

# Tactics for Improving Decorum in Shul

Compiled by Gary Buchwald (July, 2001; revised 6/7/04)

Disclaimer: As promised some time ago, I have compiled a list of all of the techniques and ideas that I've observed or discussed during my travels to many different shuls. Not all of them are applicable to every situation nor does every one carry my personal endorsement. I recognize that some of these proposed "solutions" may be considered to be worse than the "problem" they purport to correct. However, I hope it will stimulate some thinking, discussion, and sharing that will enable all of us to do a little more to increase closeness to Hashem. I am open to discuss any of these, in theory or in practice, and have noted where I am inviting feedback as to specific implementations.

1. The Rabbi stands up and looks right at the offenders.
2. The Rabbi or President stands silently on the bimah and waits for silence before nodding to the shaliach tzibur (that he may proceed). This is done as often as necessary, even if chatter resumes within 60 seconds. Or the Gabbai, or his designee, will signal a "stop-and-wait-for-silence" by placing his hand, palm-down, on the shaliach's shtender.
3. The new Rabbi has instituted a policy whereby he stops the service for a full two minutes from the time people stop talking. It is reasoned that (1) after a few such time-outs, people will realize how much this will increase the time they're in shul, (2) there will be more pressure on the talkers by their fellow congregants to keep quiet, and (3) when it becomes no longer "socially acceptable" to talk during davening, people won't do it any longer.
4. The Rabbi, President, and other officers who sit up on the bimah (facing the congregation) are extremely careful to refrain from conversation during services.
5. The Gabbai of the shul holds himself to a very high standard when it comes to talking with another congregant -- as he knows that people can easily tell when he's kibbitzing versus arranging for someone to lead the davening or take an aliyah.
6. The Rabbi will stop the service and actually name those for whom the congregation is waiting in order to proceed.
7. The Rabbi and/or President of the congregation ejects offenders from the sanctuary. Upon one occasion, the Rabbi actually asked the President to leave the synagogue.
8. In addition to the Rabbi's efforts, individuals take it upon themselves to "shush" their errant neighbors or just turn around and look directly at those who are talking in the row behind them.
9. The shaliach tzibur and baal koreh deliberately do not raise their voices to compete with the chatter. This increases the likelihood that peer pressure will be exerted to curtail conversation.
10. The baal tefilah stops mid-sentence, turns around, and glares at the offenders.

11. The Gabbai REFRAINS from "klapping" (i.e. banging his hand on the reader's desk) before repetition of the Shmoneh Esrey. This is to avoid giving the impression that talking was permitted before the klap (i.e. once a person had finished davening his silent amidah). The same is true before recitation of Vayechulu on Friday night.
12. The congregation is reminded to re-read the instructional note on page 346 of the Artscroll Siddur (Ashkenaz), printed just above the Vayechulu. It reads, "All present stand and recite Vayechulu aloud in unison. Conversation is forbidden during the congregation's recital of Vayechulu, until after the Amen response to the blessing M'kadash Hashabat."
13. From time to time, the congregation is asked to review notes 92-99 in the General Laws of Prayer, found towards the back of the Artscroll Siddur. In part, they say, "There must be a quorum (of ten, including the Chazzan) present and listening to the Chazzan's repetition of the Shemoneh Esrey. If the congregants do not pay attention, it is almost as if the Chazzan were taking God's Name in vain. Every person should imagine that there are only ten congregants present and that he is one of the nine whose attentive listening is vital to the recitation (Orach Chaim 124:4). ...It is absolutely forbidden to talk during the Shemoneh Esrey even if one makes sure to respond with Amen at the conclusion of the benediction (OC 124:7)."
14. At the conclusion of the Musaf Kedushah, the Rabbi leaves the bimah at the front of the shul and walks slowly down the center aisle, making eye contact with as many congregants as possible.
15. The Rabbi will approach certain repeat offenders, after Shabbat, to speak with them individually and ask for their cooperation.
16. The shaliach tzibur, by policy, employs a fair amount of congregational singing so as to actively involve the congregation as much as possible in the chazarat hashatz.
17. One shul has a policy precluding amateurs from leading services on Shabbat. Another shul invests its Gabbai with the responsibility of choosing a baal tefilah to lead the service who meets these minimum requirements: mastery of the correct nusach, clear enunciation, loud enough to be heard easily, and possesses a pleasant singing voice.
18. An announcement is made to remind those who finish their silent devotion quickly, that it is appropriate and respectful to engage in additional reflection and meditation rather than interfering with their neighbor's concentration and prayer.
19. When an attempt to initiate a conversation is made by her neighbor, one congregant holds a finger up to her closed lips and smiles. Another whispers, "I'd love to discuss that with you if you don't mind waiting until after the service." Suggestions for additional respectful and/or witty responses are welcome.
20. If one argues that he is forbidden to pray when he feels the need to discharge his bodily functions, he is corrected and told that this does not apply to his verbal outpouring. :)
21. Congregants are urged to daven out loud, maybe a bit louder than usual. It is felt that this creates a davening environment that makes talkers feel out of place. Also, those inclined to talk may well be influenced by the exuberance and positive energy in the room -- to daven themselves, rather than to talk.

22. The Rabbi poses two questions to the congregation just before reading of the Torah parsha -- to engage them in thought, rather than conversation, during the leyning.
23. The Rabbi devotes the first few minutes of his Dvar Torah to reviewing the laws pertaining to talking during various parts of the service.
24. The Board of Directors has posted a formal policy of zero tolerance for disruption of the service by talking.
25. When joining the shul, every member signs a formal membership application which includes an agreement to abide by the congregation's rules of decorum.
26. The Shul has framed and posted, either on the wall or on an easel, the magnificent poster of the Beit Hamikdash which is furnished, free of charge, by Manny Spero (write to him at 3673 Severn Rd, Cleveland Heights, OH 44118; Tel. 216-371-2016). It says, "After the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash, its kedushah was passed on to all the shuls in the world. You have come to this holy place to pray, to communicate with God. Please do not allow your personal or idle conversation to disturb others or reduce the efficacy of your own prayers. Talk is halachically forbidden from Baruch Sheh'amar until after the end of the Amidah, during Chazarat Hashatz, during K'riat Hatorah or the Haphtorah, during recitation of Kaddish. Silence during prayers will ensure compliance with these halachot, will encourage meaningful Amen and Y'hey Sh'mey Rabah responses, and will also save us from the evil of Lashon Harah. May our cooperation in these matters of Kedushah bring us closer to Hashem and help bring the Moshiach speedily in our time." It cites references from the Orach Chayim.
27. The Rabbi has printed up a brochure of the relevant laws pertaining to talking and interruptions during various parts of the service. The brochures are available for the taking just outside the doors of the sanctuary.
28. Printed copies of several Divrey Torah are made available on a rack outside the sanctuary -- to provide an alternative diversion to conversation within the sanctuary.
29. Before the leyning, an announcement is made to remind the congregation that one way of their fulfilling the obligation of "shney mikrah, echad targum" is to read the commentary and footnotes in their chumash.
30. The Gabbai stops the service when he SEES people talking -- not when the talking gets "too loud."
31. Just before reciting the Mishebeyrach prayers for the sick, the congregation is requested to focus its kavanah on achieving a refuah sh'leymah for all those who need it.
32. When the Mishebeyrach prayer is recited for cholim and cholot, instead of the Gabbai calling out the names of individuals, the Gabbai pauses while the congregants quietly say the names at their places. This takes much less time and also promotes silence during this serious prayer.
33. A separate lounge area, equipped with comfortable seating, provides an alternative "meeting place" to the sanctuary.
34. At one point during the Torah service, a formal Mishebeyrach prayer is recited for the benefit of all those who properly refrain from talking during the service.

35. The Rabbi dedicates 3-5 sermons per year to reviewing and expounding the laws of tefilah.
36. The Rabbi dedicates the first five minutes of every sermon to reviewing the laws of tefilah.
37. The Rabbi dedicates the first five minutes of every sermon to a story related to the importance of prayer.
38. The Rabbi dedicates the first five minutes of every sermon to discussing the meaning of particular prayers. He reminds the kahal that this is to promote their concentrating on, and thinking about, their prayers rather than conversing with their neighbor.
39. One Shabbat per year is dedicated to 100% talk-free davening. Parshat Beshalach is a good choice because it contains the pasuk which can be translated, "God will fight for you, but you must remain silent" (Shmot 14:14). The Rabbi mails out source material in advance and takes the opportunity to review the basic laws of tefilah and the value of proper davening.
40. Ushers are stationed outside the main doors of the sanctuary in order to restrict entrance during the Rabbi's sermon.
41. Ushers are appointed to enforce the policy of no talking in the main sanctuary during services. They walk over to offenders and hand them a small card. Unfortunately, I cannot recall what was printed on the card nor could I find someone who remembers this practice from 15 years ago. Suggestions are welcome. Here are a few:
 

"Perhaps you are a guest here and did not realize that we have a policy of refraining from conversation except with the Ribono Shel Olam."

"To preserve the sanctity of our service, we request that you take your conversation outside the sanctuary."
42. The congregation is allowed two 5-minute talking breaks, one just before the Torah service and one just before the Chatzi Kaddish of Musaf.
43. Just before a kattan steps forward to lead Eyn Keloheyenu, an announcement is made to the effect of, "A youngster deserves as much respect for leading the service, unless we want to teach otherwise."
44. The congregation ensures that a kiddush is held every week -- with or without an individual sponsor -- so everyone knows that, without fail, there will be time to socialize at the conclusion of the service.
45. The shul uses an E-mail distribution list to facilitate the sharing of news, announcements, and the like. One community uses three such distribution lists: one for official shul announcements, one for general announcements by any member, and one for on-line dialog and discussion of topics relevant to the community or Israel. (The more communication that takes place outside of shul, the less will take place inside shul.)

46. Like-minded individuals have received permission to daven in a talk-free, "parallel minyan" which is held in the Beit Medrash at the same time as the main minyan. Once in a while, the Rav will also daven with this minyan. Once per month, however, usually on Shabbat Mevorchim Hachodesh, this minyan as well as the Hashkama Minyan are not permitted to meet, allegedly to promote achdut. Those who cannot bear the thought of davening in the noisy main shul choose to attend shul elsewhere on these occasions.
47. The congregation is urged, by way of their monthly newsletter or via E-mail, to review the basics of Behavior in Shul as delineated most eloquently at <http://www.project-awareness.org>
48. Bookplates entitled, "When One May Talk in our Synagogue," have been affixed to the inside cover of every siddur. It reads, "The Synagogue is considered a Mikdash Me'at, a miniature version of God's House. Halachah requires that the Synagogue be treated with great respect and clearly elaborates what constitutes proper synagogue conduct including when, and how, one may talk there..." It was written by Rabbi Michael Taubes and is sponsored by the National Council of Young Israel.
49. Bookmarks have been printed and distributed for use in siddurim and chumashim. They read, "Take your Davening seriously, and your Davening will be taken seriously!" "I'm a proud member of the Silence During Davening Club." "Even whispering disrupts Davening." Such bookmarks are available for download from [http://www.project-awareness.org/page\\_bookmarks.htm](http://www.project-awareness.org/page_bookmarks.htm)  
You are welcome to submit additional slogans for use in promoting better decorum in shul.
50. There are signs posted every few feet on the side walls of the sanctuary which say, "If you come to shul to talk to your friends, where do you go to talk to God?" Another shul has posted, in Hebrew, "Dah Lifney Mi Atah Omeyd!" Another sign I've seen reads, "Assur L'daber B'sha'at Hat'filah U'kriat Hatorah."
51. The shul has chartered a committee to draft policies related to decorum, make proposals to the Board, and has invested it with authority to implement and enforce them. If your shul has done this, please contribute such policies and enforcement techniques to the list.
52. The shul has chartered a committee to study the floor plan of the sanctuary and to make recommendations related to its redesign. The main objective is to eliminate any nooks or small sections of seating which promote the congregants feeling like "they're in their own world." Also, there should not be sufficient standing room left in the rear of the sanctuary to permit you-know-what.
53. And one of my favorites: Mormon missionaries were permitted to observe the Sabbath morning services. I understand that you could have heard a pin drop -- that is, up until the time they left the room. This one also saddens me to think about how much more the strangers' presence was felt in the room than that of Hashem.

Additional suggestions for the list are most welcome! Write to me at [Gary7@alum.mit.edu](mailto:Gary7@alum.mit.edu)