may benefit.

At the outset of our Tefillah and Decorum Initiative, we formed a special committee comprised of the rabbis, administration, *gabbaim* and shul members who were interested in changing the shul culture. The committee continues to meet on a regular basis to discuss and formulate different approaches to meet this challenge.

For any meaningful change to happen, we knew the rabbinic and lay leadership of the shul had to view resolving the problem as a top priority. Rabbi Hershel Billet, the shul rabbi, Rabbi Kalman Topp, the associate rabbi, and Rabbi Dr. Aaron Glatt, assistant to the rabbi, as well as our presidents over the past three years, George Wertheimer, Allen Ganz and Avi Lauer, were all entirely committed to solving this problem.

A powerful component of our initiative was asking all of our members to voluntarily sign “A Commitment to Tefillah and Proper Decorum.” We sent this request to every shul member on four occasions during the first year. The first time we did so, I expected only a

handful of people to sign; more than 200 people did. Over time, the number grew to 400, then to 650 and, a year ago, to more than 1,000. The list of signatories, posted prominently in our lobby, enables us to publicly recognize those who are committed to maintaining shul decorum. It also serves as an ongoing reminder that two years later, proper conduct in shul is still our main concern.

A few small but important changes made at the start had an immediate impact. First, we reduced interruptions and the length of “wasted” time in shul by streamlining *mi sheberachs*, shortening the time between *aliyot*, encouraging *ba’alei tefillah* to maintain a good pace and limiting the number of synagogue announcements. In addition, we moved the recitation of Anim Zemirot to the beginning of services and the rabbi’s speech to the end. The result: *davening* time on a typical

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Shabbat morning was reduced by fifteen to thirty minutes. This is in spite of the fact that there may be ten to fifteen *aliyot* on a Shabbat and that there is rarely a week that we don’t celebrate a Bar Mitzvah, *aufruf* or both!

Working in coordination with our outstanding group of *gabbaim* was of crucial importance. In addition, we appointed a number of door and aisle monitors who assist in keeping the noise level to a minimum during *davening*.

I cannot overemphasize the importance of including an educational component in such an initiative. Recognizing the need for greater understanding of *tefillah*, *Keriyat haTorah* and the *haftarah*, our rabbis speak with greater frequency about each of these topics. A weekly, brief overview of the *parashah* and *haftarah*, as well as expla-

nations and elucidations of different *tefillot*, has had a significant effect on maintaining proper decorum in shul.

Of course, it is crucial that the rabbis, officers and *gabbaim* of a shul set a proper example. *Gabbaim*, in particular, should not talk in the shul, but should take care of “*gabbai* business” in the lobby.

Finally, it is vital to speak privately with the people who find not talking during *tefillah* to be a real challenge. It is important to help them see the beauty of *tefillah* and to relate how important it is for them, for their children and for those seated around them to be able to focus on their *tefillot*.

We knew that each change, by itself, would have a limited impact. As part of a larger, focused effort, however, these changes proved to be remarkably effective. They also let people know that we were willing to try and work hard to make changes that would enhance their *tefillah* experience.

When our Tefillah and Decorum Initiative was first contemplated, the reaction was unanimous: it won’t work, it can’t work, don’t bother wasting your time. But we decided we had to try, and our initiative has worked extraordinarily well. Each shul is different; thus, each approach should be different and tailored for the particular situation.

Will an effort to improve *tefillah* and decorum be embraced by all in your shul? No.

Might there be a number of *ba’alei batim* who will actively thwart whatever efforts are being made? Quite likely.

Might there be a limited number of people who do not understand or agree with what the shul is trying to accomplish? Yes.

In the end, though, each shul must decide what it stands for and how strongly it is prepared to act on changing its culture.

Proper decorum during *tefillah* indicates respect for self, respect for others in the congregation and, ultimately, respect for Hashem. Isn’t this an atmosphere every shul should strive for? 