

“No Kids Allowed?!”

Category: Devarim, Vayelech

Why bring kids to Shul if they are just a nuisance?

Noisy Children

One of the primary motivators drawing people to Chabad centers is Chabad’s treatment of kids.

In some synagogues, kids are “against the rules”: you’re not allowed to enter the sanctuary with them—and if you so dare to bring in a child and he makes noise, everyone stares at you with angry looks: How dare you destroy the silence! This is definitely one of the (few) things in which many Orthodox, Conservative and Reform synagogues are the same: they all discourage bringing kids into shul.

But seemingly, they’re right. During prayers, everyone needs to focus his or her heart and know that he or she stands before the King of the Universe. When one speaks to G-d, one may not entertain other thoughts, since focus during prayer is an essential part of the mitzvah. That’s why the halachah, the Jewish law, clearly states (Code of Jewish Law 98:1), “Children who distract their parents during prayers should not be brought to shul at all.” The halachah also adds (Code of Jewish Law 124:10) that while one should educate one’s children to respond “amen” appropriately during the services, “those children who run back and forth in synagogue playing are better not brought to synagogue at all.”

At Chabad centers, however, the exact opposite is the case.

We not only recruit kids to come to shul, but even encourage this phenomenon. As I always tell people, we allow the adults at Chabad—because they’re the ones who bring the kids. Of course, the main thing is the kids themselves. But the question arises again: How can we do this? Seemingly, those who follow the halachah are right in banning kids who rove around shul so that they don’t create a nuisance to adults trying to properly pray.

Big Jewish Gatherings

Let's explore this a bit by way of looking at Rosh Hashanah, Shavuot, and this coming new year, which is called a Hakhel year.

We now stand before Rosh Hashanah, when everyone comes with their kids to shul to hear the blowing of the shofar. At Chabad, we encourage this, so that not even one child be left without having heard the blowing of the shofar, G-d forbid. We assemble everyone in shul. And naturally, there's a lot of noise and tumult.

But again, a closer look at the halachah reveals the opposite—since one is obligated to hear all the shofar's sounds, the Code of Jewish Law (592:8) states that “one should therefore not bring small children under school age to shul during shofar-blowing so as not to scatter the concentration of the listeners.”

On the other hand, the Rebbe established a campaign to bring all the kids and babies to shul to hear the Ten Commandments at every Shavuot holiday. I myself remember how noisy it was during the reading of the Ten Commandments in the Rebbe's shul at 770 Eastern Parkway in Brooklyn. Nevertheless, the Rebbe continue to encourage it.

What's going on here? We can tie it all together by exploring the mitzvah of Hakhel.

Hakhel is a special mitzvah enacted once every seven years on the Sukkot holiday immediately following the Sabbatical year (Shmittah), as this coming year is. The entire Jewish nation would converge on Jerusalem for the occasion of the Sukkot holiday. But generally, the thrice-yearly mitzvah of the Jerusalem pilgrimage only applied to Jewish men—women could attend, but they didn't have to. However, the Torah tells us that once every seven years, we were to “assemble the nation: men, women and children”—the entire family had to make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem. This was known as Hakhel.

What would they do at Hakhel?

The Jewish king would stand upon a specially built wooden platform in the Holy Temple. He would read selections from Book of Devarim aloud, directly from a Torah scroll. The purpose of Hakhel was “to learn, to listen, and fear the Lord your G-d.”

But here too the question may be asked: If the entire reason for Hakhel was for the entire nation to hear the Torah reading “to learn,” then why was it necessary to bring the little kids who were sure to run around, annoy people and otherwise create the exact opposite of Hakhel’s purpose? Here all of Israel has assembled in one place. There’s pushing and tumult and chaos. Kids are crying, parents are getting upset and no one can hear a thing. Wouldn’t it have been better to leave the kids home with babysitters and come relaxed to hear the Word of G-d.

What indeed is this mitzvah of Hakhel? What is its goal?

The Experience

Maimonides explains that its entire goal was to reenact the Giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai: “To strengthen the true faith and to see oneself as if he is now being charged with the Torah and hearing it directly from G-d, since the king is the messenger to make G-d’s Word heard.” In other words, the entire nation assembled in one place once every seven years to experience the Giving of the Torah anew.

Now, what essentially happened at the original Giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai? The Jewish People didn’t hear anything new. Did they not know that you’re not allowed to murder? G-d punished Cain for murdering his brother Abel way before Matan Torah!

Likewise, in Parshas Noach, G-d punished the generation of the flood for stealing. Obviously, humanity knew that stealing was prohibited by G-d – thousands of years before the Ten Commandments were given.

And the same holds true for the remaining Commandments—even Shabbos was given to the Jews several weeks before Matan Torah. So why did G-d Himself have to bother, so to speak, to say things that everyone already knew?

The Rebbe explains that the essential innovation of Matan Torah at Mt. Sinai was not learning the Torah and hearing G-d’s commandments, but rather, to do so by seeing and witnessing it, so that, as the verse states, “the fear of G-d shall be upon your faces so that you do not sin.” In other words, the entire goal of Matan Torah— thunder, lightning, smoke, shofar sounds and all—was to create a strong experience that would penetrate the very essence of all who witnessed it. No one

could ever forget such an experience—an experience recounted to children and grandchildren and thus passed from generation to generation. It is what empowers the Jewish people to fulfill the Torah.

The same applies to the mitzvah of Hakhel. The Jerusalem pilgrimage was not to hear new things never before heard. Everyone knew the Book of Devarim. Everyone knew what the king would recite. Nothing original about that! But the experience was always original—the experience of the entire Jewish Nation in one place at one time, men, women and children, with no one missing, just like at Matan Torah. All of Jewry would stand in the Temple's courtyard in awe and fear to hear the words of the king, G-d's representative on Earth, as he would read directly from the Torah. It was this experience that lent strength and motivation to the Jewish People to carry on keeping the Torah and its mitzvos.

Our Weekly Matan Torah

Today, our synagogue is not a place where adults come to pray to discharge their religious obligations. Rather, it is a place in which Jewish children are raised and educated to be good Jews. Likewise, the weekly Torah reading on Shabbos is not to teach congregants the contents of the Torah portion—for that, there are classes throughout the week that adults can attend and study in a conducive atmosphere without being bothered by kids. The Torah reading takes place, rather to relive the experience of Matan Torah. That's why everyone needs to be there when the Torah is being read, as we read at the beginning of our parshah: "You are all standing here today... every Jewish man, and your wives and children..."

Prayer time in shul on Shabbos is like the mitzvah of Hakhel held every seven years in the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. But today, once every seven years is not enough—once a week is needed.

Just like everyone converged and had their part of the experience at Matan Torah, and just like everyone assembled at Hakhel, men, women and children, so too today, we must bring everyone to shul so that everyone, even the little kids, will not only learn about Judaism, but experience it.

On Shabbos, let everyone experience what Shabbos in shul is all about. On Shavuos, let all re-experience the Giving of the Torah. And at Rosh Hashanah, which is rapidly approaching, let the sound of the shofar be engraved deep within

our children's hearts and this year let us resolve to give our kids as many authentic Jewish experiences as possible.