



Follow That SIREN

This column needs a disclaimer. As I sent out an email to mothers of boys asking them to share their experiences with their boys and sirens, I wondered how it would be received. Sure enough, the responses were split 50-50. Half were enthusiastic, full of tales of boyish energy that ignites in response to a siren call. The other half reminded me of what we all know: In reality, sirens are serious business and really not anything to celebrate.

I wavered a few moments, reconsidering, before I began to laugh.

Who is responding to my query? Mothers!

And that's precisely why this is material that makes an article. Mothers know what sirens signify, and we take them seriously. Granted, toddlers imitating a siren are merely fascinated by that powerful sound, but surprisingly, older boys know what sirens signify, and yet they *still* find that sense of danger exhilarating.

Es vet gornish helfen! They are boys, and this is how they are wired.

A few years ago, our own home was consumed by a fire that the wind quickly blew over to the next two homes as well. Like a drawing in a picture book, the house was

physically engulfed in flames that were shooting out of the windows and leaping over the rooftops. After taking refuge in our minivan from the chill, we soon transferred our family to a neighbor's living room, partially to shield them from watching their house burn down.

My little ones were relieved to settle onto the couch and try to rest, but the older boys? I couldn't keep them in for 30 seconds. An area three blocks wide and three blocks deep was closed to traffic. Six fire engines lined the street, flanked by ambulances and a considerable police presence. Lights flashed everywhere, illuminating the night with their eerie glow. It seemed that every two minutes another emergency vehicle pulled up. First responders were everywhere, banging down doors, managing the crowd, communicating by radio.

This was *The Call* of the century. Were my sons going to miss it because of the trifling fact that it was their own house and all their possessions that were turning to ashes? Not a chance.

If there is drama and action (and sirens), the boys will be there.

It starts when they are incredibly young. I recall pushing two toddlers, my son and his friend, in a double stroller. An emergency vehicle passed, and for the next five blocks, the two of them kept up a chorus of *wheee-oooh wheee-oooh* that only died down when we passed a crane in action.

Just ask 14-year-old Shaindy Grunbaum,* who has

five younger brothers. For a while, she made a show of pretending her baby brother was a girl. But when, at about six months old, he became totally animated in response to the wail of a police car, she knew the game was up. This baby was definitely a boy.

In our bungalow colony, one of the highlights of the summer for the boys is the chance to ride in a police car. They split up into groups, and each group gets a ride down the road and back, sirens blaring. The glow on their faces is indescribable. No less fascinating is watching the littlest boys, running on pudgy toddler legs in the direction of the parking lot as soon as the first siren's wail is heard.

Mrs. Chaya Kohn,* whose son was born after several girls, learned her lesson quickly. She would caution her girls against doing something unsafe by warning them, "That's very dangerous, and Hatzolah may have to take someone to the hospital if they do that." When her son was going through a stage of fascination with fire, she tried the same tactic. His eyes lit up. "A real ambulance — with sirens?" She had to keep an even closer watch on him after that. Oops.

Several years ago, my friend was outside in her suburban front yard with her twin toddlers and very responsible ten-year-old son. "Can you watch the twins for a few minutes?" she asked him. "I need to run upstairs and check on the chicken in the oven." She was back down in record time. The two babies were at the top of the slide, and her son was nowhere to be seen. After helping them down gently, she took them and headed towards the street. There, at the corner, her son was staring down the road. He had heard a siren, and all else had disintegrated before that clarion call.

"It's amazing how boys who never hear 'clothes in the hamper' or 'coats on the hooks' have canine-like hearing for the faraway wail of any siren," says Mrs. Kohn. "They can all be enjoying their long-awaited pastrami-and-barbecue-infused cholent, and in a fraction of a second, our Shabbos table empties completely."

In the Sternfeld home, it's official. The first to hear a siren calls out, "*Yingelach tzum fenster* (boys, go to the window!)" and all the boys come running.

The Brach* boys play an intense game called *Ratevetz* (help)! The last time Mrs. Brach caught them at it, she dug up her camera and captured most of it, so they now have their own action-packed thriller that they can watch at any time. It starts with "unsuspecting" players *davening Minchah*, until sudden cries of "Help! Help" pierce the air. These are followed by — what else? — all manner of sirens and alarms... with a backdrop of urgent communication on hand-held radios.

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Of course, all the members of the *minyan* rush to respond. The family car is requisitioned, and, under their father's watchful eye, doors open and close to retrieve necessary ammunition, a makeshift stretcher and first aid supplies. No one tires until the victim is rescued, his wounds are bandaged and the perpetrator is captured. (They do share the victory feast with the criminal, though!)

Hiding safely behind her changed name, Mrs. Brach confesses that a few nights ago, she was sure all her boys were sound asleep when the front door opened and in walked her pajama-clad seven-year-old. He had heard a siren, and had escaped from bed and followed it outside.

"It's like a summons; there's no thought to resist it. Hear siren, go."

Is there anything a sensitive mother can do to help her son realize that sirens are not usually fun and games?

"Whenever we hear an ambulance, we stop and say *Tehillim* together," says Mrs. Marks.* "A good friend of mine taught her children the shortest *kapitel* of *Tehillim* by heart at a very young age, expressly for this purpose."

We might not be able to uproot the excitement at the sound of the siren's call, but we can balance it with a dose of sensitivity and concern. Then, if our son does grow up to be part of Hatzolah or Shomrim, it will be not only out of a sense of adventure, but also because he has learned to care. ■

**All names have been changed; stories lightly fictionalized for your reading pleasure.*

Mrs. Paluch is the author of "Boy Oh Boy!" — the engaging guide for mothers of one boy or a dozen. Comments and topic suggestions related to this column can be directed to magazine@hamodia.com.