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Discover the Joy
of Shabbos

Around the Shabbos Table Part One

By Rebbetzin Shira Smiles (Shiur E12)

Tips for handling challenges that can impede the spirit of the Shabbos table

The Technical Side

The mission of keeping children engaged with and enjoying the goings-on of the Shabbos table can be challenging at times. There is a lovely booklet by Rav Dovid Kaplan entitled 'How to Run a Shabbos Table' which provides some tips, and we will try to build off those.

Anticipate

Certain challenges are not a surprise. They crop up repeatedly. Those should be worked out with some strategy since we know that they are coming. For example, if children wrangle over who sits where, then setting up a system helps set that aside. If the children do not 'get' the system you can put out place cards. We all like to see our name at our seat.

If a predictable quarrel is about who got more Kiddush wine, then putting out the small Kiddush cups in front of each plate (adding a drop from the Kiddush cup to each) can put that aside. The basic message is that the challenges that recur should be addressed in advance.

Start right away

Children like to know what comes next. When they are unsure, they start to fidget. It is best to begin שלום עליכם as soon as the man/men come

into the house. If there is a delay, chatting with the guests, etc., the children feel lost.

The children are the point

The Shabbos table is the 'quality time' that everyone speaks about. It is a time for focusing attention on each member of the family. The guests will come to understand that the children are our focus, and the children will sense their significance in our hearts and minds.

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R' Moshe זצ"ל would seat his children near him and the guests were next. The message is not lost. R' Gamliel Rabinovitz שליט"א seats his young children near him while the marrieds are seated further on. The point of the table is to bring the children in, as close as our hearts allow. Closeness is the message of the Shabbos table.

Structure

As we have mentioned, structure works well for children. They tend to adapt to the predictable. Kiddush starts when Kiddush starts, and children adapt to be there when it does.

Those who wish to engage their children in serving and clearing might wish to structure who serves which and who clears which course. When the expectations are clear, children tend to rise to meet them. This removes the pressure of 'how will this work' and frees up energy for the



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table to be a place of joy, of companionship and singing זמירות which the children enjoy.

[As a practical aside, life is simpler if there are enough of the same Bencher for everyone to have access. In this way a simple page announcement is enough for everyone to know what we are up to.]

Food that the children like

While there is generally a 'Shabbos menu' which is traditional in most homes, there is still room for adapting the menu to the tastes of the children. When a mother has a spot in her heart for such a question it is wonderful to ask a child, "What is your favorite Shabbos food?" "I would like to make it for you this week." This is another way for the children, or for this one child, to look forward to the Shabbos meal.

Creativity allowed and encouraged

There is always room for creativity if you and your children are inclined. You may be surprised at what emerges if you let yours and your

children's imagination go to work for the Shabbos table. We know of Parsha-based centerpieces, Parsha cakes, color coordination of napkins, and flowers for an artistic presentation. These may seem like small things, but those small things are invitational for children. They connect with the Shabbos table experience and will want, yearn and long to be present.

Games can also add to the positive energy of the table. I was shown a version of "I spy" where the parent announces that he/she has a certain item in mind and whomever clears that item gets to give out the Shabbos treats. This creates an extra incentive for everyone to clear as much as they can to pick up the choice object.

The *סעודה שבת* is meant to be a highlight of *שבת קודש*. And if it is such for the parents, then they can transmit that to the children using tangible strategies such as décor, ambience and singing.

Those comprise the technical side of the Shabbos spirit. Next, we must look at how we instill the meals with *קדושה* and *יראת שמים*.

Takeaway: I will try to look at the Shabbos table as a tool for engaging my children.