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To Stand in Awe: The Women of Building Blocks

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Imagine being a young mother who has made the commitment to raise Jewish children despite being raised in another religious tradition. Where does she go to learn the how-to's of Jewish living?

Where can she find support as the family begins to create a Jewish home? Where does she turn for answers to the many questions that arise—especially if her Jewish husband can't answer them either? How do we as Jewish communal professionals help her to truly feel a welcomed and valued member of the Jewish community?

Building Blocks, a pioneering program originally launched in a suburban Atlanta Reform synagogue, was created to address these concerns and more. Twice-a-month classes serve as a forum for learning and support. Women who enter the program express feeling overwhelmed by all that living a Jewish family life can entail, and ask: How can I begin to feel authentic in raising Jewish children if I did not have a Jewish childhood myself? Where do I start? Do I have to do it all...now?

In *Building Blocks*, moms learn about the many ways to bring Judaism to life in their homes, with a focus on taking it step-by-step. Students learn simple ways to take each next step, and are reminded that one can start small when beginning new family traditions. They may look toward other customs as practices they hope to take on further down the road.

After many years of working specifically with interfaith couples, I found it surprisingly rewarding to facilitate these women-only classes. The format affords a safe environment for sharing concerns unique to moms

raised in other religious traditions. I find that the women regularly discuss issues raised in class with their husbands, and form friendships that become invaluable. And with couples' and family events throughout the year, husbands note that they also feel connected to the program, its content, and the other families.

For many of the moms, an underlying need is to overcome the isolation they often feel in raising Jewish children when little in their upbringing prepared them to do so. For them *Building Blocks* is much more than a class—it is a place of tremendous intra-group support and sharing of Jewish parenting ideas. *Building Blocks* alumni report nearly universal plans to affiliate with a local synagogue and provide a formal Jewish education for their children—and becoming active participants in both synagogue and Jewish home life.

As each year concludes, the women are asked to state what they think they have gained from their time together. Here are just a few of their statements:

“This class gives us the tools, resources and the confidence to make Jewish home life happen.”

“Building Blocks has been a safe place to share my concerns and thoughts.”

“I now know that there are other families similar to mine...and having similar experiences.”

“This brought my (Jewish) husband back into religion!”

Then there are the children—who ultimately are the

ones to benefit from their parents' dedication. What could be more heart-warming than to see the faces of the young children as we light the candles at our family Shabbat dinner, and to be present as they experience a Tot Shabbat service with their parents? Students have joined together to share in the joy of a family's first baby-naming or to celebrate a *bris*. We delight at the babies born each year as *Building Blocks* families continue to grow.

These women should serve to inspire us all with their dedication to raising Jewish children, willingness to support one another, and eagerness to learn. What pride our

Jewish community can feel in knowing that such a program helps many interfaith couples to live a meaningful Jewish life. And that there is such a great appreciation towards the Jewish community for providing this opportunity. To be a part of this is truly a privilege—I stand in awe of their commitment to enhancing Jewish life.

Note: *Building Blocks* evolved into The Mothers Circle: The Course and grew to become part of the comprehensive Mothers Circle program sponsored by the Jewish Outreach Institute.

An Open and Extended Hand

Rabbi Alvin Sugarman

Mothers Circle Rabbi in Atlanta and Rabbi Emeritus, The Temple, Atlanta, Georgia

“Over the years I have had the opportunity to work with countless non-Jewish women and Jewish women who chose Judaism who have worked to create Jewish homes.”

When the telephone rings, no one can know what awaits us after our obligatory *hello*. Last year when I was serving as interim rabbi in Santa Barbara, California, my phone rang and my secretary said, “Rabbi, there’s a call for you on line three.” And like the rest of us I knew not what voice or communication that call would bring. But at the end of the call, I can tell you I was elated to have heard from Dr. Kerry Olitzky, Executive Director of the Jewish Outreach Institute. During our conversation, Dr. Olitzky brought me up to date on the wonderful work the JOI was doing, notably the work of the Mothers Circle, a Jewish support, education, and experiential program designed to benefit non-Jewish women who are raising Jewish children. When he asked if I would be interested in becoming part of the Mothers Circle and working with Debbie Antonoff, whom I have known and respected for many years, I gave him an enthusiastic ‘yes’. For the goals of the Mothers Circle are but an extension of what was so important to me during my three decades plus in the congregational rabbinate.

In the months since Dr. Olitzky’s phone call, I have come to know some of these wonderful women and their commitment not only to bring Judaism into their homes, but to actually create a Jewish home. I often wonder what percentage of our Jewish community has any idea of how serious the participants in the Mothers Circle are. Over the years I have had the opportunity to work with countless non-Jewish women and Jewish women who chose Judaism who have worked to create Jewish homes. But none were more devoted to the task of making real the ideals of a Jewish home than those of the Mothers Circle groups.

The Jewish community should know the depth of what it means to such women to have their needs recognized. As Jewish professionals, our community needs to realize the unique role the Mothers Circle has in reaching out, supporting, and encouraging others.

It is also important that the Jewish community fully realizes the dedication that the women of the Mothers

Circle women bring to learning and applying what they learn to their home lives. As a guest in one of their homes for Shabbat dinner, for example, one would not be able to tell the difference between their home and a home where the wife was raised Jewish. Nor could one detect any difference in their preparation for a Passover Seder or the observance of Hanukkah.

It is also important to acknowledge the obstacles some of the Mothers Circle women face. These may include: a lack of basic Jewish knowledge, which (via Mothers Circle) they are striving to overcome; a possibly non-supportive Jewish husband (or extended family); a less-than-welcoming synagogue and/or rabbi; and opposition from their family of origin.

I want to convey to these women just how important what they are doing is to the survival of the Jewish faith and Jewish people. For without the Jewish home, there can be no Jewish faith or Jewish people to live that faith. I want the members of our Mothers Circle to know how much the Jewish community appreciates their efforts.

Though it might sound trite, I receive far more from my time with the Mothers Circle than I have given. I am inspired by the women’s intensity, their devotion to the Jewish homes they are creating, their determination to succeed in their efforts, and the wonderful support they offer each other. When in the midst of one of the Mothers Circle groups, I am touched both by the palpable energy in the room and the marvelous sense of their sharing this wonderful spiritual journey.

Finally, I want to share with you a poignant moment. I make it a point to express to participants my own gratitude as a rabbi and the gratitude of the Jewish people for their efforts to create and maintain a Jewish home. As I was saying this to one woman, her eyes filled with tears as she told me what it meant to her to feel so welcomed and affirmed. The Mothers Circle course truly enriches and strengthens our Jewish community by opening the beauty of the Jewish home to **all** who seek it.