

Making Room at the Table

Simple, sensitive approaches to food-related issues

Food is central to Jewish culture and, therefore, should bring us together. But those with allergies can have the opposite experience. Food can set them apart.

Dishes that others enjoy can cause discomfort and, even, life-threatening reactions for those who have allergies. And events meant to be warm and welcoming can, instead, create distress and feelings of isolation.

The National Institutes of Health estimates that 4 percent of adults and 5 percent of children are affected by food allergies. As a congregation, what can you do to make these adults and children feel included?

Area synagogues increasingly are tackling this question as part of their inclusion and education efforts. Congregations are raising awareness and adopting food policies to help safeguard and embrace those who have allergies or dietary restrictions.

“We want to be inclusive on every dimension,” says Joan Perlman, education director at Kerem Shalom in Concord. “We strive to make everyone feel part of our community. No one should feel left out.”

Although no congregation can promise to be allergy-free, there are steps you can take to help reduce the risk and accommodate those who have allergies. Following are just some suggestions, based on examples from area synagogues. Please note that the information is not all-inclusive and is intended as guidance, not medical advice.

- **Start with education.** Bring in an allergist to familiarize teachers, committee members and others about the prevalence and risks of food allergies. Tap the experts: Invite adults with allergies or parents of children with allergies to share their experiences and their advice.
- **Take extra precautions in schools.** Maintain allergy records on students and share that information with the appropriate teachers. Have young children wash their hands before entering the classroom, and consider “no-sharing” and “nut-free” policies. Simple, clear-cut policies are easier to understand and enforce—and often more successful at preventing cross contamination. Use allergy-free recipes in baking projects and take students’ allergies into account when making decisions about classroom activities involving food. Is a student lactose intolerant? Instead of ice cream, why not serve sorbet?
- **Spell it out.** Many congregations use signs and labels to indicate vegetarian, gluten-, dairy-, soy- or nut-free. Listing ingredients is even better. Ninety percent of food allergic reactions are caused by “the Big 8”: milk, eggs, fish, shellfish, tree nuts, peanuts, wheat and soybeans. But more than 160 foods can cause reactions. If you’re serving a pot luck dinner, it’s a good idea to ask that every ingredient be listed. That will allow people to make informed decisions, quietly, without having to call attention to themselves.
- **Offer allergy-sensitive options.** Some temples have a separate table for fruit, free of any items that contain gluten or dairy. Some have baskets with packaged, single-serving items that are

certified as gluten-free. Others offer nut-free Kiddush or special food packages, with ingredients listed. “Simchat Torah” bags and “Mishloach Manot” baskets are two examples. Many congregations make sure that every event involving food includes gluten-free and vegetarian options.

- **Ask about allergies.** Sometimes, it’s as simple as including a line on an invitation asking people if they have any special dietary needs. The more you know about your congregation, the more easily you can accommodate them.
- **Communicate your efforts.** Spread the word about what your congregation can count on, whether it’s allergy-sensitive events, a nut-free community Kiddush, or the choice of regular, egg-free and gluten-free challah at your religious school.
- **Create a record/resource.** Most congregations acknowledge that their food policies and practices are a work in progress—and that inclusion efforts improve with experience. To help new staff and volunteers get up to speed quickly, consider developing a policy manual that spells out successful ways to accommodate congregants who have allergies.

Note: Thanks to Congregation Beth El, Sudbury; Congregation Shaarei Tefillah, Newton; Kerem Shalom, Concord; Temple Emanuel, Newton; Temple Isaiah, Lexington; and Temple Sinai, Brookline, for sharing their food policies and practices.