

Along For The Ride

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Sukkos Day II

If you want to go down a Wikipedia rabbit hole, I suggest you look at their listing of the most people gathered peacefully in one place at one time, for a single event. For example, the largest annual gathering is the Arba'een pilgrimage, which takes place annually on Karbala, Iraq, on the 40th day after the Shi'a Muslim festival of Ashura. To explain this festival in detail would take too long (but then again, so would Sukkos, lehavdil), but it strikes at the heart of the contentious and often bloody theological differences between Sunni and Shiite Muslim belief. Suffice it to say that **30 million** people attend the Arba'een pilgrimage annually, a number greatly exceeding the number of people who go to Mecca on Hajj, for example. If you prefer your mass gatherings a little more secular, 3 million people attended a parade thrown in honor of the Red Sox victory in the 2004 World Series that ended their 86 year draught, and 1.2 million people attended an anti terrorism protest in Paris after the Charlie Hebdo massacre. For reference, the nearly 800,000 people who attended Rav Ovadia Yosef's funeral did not even merit a mention in the article. I've been thinking about mass gatherings because in the days of the Beit HaMikdash, another one would take place today. I am referring to Hakhel.

The Torah tells us about a gathering that takes place every eight years:

וַיֹּצֵא מֹשֶׁה אוֹתָם לֵאמֹר מִקֹּץ | שְׁבַע שָׁנִים בְּמַעַד שְׁנַת הַשְּׁמִטָּה בָּחֵג

הַסְּכּוֹת:

11When all Israel comes to appear before the Lord, your God, in the place He will choose, you shall read this Torah before all Israel, in their ears.

יֵאָבְדוּ כָל־יִשְׂרָאֵל לִרְאוֹת אֶת־פְּנֵי יְהוָה

אֲלֵהֶיךָ בְּמָקוֹם אֲשֶׁר יִבְחָר תִּקְרָא אֶת־הַתּוֹרָה

הַזֹּאת לִפְנֵי כָל־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּאַזְנוֹתֵיהֶם:

12Assemble the people: the men, the women, and the children, and your stranger in your cities, in order that they hear, and in order that they learn and fear the Lord, your God, and they will observe to do all the words of this Torah.

יִבְהַקְהוּל אֶת־הָעָם הָאֲנָשִׁים וְהַנָּשִׁים וְהַטָּף

וְגֵרְךָ אֲשֶׁר בְּשַׁעְרֶיךָ לִמְעַן יִשְׁמְעוּ וּלְמַעַן

יִלְמְדוּ וַיִּירְאוּ אֶת־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם וְשָׁמְרוּ

לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת־כָּל־דְּבָרֵי הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת:

13 And their children, who did not know, will
hear and learn to fear the Lord, your God, all
the days that you live on the land, to which
you are crossing the Jordan, to possess.

יגובינהם אשר לא ידעו ישמעו וילמדו ליראה
את יהוה אלהיכם כל הימים אשר אתם חיים
על האדמה אשר אתם עברים
את הירדן שמה לרשתה:

Note that children are required to attend as well. Of course, this is a logistical necessity. Who will watch them otherwise? The Beit HaMikdash didn't have Saras and Natans and youth group leaders to create amazing programs for the kids, and leaving them behind wherever they lived while going on *aliyah leregel* wasn't a feasible option- all the babysitters went to Jerusalem, too! But the Torah doesn't frame the bringing of children as a concession to logistics- it describes it as an integral part of the Hakhel experience. Why?

The Talmud in Tractate Chagigah tells this to us in one pithy phrase: ליתן שכר
למביאייהם - to accrue reward to those who bring them.

How, exactly, do those who bring them attain this reward? This statement is especially perplexing when you consider that having kids around at Hakhel wasn't easy, and if, as some explain, the purpose was to create an atmosphere of festivity and even atonement, having a lot of children there may not have helped in attaining

that goal. The ritual of Hakhel involved the king reading large parts of the book of Devarim from his royal Sefer Torah, flanked by illustrious members of the Jewish community, while everyone stood in rapt attention...ideally. You can imagine how well that went, I'm sure. Thousands upon thousands of kids running around all over the place—over the Chaggim, some kids at Shaare did damage to some of the structures in our building. If you think the kids *here* get unruly at times, can you imagine what kind of havoc they wreaked at the Beit HaMikdash?! Not only that; it was hot outside, so kids could get overheated (as could their parents). And then you had to deal with managing dirty diapers in the holiest site of Judaism on one of the most special gatherings in the Jewish calendar. This seems like a recipe for disaster, not for reward!

I think the answer might be in a close reading of this phrase. It doesn't say "to give reward להוריהם," to their parents. It says, "To give reward to מביאיהם," to those who bring them. "Bringing them" doesn't just mean hauling them along to Jerusalem— it means shepherding them on a path toward education and growth and maturity. How to do this is something I struggle with as a parent, and think about a great deal as your Rabbi. The Torah understands that there is a delicate balance when it comes to bringing children to places of holiness— like shul, for example. There are those whose kids "get it" right away. From a young age, they understand how to behave in shul, and are trained by their parents about how to act with respect and

awe while there. Over the Yamim Noraim, I saw so many of you whose kids sat alongside you quietly, intently and reverently. I don't know how you do it, but I am filled with admiration for you, and even jealousy. Those were the kids at Hakhel who stood there and soaked it in- and it is about these children that the *Baalei HaTosfos* say that there is a beneficial practice to bring children to shul. Then there are those kids who aren't quite ready to enter shul, at least not for more than a short while- but there is a benefit to making a holy place the focal point of our social and communal lives. The Torah wants that, too. Those were the kids who came to Hakhel because they hadn't seen their friends in a few months, and they were excited to go to the Beit Hamikdash and see them there, even if the rest of the event taking place was lost on them. Those kids would associate all their positive and formative memories with the Beit HaMikdash. The kids who don't really understand- אשר לא ידעו- what is happening will eventually grow to appreciate the gathering, and participate in it actively. We want our shul to play that role for our kids; we want their fondest memories and formative experiences to be associated with shul. Of course, not everyone feels this way, or agrees with the words of the *Baalei HaTosfos*. Writing in the early 17th century, Rabbi Yoseph Yuspe Hahn Norlingen (1570-1637), the Chief Rabbi of Frankfurt, wrote the following in his work *Yosef Ometz*¹

¹ Dinei Beit Knesset 62

I have seen that most of the world is careful to be pious in this regard, thinking that they are doing a mitzvah by bringing their children to shul, including children who have not reached the age of education. They are making an enormous mistake! Not only are they not doing a mitzvah, but are committing a grievous sin, as the children confuse them and the entire world with their screams, and the father is greatly distracted by watching his child to the degree that he almost cannot pray- even without intentionality...I saw in a book called Derech Chaim published in Constantinople, whose author wrote “The children that we bring now to shul cause punishment to those who bring them...”

Obviously, we adopt a different approach to children at shul, because we recognize that, at least in our Modern Orthodox community, the alternative to a shul filled with the indecorous sound of lively children is often one with decorum, and no children. And what Rav Hahn Norlingen was saying about fathers being distracted by their children is just as applicable to women who bring their kids to shul and want to daven. But we need to recognize that the reward occurs when the experience brings out the best in a child's character- when it is the best, kindest, most respect version of themselves that comes to shul, but also when there is a process of *מביאיהם*, to bring the kids along with us, such that their shul experience evolves and deepens over time as does ours. This maturing process requires hands-on parenting, to be sure, and setting an example- and in this, I am speaking

to myself more than anyone else. Done right, eventually, our kids won't just go to shul, but they go *into* shul. Yes, it will be where they socialize, where they find community, where they meet like minded people and perhaps even their spouse, where they multiply their joy and divide their sorrow. But it will also be the place where they go for spiritual nourishment, for intellectual growth, for structure and guidance in their lives. Let us be the best guides we can be- the Torah has faith in us that we can rise to the occasion. Our children are not just along for the ride- they are essential parts of our journey.