

Children in the Sanctuary

By Rabbi Menachem Creditor

I share these words in response to something disturbing that has taken place in my synagogue's sanctuary twice over the last month.

In both cases, a child in the sanctuary made child-like sounds, and in both cases, someone asked the child's parents to take the child out of the sanctuary. In one case, the person said to the parent, "*perhaps your child doesn't belong in synagogue.*" Besides my sense of (and agreement with) the parents' hurt, these words are also the least synagogue-ish I've ever heard. This sentiment has no place in our faith communities, and my response is one of outrage that they were said in the first place.

My response to these wrong reactions to the presence of children within holy space is simple and core to who we are called to be as faith communities: **Our sanctuaries are not sanctuaries from children. They are sanctuaries for children.**



Parents are the only ones responsible for their children, in a sanctuary and in general. We expect them to use good judgment, knowing that children have a hard time being quiet and that there are some quiet moments of solemnity. So while parents should be responsible for exercising wisdom, only parents are entitled to make that decision.

If you feel the urge to react to the sound a child makes in a sanctuary, please know that you are welcome to walk out until that feeling subsides. Children are cherished parts of our spiritual lives, not distractions from it. Just this morning in the sanctuary of my synagogue, I wept at the cries of a new baby, held in his grandfather's arms. Those cries (and the ruckus I pray he causes in that same space in years to come) spell out a glorious, vital future for my community and for people of faith.

After all, we are only older versions of the children we see. We cry. *Why shouldn't they?* They play. *Shouldn't we as well?* Those children will, one day, please God, take our places as leaders of faith communities. That is, they will be the next generation of faith leaders unless we inform them that their whole selves aren't welcome in our sacred spaces.

Jewish tradition teaches us that the Gates of Heaven are only open because of the cries of children. *How can our prayers be acceptable if we exclude our most pure sound?*

And so, I close with the simplest way I can state this, and invite you to remind each other if the need arises: A sanctuary is not a sanctuary from children. It is a sanctuary we've built for our children, and their children after them.

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