



Totally Terrific Tot Shabbats

Tips & Techniques



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1. **Totally Terrific Tot Shabbats should...**
 - a. be welcoming, relaxed and upbeat;
 - b. offer moments that are reflective and quiet, educational and engaging;
 - c. provide opportunities for children to sing, dance, and interact with parents and service leader;
 - d. incorporate instruments, stories, sign language and movement
 - e. involve the parents as well as the children!

2. **Tips for Engaging Young Children in T'filah:**
 - a. Make it highly interactive and 90% musical!
 - b. Use hand motions/sign language. Explain the prayers in the context of teaching the movement. You are teaching the parents right along with the children!
 - c. Use percussion instruments and props that invite movement for kinesthetic learners.
 - d. Choose songs that preschoolers can sing.
 - e. Choose songs that allow children to zip in their suggestions.
 - f. Make the service long enough to include lots of fun songs... 45 minutes is ideal. A prevailing theory is that shorter services (20-30 minutes) are better for tots, but I feel that shortening the service reduces opportunities for participation, and therefore makes it LESS engaging.
 - g. Set up space so there is room for children to move around.
 - h. Start on time with interactive, opening songs so that children aren't milling around, bored. Enough opening songs allow late-comers to still arrive before Bar'chu.
 - i. Do not use 'readings' of any sort. Instead, give brief intros to songs to give them meaning and context. This serves as a segue from prayer to prayer, and reinforces the meaning of the prayers to parents and children alike. Better yet, sing it, don't say it!

3. **How to choose songs that "work"...**
 - a. Consider whether a song engages children. Can they sing along? Is there movement? Can they use an instrument? Can they answer questions or share ideas? Can they be a helper?
 - b. Multiple Intelligences Theory (different learning styles) explains that people learn in a variety of ways. Apply this by using a variety of approaches to engage children:
 - ♦ kinesthetic - use sign language and movement;
 - ♦ musical - offer percussion instruments;
 - ♦ interpersonal - encourage community-building moments;
 - ♦ intrapersonal - ask reflective questions (where is God?); allow for quiet moments (silent prayer).
 - c. Edit and adapt songs! Change lyrics, eliminate verses, add movements, sing a capella or with echoes, be dramatic and/or act it out, etc.

4. **Using Printed Services...**
 - a. Ellen Allard says DON'T – they're not necessary for participation and they just get in the way.
 - b. My congregation says DO – the parents like to have something to hold.
 - c. Therefore, if you use a service, make it a teaching opportunity!

5. **Final Thoughts...**
 - a. Figure out what works for YOU and your congregation.
 - b. Consistency is important. Once you figure out what works, stick with it.
 - c. On the other hand, evaluate each service, and adapt, adapt, adapt!
 - d. Know your music and service structure inside out so you can maintain the flow of the service and make eye contact throughout.
 - e. Don't let time constraints rush you if you feel you have the children's attention. Likewise, if you feel you are losing their attention, change things up or end the service earlier than planned.

Service Structure Suggestions

1. Opening songs should be friendly, welcoming and participatory! I like to sing 2-3 songs of greeting to **create a warm and engaging environment**. Your song choices will depend on the mood you are trying to create and the mood of the congregants. Is this a shy crowd or a rowdy group? Do you want to begin gently or with ruach?
2. Engage everyone immediately with an **action** song such as Hal'I'l'luyah (go shake hands with adults and kids!) and/or with **directed movements** as in Boker Tov (Baydush).
3. Involve everyone with:
 - ♦ an **echo** song such as Modeh Ani (Baydush)
 - ♦ a **call and response** song such as Boker Tov Boker Or (Allard) and Are You Ready to Pray (Allard).
 - ♦ **sign language** for Sh'ma (it allows you to chant a traditional melody while at the same time actively involving very young children who wouldn't otherwise have a way to participate because they have not yet learned the Hebrew).
4. Invite their participation by:
 - ♦ **zipping their ideas** into the song God is Everywhere (Allard). (Engage the children with the question – where is God? Sing the children's responses; be patient, don't be afraid of the silence; murmur that big people can share their ideas too.)
 - ♦ modeling **clapping rhythm** for V'ahavata
 - ♦ passing out **percussion instruments** for Mi Chamocha
 - ♦ singing **lai lai's** to teach the melody
 - ♦ asking the children if they want to **be cheerleaders** for God for Great, Mighty and Awesome (Allard) (rev them up; get them to shout "Yeah!" with arms in the air)
5. Change the dynamic by:
 - ♦ **collecting the percussion instruments**;
 - ♦ doing a **breathing exercise** to settle them down.
 - ♦ suggesting that they go **sit with their parents** for THE MOST IMPORTANT PRAYER of all.
 - ♦ singing a **quiet, reflective song** such as My Silent Prayer (Rossio) or With My Lips (Allard). (Preface the song by telling the children that this is their opportunity to share with God the prayer that is in each of their hearts, and I urge them to close their eyes and talk silently to God. Close your eyes too. You are modeling how to be in a prayerful moment.)
6. If you conclude silent prayer with a prayer for peace, make sure it is **participatory**. Keep it simple because they need to be able to join in. Sim Shalom (folk) is nice because it starts gently but you can build it up. I usually move on to the Torah service.
7. **Torah Service**:
 - ♦ If I only have a few Torahs, I hold one up for the children to see; if I have enough for all of the children, we hand them out and then everyone holds their Torah up high. I ask them to repeat after me: "This is the Torah/that God gave to Moses/and Moses to the people of Israel!"
 - ♦ Then we march around in the room singing Torah Torah, and return the Torahs to the Ark.
8. **Story-time**:
 - ♦ sit on the floor and invite all of the children to gather 'round.
 - ♦ tell a holiday-related story and/or sing a couple of songs. Be as interactive as possible.
9. Concluding the service:
 - ♦ Make a **tallitot tent** and invite the children to sit under it. (Parents hold tallitot over children's heads.)
 - ♦ Sit down low with the children; tell them that 'at the end of the service, we say thank you to God for the blessings in our lives. Teach 'todah' and the **sign language** for it. Sing We Say Todah (Baydush) either as written or with the **children suggesting** blessings for which they are thankful.
 - ♦ Tell children that we also pray for a peaceful world. Ask them if they will be God's helpers in building a better world. Demonstrate **hand motions** and sing Building a Better World (Allard).
 - ♦ Sing a blessing to the children after that. But if you sense they are done, then do **high fives** while saying 'Shabbat Shalom!' exuberantly.
 - ♦ Sing an **upbeat song** such as Great Shabbat (Baydush) while everyone puts the tallitot away and kids go back to their parents, then invite everyone to "Shabababa" to the back of the room for Kiddush, Motzi and oneg; lead them singing Shabba Shabba (Bellows) or Shabababat (Heckelman).

*Please note the following resources available at www.ShirSynergy.com + Free Downloadable Stuff:
Tot services (Shabbat and holidays), Music That Rocks the Preschool Classroom,
Tot Shabbat songs organized according to liturgy