

INTRODUCTION — The Significance of the Synagogue

Our sages point out that it is a mitzvah of the Torah to build a synagogue. The importance of the synagogue is two-fold; it aids in the execution of the commandment to pray; it is symbolic of the Beis Hamikdosh. Because it is an aid to prayer the synagogue is classified as "tashmishei mitzvah." In addition the holiness of the synagogue is attributed to the spirit of Hashem which dwells in the place of prayer. Because of this the synagogue is known as "mikdash me'at" — a small sanctuary, and is designed and decorated to resemble the Beis Hamikdosh. The parallel between the two is seen in other ways. Just as the holiness of the Holy Temple is everlasting, even today that it has been destroyed, so too the synagogue retains its holiness even in destruction. Because the spirit of Hashem is present in the synagogue, one should focus his emotions and purify his thoughts in prayer. It is for this reason that it is customary not to kiss children in the synagogue. This also explains why there is a partition which separates the men's sections' and the women's gallery.

Upon approaching the synagogue we move swiftly and bow as we enter. In the synagogue we stand in respect for it is a mitzvah to act with dignity there. When leaving we face the Aron Hakodesh so as not to turn our backs to the sanctuary. We then walk slowly away from the synagogue.

Since the synagogue plays a very important role in our lives, it is important that we understand the rules and regulations which govern its construction and which insure the maintenance of its sanctity.