

PARENTAL EXPECTATIONS

by Dovid Kaplan

One of the great truisms of life is that disappointment is relative to expectation. The bigger the expectation, the greater the potential for a letdown. If our expectations are patently unrealistic, the result will be disappointment, frustration and anger.

I was once waiting at a bus stop in Jerusalem at about one o'clock on a Friday afternoon. Anyone who takes buses regularly will tell you that this is not a good time to be out there if you are in a hurry. Not good at all. The buses pass one after the other without stopping, and the people inside -- the lucky ones who have boarded at earlier stops -- are packed in like sardines. It is particularly irritating when you recognize someone on the bus and he looks at you, smiles and waves. (Actually, he is not doing that at all. His face and hands are being squashed up against the window so that it only appears as if he is smiling and waving. He is really most uncomfortable.)

On this particular Friday, the buses were zooming by as usual... One man was loaded down with groceries and other goodies he had just bought at the shuk. As each bus approached, he drew close to the curb in anticipation, only to be disappointed as the bus passed without stopping. After the third full bus went by, he couldn't take it any longer. Through clenched teeth he bellowed in Hebrew, "If the next one doesn't stop, I'm going to stop it by force!"

My first thought on hearing this was, Now, this I must see. My next thought was, I feel bad that you're so upset, but I'd like to ask you something. You've been coming to this bus stop at the same time for how many years? You know what it's going to be like. Bring a book. Bring a newspaper. Bring a Walkman. Bring something! You know you're in for a wait. Why not prepare for it? Why feel frustrated because of unrealistic expectations based on how you would like things to be? Life just doesn't work that way.

If this man's behavior seems somewhat ridiculous and exaggerated in its unreasonableness, you

should think about your own behavior as a parent. You probably imitate this man several times a day, often resulting in the same frustration and anger. We will now look at a few examples and situations until you will most likely raise your hands in surrender and say, "Enough!..."

The first expectation that comes to mind is that parents often feel their children are not sufficiently appreciative. The children may not thank Mommy for making their beds and doing the laundry. They may not thank Daddy for fixing the bike or helping with homework. Which mother hasn't wondered what it takes to get a "thank you" out of the kids for the delicious dinner she's just served?

One woman taught her family a lesson that none of them has ever forgotten. As her family gathered around the dinner table one night, she went into the kitchen and came back with a tray full of cattle fodder. "What's that?" they asked in unison.

"I've been making meals around here for years, and no one has ever expressed any appreciation. So I figured that it doesn't really matter what I serve." They started expressing appreciation.

Now I'll let you in on a little secret. Children need to be taught to express their appreciation. It is not something that comes naturally to many people, and even those who do express thanks for some things often don't realize that there are other neglected areas.

One set of parents with whom I am acquainted made a particularly wise move. The mother said to the children, "We'd like to institute a new custom in the family -- something I saw in someone else's home that impressed me greatly. After the Shabbat meal, all the children all said, 'Thank you, Mommy, for the beautiful meal.' Then they cleared the table and washed the dishes."

The astonished look on the children's faces was followed by a few disapproving grunts, but the message was understood. This couple's children went into action that very night and continued the practice for many years. All it took was the parents' showing them what was expected -- just as they would instruct the children in any other area of behavior...

Many people find this concept perplexing. "Isn't it instinctive to feel and express gratitude?" they ask. "Do kids really need to be told to do something that is so basic?"

We must look at ourselves and ask the same question. How good are we at expressing appreciation or even realizing that there is a debt of gratitude? Don't we sometimes take for granted the good that others do for us? Do we always thank bus drivers, repairmen, teachers and parents for benefiting us? Do we realize how grateful we should be to guests who have participated in our simchas?

It should therefore come as no surprise that children need some pointers on this subject. Probably the best and most efficient method of educating children in this area is through example. If you thank them, they'll begin to understand. I'm not talking about thanking them for a gift they've bought you or a special errand they have performed for you. I'm talking about thanking them for routine actions.

"Thank you for going to sleep on time last night" makes a lasting impression. "I appreciate your not tormenting your sister for twenty minutes" has a decided effect. You have shown them that nothing anyone does should be taken for granted.

A constant source of consternation is the attempt to get kids to do things happily. "If you do it, do it with a smile," parents sometimes say...

The unfairness of this demand never ceases to amaze me. We adults don't do everything with a smile, do we? I can recall many occasions when I was cranky while fixing things around the house, and I have seen other men show displeasure when asked to take out the garbage or drive the carpool. Mothers have been known to show a little irritability when preparing the fourth evening meal of the day instead of unwinding with a book, and I have seen others forgetting to wear a happy face when cleaning up after Shabbat.

So why do we expect kids to perform at a higher level than we do? While we can emphasize that there is an ideal -- that of doing everything with joy -- we must be very patient while it develops. "I know it's not fun, but it needs to be done" is much more sensitive -- and sensible -- than "Oh, stop complaining, I do so much for you."

Another area where EER -- Expectation Exceeds Reality -- applies is the participation of children in home maintenance. The notion that youngsters will clean or straighten up their room because it so obviously needs cleaning and straightening is just that -- a notion. Saying things like, "Do you think

"I'm the maid around here?" or "Don't you see the mess on the living room floor?" is not going to magically bring results. As a matter of fact, mess and disorder don't bother most kids at all, so dramatic statements and frustrated whining on the part of their parents will not accomplish much.

The most efficient technique you can use is to explain clearly what you expect of them regarding the tidiness of the house, and then to remind them repeatedly of their responsibilities. But be realistic about achieving results. You will often find that until they are in their twenties, the results will be disappointing. Sending boys into their room with instructions to make it orderly and a warning that you'll be in to inspect in ten minutes usually results in a sock-throwing fight and lots of wild laughter.

One mother tried using shock tactics, with astonishing results. She called in her boys one night, sat them down and passed sentence on them. "I am tired of picking up after you guys," she said. "From now on, I'm going to fine you a nickel for every piece of clothing and junk I pick up in your room during the week. Every Thursday night I'm going to present you with a bill."

She counted 35 items during the week. At dinner on Thursday night, she told her sons they owed her \$1.75. The next morning, when she entered the kitchen, she saw an envelope on the table with two dollars inside and a note. "Here's the money we owe you, Mom, and a quarter tip. Keep up the good work!"

Frustrating? Absolutely. Astonishing? Not really. So try to keep things in perspective. And here's a relaxation technique you might want to try. Assume a comfortable position, close your eyes and picture the messy drawers in your own dresser when you were young. Breathe in deeply and imagine the mess of clothing, shoes, toys and other objects stuffed under your bed. Try to remember how you crammed your schoolbag with much more than the laws of nature decreed it could hold.

Dwell on these images until you actually relive that period of your life. Is that a smile forming on your lips and a laugh escaping inadvertently? Now keep that smile on your face as you open your eyes to reality.

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