

DO IT FOR THE KIDS

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"Gather the nation together, the men, the women, the children, and the stranger who is within your gates, in order that they hear and in order that they learn, that they fear HaShem your G-d, and that they guard, in order to perform, all the words of this Torah." [31:12]

The Mitzvah of Hakhel, gathering the entire nation together to hear a public Torah reading, afforded all Jews the opportunity to come together to listen to the words of the Torah. Yet in this mitzvah, we find an apparent contradiction -- the verse goes out of its way to specify that the small children, "haTaf," should come to participate as well. This mitzvah is supposed to offer us all the opportunity to come together and to listen carefully, to learn, but we are also supposed to bring our kids.

Any parent can tell you that if you want the adults to listen carefully, then you should be telling them to leave their children at home! Small children disturb the adults, preventing them from paying attention and listening properly. So why should the "Taf," little children who won't understand anyway, not only be tolerated, but invited?

In the Talmud (Chagiga 3a), Rabbi Elazar Ben Azaryah asks this question. "The children -- for what purpose are they coming?" And he answers: "In order to give reward to those who bring them." Rabbi Nosson Adler explains: children are extremely impressionable, as we know. It may be true that they will not fully understand, but simply being in such a sanctified environment, and seeing so many people brought together for the purpose of hearing the Torah, will have a deep and lasting impact in their hearts. The Torah says that it is worth the sacrifice of one's personal growth in order to guide one's children towards Torah and good deeds. Should anyone fear that they will "lose out" by bringing their children, the Torah requires that they come -- and Rabbi Elazar Ben Azaryah explains that the Torah is promising extra reward to their parents.

Educating children takes tremendous effort and requires sacrifices -- sacrifices of both money and time. Certainly, it is not appropriate to bring young children to every event, or to synagogue in a situation where they will indeed disturb the services. But at other times, we need to weigh the impact upon our children if we do bring them, to see, to hear, and to listen, even if they do not fully understand.

What does the Torah tell us? That when a person sacrifices of him or herself for the sake of the children, he or she will receive extra!