

Miss Manners Goes to Shul

Dear Friends,

In Japan slurping your noodles indicates appreciation. Such is the case with burping after a meal in Saudi Arabia. Slurping and burping, however, are not considered the best manners in the U.S. As a result, if we traveled to Japan with our best American manners, and ate our noodles quietly, we may be inadvertently insulting someone!

Many people have come to me over the years reporting that they have felt offended by someone's behavior in shul that goes against a norm as they know it. Part of being in community is to have a shared set of norms so people can communicate with each other easily and without offense. Being a part of a religious community increases the importance of a shared set of norms, because these norms are often used to build a communal sense of the sacred.

So how can we develop a shared set of norms that everyone respects? We are a group of diverse people with different backgrounds. What some of us grew up with as "never done" others have never heard of. So I decided to go to Miss Manners for help. Please consider taking Miss Manners' advice, especially as the High Holidays come along, when we all need to sit happily together at the "table" burping and slurping or not!

Happy slurping and Shana tova!!

--Rabbi Caryn Broitman

Dear Miss Manners,

I haven't been to synagogue in many years and finally came with my two children. I didn't want them to disrupt the service so I let one games on my iPhone and the other on my Android. After some time, an usher came up to me and told me we could not use our phones anywhere in the building during the service. I felt angry that someone would tell me what to do instead of welcoming me and my children. Shouldn't it be my choice whether my children can play on the phone during the service?

Gentle Reader:

It is certainly your choice to use your cell phone at home or not. But in a communal setting you need to go by what the community decides. That is actually the attraction of a community space—that it is a little different from our homes. Of course, you and your children should certainly be welcomed as you enter the synagogue. I assume that the usher explained the rules to you with courtesy. But cell phone use by adults or children in the sanctuary, foyer or anywhere in the building during the Sabbath or holy days is not permitted. If you are an emergency worker, explain to the administrator your needs and he will make an exception. Otherwise, leave the phones at home or in the car and enjoy the break from electronics. That is a small price to pay for the creation of a meditative space without constant ringing, dinging and beeping. Remember, no texting, phoning or web surfing while driving or davening.

Dear Miss Manners,

I was in synagogue for Yom Kippur and was upset to see in the sanctuary a teenager chewing gum, an adult drinking water, and mothers of young children eating peanut butter and banana sandwiches with their children outside. When I grew up this was unheard of, even for those people who did not fast. Is there anything I can do? I don't want to get into a difficult situation with my neighbors but it does bother me.

Gentle Reader:

Fasting from food and water on Yom Kippur is a very important tradition, and it is understandable that you would feel so upset to see people in the synagogue eating and drinking. As you probably know, when there is a health issue, Judaism encourages people who are ill or too weak to fast to eat or drink. If one begins to fast and then feels faint or ill, one should indeed drink, rather than spend Yom Kippur too sick to pray. Unless it is urgent however, this eating or drinking should be done in private so as not to distract others who are fasting. Of course children should eat or drink, and this can be done away from the sanctuary. Parents should not partake in their children's food at the synagogue for this would also take away from the community feeling of the day. Of course, what people do in private is their own decision. If you see someone eating or drinking and you know that there is clearly not a health issue (chewing gum, for example), you can politely explain that there is no eating or drinking at the synagogue during Yom Kippur other than in cases of illness. If that is uncomfortable, you could always ask your Rabbi to quote Miss Manners and communicate with the congregation.

Dear Miss Manners,

I have attended High Holiday services at the Martha's Vineyard Hebrew Center in the past and have no idea how to dress. There are people in white, black, purple, suits and ties, Hawaiian shirts and shorts, and everything else. I am afraid I will choose the one outfit that is out of place. Can you advise?

Gentle Reader:

I happen to know something about the Martha's Vineyard Hebrew Center and am sure you will enjoy the holidays there. On Yom Kippur the custom is to wear white and many people observe the custom of not wearing leather and choose to wear more casual canvas or synthetic shoes or sneakers. You are welcome to wear any color you choose and not everyone wears white but the majority of people do.

The Hebrew Center encourages people, including children, to dress festively in celebration of a holy day. That will look different for different people, and there is no dress code. The most important thing is prayer and community. Besides, I hear that the Rabbi is a baby boomer, and we know how that misguided generation feels about proper dress.

Shana Tova to everyone!

Miss Manners