

HAPPY FAMILIES

by Rabbi Y.Y. Rubinstein

There was a couple whom my wife and I knew reasonably well. We live in Manchester they lived in another town. Whenever we met at various occasions, we enjoyed a pleasant time schmoozing of this and that. Then one day we heard that they'd got divorced. My wife was truly shocked and said; "I can't understand it, they seemed to get on so well." I remembered something that I'd heard somewhere and replied "If people lived in Glass houses, then you could say that."

How many times are husband and wife in the middle of a very serious exchange of words (I have put this very politely) when the doorbell rings? The husband walks towards the door still firing hurtful comments over his shoulder "You're only like that because you take after your mother!" He has just received his wife's reply about his own family and then he turns and opens the door. The noise level in the home, which a few moments before was at the same level as a thermonuclear explosion, subsides into total quiet and a smiling and cordial host greets the visitor on the doorstep. "Oh hello Chaim! Look dear, Chaim's here!" a second smile from the woman of the house beams itself on the unsuspecting Chaim, who walks into this most perfect and happy of homes.

My wife once heard Reb Matisyohu Salomon Shlita explain in a class in Gateshead the mechanics of Kibud Av V'Aim (the commandment to honor one's parents). The Mitzva applies to the parents! Children will receive their Chinuch (education) in this Mitzva if they see their mother and father treating each other with Kovod (respect).

What children see in their homes quite simply produces not just the raw material, which will evolve into an adult but in reality produces the adult himself. A friend who is a psychologist gave me a piece of recent research from America. Doctors had listed several disastrous childhood experiences. These included Violent father, Divorce, Substance abuse and several others. Each childhood experience was given a score, two points for a violent father etc. ending with a final total. Adults, who had a score of zero, went on to adult life with incredibly better health. They enjoyed dramatically lower rates of Cancer, heart Disease, Obesity, diabetes and the rest!

I read the paper with profound sadness. How we bring up our children or rather how we fail to bring them up can actually bestow on them a legacy of poor health and even life threatening diseases. I once asked the Gateshead Rov Shlita, for advice on bringing up children. He told me that it is essential to make a special time set aside for each and every child. Each one had to feel that they were special to mummy and daddy. Someone who was in Yeshiva with me told me what he had discovered when he and his brothers were "sitting Shiva" (mourning) for their father. When they were discussing their childhood each brother confided that from their tenderest years till his death each one was convinced that their father loved him best. It was this discovery which made them realize how lucky they were to have been brought up in such a home.

Reb Matisyohu once told me of a yeshiva student who had come to see him for help. The young man explained his problem; he hated his Tefillin! The meaning of this strange declaration was that he had thoroughly gone through all the Halochos of Tefillin. As well as knowing what Tefillin should be like, he also knew what they shouldn't be like. He had become terrified that his boxes weren't perfectly square or the straps insufficiently black or the scrolls had become Posul (invalid). Reb Matisyohu pointed out that after we finish reading from the Torah scroll it is replaced in the Ark with the words from Mishle, "Darcheho Darchei Noam," The ways of the Torah are pleasant. If we have read the Torah and the results are that our lives are miserable, we mis-read the words.

Yiddishkeit (Judaism) is meant to be pleasant, when we bring up our children, they should be shown that.

Recently it has become apparent in many congregations that in addition to people like me, who specialize in Kiruv Rechokim (outreach), we are increasingly in need of people gifted in the infinitely more difficult art of Kiruv Kirovim ("reaching relatives"). Significant numbers of young people from homes which uphold all the laws of the Shulchan Oruch, are drifting away and getting lost.

The reasons for this tragedy are multifaceted but it is certainly hard to imagine a time when the corrosive values of Easuv have found so many different ways to insinuate themselves into Jewish homes. Never before have Jewish families needed so badly to be places which are warm and pleasant.

On the 17th of April 1835 Rav Shimshon Rephael Hirsch sent off the manuscript for the work that would become famous as Horeb. He wrote that it was meant mainly for "Israel's thinking young men and women." In the chapter entitled "Guarding Against Immorality", He writes...

"And as for you, Jewish parents, do not forget that it was at the time when you were young that the decline began. Sin has made giant steps since you were young; keep guard over your children! Some already move in the direction of this sin in the tenth, ninth, eighth year. Test the schools, the playmates, the servants, the friends of the house! Know that vice enters into the circle of youth by every way. Become the friends of your children! Give them early warning! Stand by their side in their battle! Do not leave them just in those years when the battle is hottest!"

If moral decline started when Horeb's readers were young, Rav Hirsch means the beginning of the 1800s! How would he react if he saw what a walk on a deserted street, empty of people but festooned with billboards and posters, would reveal to our children today? The central role of a Jewish home as a place, which is happy and warm, has rarely been so needed. Such a home will be a sanctuary whose values children feel guilty to flaunt and which will always be a place they are happy to be part of.

Sadly, I have been consulted several times by parents whose children have wandered from the proper path. It is not within the scope of one article to address all the possible causes and all the possible cures. One thing is obvious, the happier and more secure the home, the less likely it is to occur.

When I see young people who are in bad shape religiously or emotionally I always wonder "What is the home like?" Often "Unhappy" kids are the products of "Unhappy" parents. This leads one to wonder who produced this unhappiness in the parents? Must have been the Grandparents! So somewhere in Nineteenth century Poland a perfectly well adjusted Jew was coming home from the market when he met a group of Napoleon's soldiers. They decided to beat him up which resulted in an inferiority complex. Nearly two hundred years later, scores of other lives have had to struggle with that legacy.

This does not mean however, that people are fated to be "Congenital Nebachs (unfortunates)!"

One of the most exciting things I ever read in any Sefer was Rabbi Dessler pointing out the opposite of the Hebrew word "Ra" (bad). Instead of the obvious "Tov" (good), he says "Ayr"; Ayin-Raysh. Ayr means catalyst or awakening.

It is true that statistically, Bullies were themselves often bullied, Abusive parents were themselves often abused. But it doesn't have to be that way! Avrohom Avinu the monotheist had a father who sold idols. A man who thought himself a god, Pharaoh, brought up Moshe Rabbeinu. Klal Yisroel had

their preparation for receiving the Torah by a two hundred and ten year stay in Egypt. The paradigm of Tznius (modesty), Ruth came from a nation, which was a byword for Immorality.

Bad experiences can be used positively to project us in the opposite direction. They can awaken in us a rejection of that which we ourselves suffered.

When a young couple are told that they are going to have a baby many things in their lives will change. The news will not however, bestow perfection on the new mother and father. They will carry their shortcomings with them into parenthood. They need not however, transfer those same shortcomings to their own children.

The most important advice that any Jew can take towards creating a happy home for themselves and their children is found in Pirkei Avos (Ethics of our Fathers) "Asei L'Choh Rav." Get yourself a Rabbi! Especially when a couple are committed to making their marriage as successful as can be but have reached an impasse from which they can't escape. The best analysis that they can arrive at is that the husband thinks his wife behaves badly because she takes after her mother and the wife doesn't have a high opinion of her husbands relations either.

The Mishna states "Rav" in the singular. The more the advice, the more the confusion! If the Rav gives advice that we don't like, then we still have to take it, "If your Rav tells you your right hand is your left hand... believe him!"

How do you find such a Rav? How do you find out who is the best specialist in any field? Ask other people; especially those who had the same problems. Suppose you live in West Hollywood, Los Angeles and the Rav lives in Bnei Brak? Well there is always the phone and the Fax and maybe he would recommend someone nearby whom you didn't think of.

The greatest gift that we can give our children is a happy home. The Torah provides the advice to make that ambition a reality. It is essential that the smiles that Chaim sees after he presses the doorbell are the same ones that were there before the bell was rung.

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