Synagogue Survival Guide for the Deaf Jew

Introduction

Attending synagogue services is one of the most common experiences for Jews all over the globe. However, the results are different for every person.

Prayer has occupied a central position in Judaism ever since it was founded. We even find in the Torah that our forefathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob prayed. A thrice-yearly visit to the Temple in Jerusalem was one of the highlights of a Jew living during that era.

Today, the Temple is no longer standing. But that has not affected our connection with G-d. Instead, we turn to Him in our prayers in the synagogue (and at home as well).

Many deaf people – for a good reason – have shied away from the idea of communal prayer, because they see it as a purely aural experience. But they couldn’t be further from the truth.

Our Sages describe prayer as “the service of the heart.” In other words, true prayer occurs when one focuses internally and works on connecting the mind and the heart to G-d. Listening to the prayer leader (chazzan) helps one accomplish this, but it is not the main focus.

So perhaps it is possible to say that Jewish deaf people have an advantage over others; we are able to realize the real point of prayer and to focus on it. Instead of viewing the synagogue as a concert, we come not to listen to the chazzan, but to talk to G-d.

Below, we have complied a list of tips and suggestions for the average Jewish deaf person who wants to make the most of his/her synagogue visit experience. We hope that you will benefit greatly from what we have to offer!

(Note: worship services vary from synagogue to synagogue. This guide is meant to be used as a general guide.)
Will There Be an Interpreter?

The most famous question for the Jewish deaf person, when offered to join synagogue services, is: “Will there be an interpreter?”

Sadly, the answer is often “no.”

The reasons always vary. Sometimes, it is because there is nobody capable of interpreting the Hebrew involved in a typical synagogue service. In other cases, the synagogue doesn’t have enough funds to pay for an interpreter.

But don’t let this stop you from benefitting from what a synagogue visit can offer you. As we mentioned in the introduction, true prayer occurs when it comes from the heart, not from the interpreter’s hands. Even when there is an interpreter present, nobody can express your own thoughts and desires as well as yourself. Allow your soul to speak to G-d by using the structured prayer book as a guide!

But How Will I follow Along With the Chazzan?

Ah! We’ve got you covered. Here’s a list of tips you can use to keep up with the prayer service:

- Some synagogues have a large sign with the page number clearly displayed near the front. Often, someone is appointed with the task of continuously changing the page number as the chazzan turns the page.
- Peer over your neighbor’s shoulder and look at where his/her prayer book is opened up to.
- Before the prayer service starts, approach a friend or fellow prayer-goer and ask for assistance in keeping up with the prayer service. You will be surprised to find out how many people are willing to help you!
- If many people all seem to be at different points in the prayer service, then walk up to the chazzan and look at his prayer book. (This one never fails.)

Oy! The Rabbi’s Speaking!

So what do you do when the rabbi gives a speech?

- For those who are able to lip-read well (or rely on some hearing), sitting up near the front will greatly help in following along with the rabbi’s speech.
- If you know that the rabbi is going to speak during the prayer service, approach the rabbi before the prayer service starts and ask him for a copy of his speech, if he has one available. (This may not work the first time if he didn’t come with an extra copy ready, but he will be able to do this in the future.)
• Ask someone to quietly explain to you what the rabbi is saying while he speaks.
• If you are not interested in what the rabbi has to say anyways, take up a book and read it while the rabbi is speaking. Don’t just sit there and waste your time – learn something new!
• There are often many newsletters or Jewish publications lying around the synagogue. Use this opportunity to learn about what’s going on in your community.
• Remember – try not to disturb others while the rabbi is speaking. Your rabbi and peers won’t appreciate it!
• Use this time to take a bathroom break or check on the kids.
• Approach the rabbi (or anyone else who was listening) after the speech and ask him if he/she could repeat the main point of the speech for you. Perhaps if you show the rabbi that you are interested in hearing what he has to say, he will make the extra effort to make you feel involved.

What? Is That the Torah?

The reading of the Torah takes up a central part of the prayer service. The Torah is read four times in a regular week – Monday, Thursday, and Shabbos (Saturday) mornings, and on Shabbos afternoon.

Here are some ways you can feel more involved with the Torah reading:

• Open up your Chumash (Bible) to the part where they are reading from the Torah. (Ask others for help if you don’t know where exactly to find it.)
• Some fellow prayer-goers will be willing to point to your Chumash and follow along with the Torah reader for your benefit.
• Some people prefer to read the Torah portion on their own. Feel free to read the Torah portion at your own pace. Don’t be afraid to glance at the commentaries on the bottom of your Chumash (if your Chumash has them).

Wait? Is that a Visual Cue?

One of the best things about the Jewish prayer service that there are many visual cues that can help you in identifying where exactly the prayer service is at.

Some visual cues are:

• When the prayer service starts, the chazzan comes up to the amud (prayer lectern). (Note: In some synagogues, the chazzan only comes up to the amud after the prayer service has reached a certain point.) In Sephardic synagogues, the chazzan stands at the bimah (the table on which the Torah is read from).
• When the prayer service reaches “Barchu” (the start of the blessings before the Shema is read), everybody bows his/her head. You can’t miss an entire room filled with bowing heads!
• When the prayer service reaches the Shema prayer, everybody covers his/her eyes with the hand.
• When the congregation is ready to start the silent prayer (Shemonei Esrei, or otherwise known as the Amidah), everybody stands up and stays in place.
• When the chazzan reaches “Kedushah” in his repetition of the Shemonei Esrei, everybody stands in place and rises on his/her toes. When the chazzan reaches the end of the “Kedushah,” you will notice everybody moving around again.
• When the chazzan reaches “Modim” in his repetition, everybody bows down.
• If it is a day when one says “Tachanun” (supplication prayers), you will see people beating their chest.
• When the congregation is ready to read from the Torah, the curtain in front of the Holy Ark is opened.
• During the Torah reading, every time an aliyah (section from the Torah) ends, a different person is called up to the bimah (Torah-reading table).
• When the Torah is raised . . . the Torah is raised! Also, everyone stands up when this takes place.
• When the Torah reading service is completed, the Torah is returned to the Holy Ark.
• When the rabbi speaks, everybody sits down and looks at the rabbi. It would be tough not to realize what is going on!
• When the prayer service has reached near the end, the “Aleinu” prayer is recited. In the middle of this prayer, one bows his/her head.
• In some synagogues, the congregation stands up when “Kaddish” is recited.

**Nu, So What’s the Conclusion?**

Prayer is one of the foundations of Judaism. Through our personal prayer, we connect our souls with G-d. While the presence of an interpreter is greatly appreciated for the points in the prayer service when the rabbi or other members of the congregation speaks, we should allow ourselves to focus on the purpose of the prayer service during the rest of our time in the synagogue.

We presented many tips in helping the typical Jewish deaf synagogue-goer gain the most of his/her visit. We covered basic topics such as what to do while the rabbi speaks, how to keep up with the pace of the prayer service, and how to identify the various points in the prayer service itself.

We wish you the best of luck in growing in your personal “service of the heart” as you participate in your synagogue prayer service with the aid of this guide!