

THE TRUTH ABOUT CHILD-RAISING

by Rabbi Yisrael Rutman

One of the great child-raising stories of all time is the one involving Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky. The great sage was once visiting a Jewish school in New York, when he noticed something unusual about the mezuzah. It was affixed much lower on the doorpost than is customary. It turned out that this was an innovation designed to make it easier for the children to reach the mezuzah to touch it, thus making the mitzvah literally more accessible to them.

Rabbi Kamenetsky did not approve. "Put the mezuzah on the upper third of the doorpost, where it belongs," he said, "and let them use a stool to reach it. Otherwise, they will grow up thinking a mezuzah can be put anywhere you wish. One does not raise children with falsehood." No matter how well-intentioned the idea, he did not consider it a proper educational approach. Our goal is to teach children to be truthful, and our methods must be truthful, as well.

Truthfulness is a paramount virtue, and needs to be inculcated from earliest youth. In the first major goal of any child's schooling, learning to read, we encounter the unique Jewish emphasis on truth. For in Hebrew the word for truth is *emet*. *Emet* consists of the letters aleph, mem and tav, the aleph being the very first letter in the Hebrew alphabet (aleph-beit), the mem exactly at the middle of the aleph-beit, and the tav the very last letter. Thus, the word for truth spans the Hebrew language, symbolizing that one's entire course in life must be made up of truth, from the beginning and the middle to the end.

The first Talmudic passage that most children learn is called *Eilu Metziot*, and is concerned with the laws of returning lost articles. Many other sections of the Talmud could be used to teach the fundamentals of Jewish learning; but tradition has settled on *Eilu Metziot* because it imparts a deep respect for the property of others. One who is trained to return lost articles will also be careful not to steal or damage the property of others. Furthermore, it shows the student that the Talmud, the pinnacle of Jewish scholarship, is intimately concerned with the most scrupulous honesty in everyday affairs.

This also explains why there has always been an insistence on learning directly from Torah scholars, and not just from books. It is necessary to have close contact with them in order to learn from their personal example. The life that is taught and the life that is lived are inseparable. This, in contrast to the secular attitude articulated by Bertrand Russell who, when caught having an affair with one of his female students, explained away any conflict with his standing as an ethical philosopher with the remark, "You don't have to be a parallelogram to teach geometry."

We who live and raise our children in a culture of deceit, face a daunting challenge. Whereas the role model for moral conduct in America used to be little George Washington confessing to his father, "I cannot tell a lie. I chopped down the cherry tree," today the role model in the White House and public life in general is of a very different kind. From Watergate to Monicagate, the lessons absorbed by our children from the mass media are often exactly the opposite of what we want for them.

So it is our responsibility as parents to provide alternative role models. We have to put in front of them images of righteousness, of great and honest people, for them to emulate. The stories of the great spiritual leaders of our people have traditionally been an integral part of Jewish education. If the books our children are reading and the shows they're watching are lacking in such content, then it's up to us as parents to find the right material for them.

Nor is it enough to teach our children about truth. We ourselves have to strive to be truthful; which means not only not lying, but also living up to the noble precepts of Jewish tradition that we expect them to follow. It's certainly not an easy task. We are not the prophets and sages of generations ago; we are far from the image of truth that our children so much need to see. But if we do our best, it will make all the difference, both for them and for ourselves.

And that's the truth about child-raising.

** E-geress is a Hebrew word meaning letter or correspondence.

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