

PSS

PROJECT SARAH SERVICES

ADDRESSING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE, SEXUAL ABUSE, AND TRAUMA IN THE JEWISH COMMUNITY



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■ WWW.PROJECTSARAH.ORG
■ 973-777-7638 x300
■ HEREFORYOU@PROJECTSARAH.ORG

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FAMILY LINK

A Jewish Man's Personal Plea To Protect Children in Shul

(Courtesy of PSS) As a father and member of the local community, I write this with a heavy yet resolute heart. This comes from a sense of responsibility—not from a place of accusation. We claim to be *shomrei Torah u'mitzvot*, yet ignore tragic dangers occurring within our own *mikdashai me'at*. We spend time making sure our lulav is straight and that our mezuzot and meat are kosher, so how can we show less care for the wellbeing of our precious children?

Our shuls are sanctuaries — places of Torah, tefillah and learning. Shuls should also be safe spaces, yet in recent years, we have seen painful reminders that vigilance is so crucial. Sexual abuse, tragically, does not distinguish between religious and secular. When our children are left unattended, we risk giving predators the opportunity they seek.

In our sacred shuls, where the Shechinah rests, it's easy to assume that all is safe, all is holy, and that everyone within these walls shares the same values of *yirat shamayim* and *kedusha*. However, assuming safety is not the same as ensuring it. When it comes to our children — the most precious treasures that Hashem has entrusted us with — we simply cannot afford to be complacent.

We are commanded in Devarim 4:9, "*Hishamer lecha u'shmor nafsh'cha me'od* — Be very careful and guard your soul." Chazal teach us that this *shemirah* includes our own safety, but also the protection of others, especially of those who cannot protect themselves.

Unfortunately, the walls of a shul do not automatically protect children from all harm. In too many communities — yes, even in the Orthodox world — cases have come to light of children who were abused in the very places that should have been their safe haven.

Predators do not always look like threats. They may be respected community members, youth leaders, even family friends. They thrive on access, opportunity and silence. An unattended child — wandering the halls, playing behind a *mechitza*, running unsupervised in classrooms — is a vulnerable child.

Let us not pretend: The *yetzer hara* does not stop at the doors of the shul. It disguises itself, adapts and waits. Our job is to shut the door before it can enter.

We don't like to believe that such evils could happen in our communities. However, both recent and distant history have shown us otherwise. Sexual abuse has occurred in shuls, yeshivot and camps, often committed by people known and trusted.

Our local shuls are large and children often wander freely into coatrooms, unoccupied classrooms or other unsupervised areas. In the hustle of Shabbat and Yom Tov davening, socializing or kiddush, children are often left alone. Some play outside. Some explore rooms. The assumption is that "someone is watching," but more often than not, no one is.

What Can We Do?

As recommended by PSS (Project Sarah Services):

1. Keep Children in Sight

Children should not be roaming shuls without supervision. Parents and caregivers must remain vigilant, especially during davening. Shuls can implement designated areas where children are supervised by responsible adults or teens.

2. Policies With Rabbinic Backing

Every shul should work with its rabbi and board to create child protection policies that are in line with Halacha and best safety practices. These should include:

- Two-adult rule: No adult alone with a child in a room.
- Bathroom policies for young children.
- No unsupervised access to secluded areas (coatrooms, utility closets, side rooms).

These policies must be public, transparent and enforced.

3. Education Without Shame

Modesty (*tzniut*) and safety are not contradictory. It is necessary to teach children about body safety, personal boundaries and how to recognize inappropriate behavior, all within a Torah framework. Parents should have age appropriate conversations with their children on these topics.

4. Background Checks and Accountability

Youth leaders, babysitters and volunteers must undergo background checks and training in child safety. This is not a sign of distrust; it is a sign of communal responsibility. The same way we ensure our eruv is kosher, we must ensure our caregivers are trustworthy.

5. A Community That Supports Reporting

In too many cases, abuse continued because suspicions were silenced. We must make it clear: Reporting abuse is not *lashon hara*, it is *le toelet* — a constructive, halachically permitted act to prevent harm. Gedolei Yisrael have *parkened* that when there is reason to suspect abuse, it must be reported to authorities.

As we approach Rosh Hashanah, our hearts naturally turn inward. We examine our actions, our relationships and our commitments to Hashem and to one another. We plead for a year of life, health and protection for ourselves, our families and klal Yisrael.

How can we stand before the *Kisei HaKavod* and ask Hashem to watch over our children if we ourselves have failed to do so?

This year, as we hear the shofar, let it remind us that teshuva is not only about *bein adam laMakom*, but also *bein adam lachaveiro*. What greater *chaveiro* is there than a child, who relies on us to be their eyes, ears and voice?

Kesiva v'chasima tova, may we all be inscribed for a year of health, happiness and safety.

Special thanks to PSS (Project Sarah Services) for instrumental and invaluable expert guidance on this topic.