

POST-CREATIONIST CHILD-RAISING

by Rabbi Yisrael Rutman

Our two young daughters were bouncing off the walls. Not figuratively. Literally. Using their mothers' bed as a trampoline, they were propelling their lithe little bodies from the bed to the adjacent wall and back again. This in itself might have been unremarkable, had it not come at the end of a busy day in the lassitudinous heat of August. Yet, after a day of packing for vacation, a trip to the swimming pool, cleaning their rooms (sort of), various bouts of eating and drinking and fighting and running up and down stairs, they were still going. Slouching toward middle age, my wife and I lay in a state of near-senseless exhaustion, while their energy seemed limitless. How, we wondered, could we possibly keep up with them until the bedtime struggles would be over later that evening?

Of course, one can take comfort in the knowledge that such energy levels are a sign of health in the little tykes. But there is something deeper going on here...

There is a statement in the Talmud that idleness leads to insanity. That is why it says that even a married woman with many servants must still do some kind of work. Rabbi Avigdor Miller says that this reflects G-d's intention in creating the world. That we are put into this world to do, to improve on both the physical universe through invention and technological development, and ourselves, morally and spiritually. He made it so that human beings (and other creatures) are naturally active. Idleness, which runs against the grain of creation and man's role in it, is unhealthy. That is why one of the most effective forms of therapy for the mentally ill is occupational therapy; and physical exercise is a natural anti-depressant.

This idea is derived from a verse at the conclusion of the section of Genesis describing the creation. It's written, ...*asher bara elokim la'asot*... "that G-d created to do." The enigmatic phrase "to do," implies some further action beyond G-d's creation of the physical universe. But the post-creationist phase referred to is actually not that of G-d. Rather, it is that stage of the creative process that devolves upon Man. G-d provided the raw materials; but it's man's task "to do," to marry and procreate, to build up and civilize the earth.

His active role in Post-Creation is first signaled by the invention of fire. Although all the principal elements of the physical universe were created by G-d in the first six days, fire did not come into existence until after the seventh day. The Midrash tells us that on the departure of the first Sabbath, man introduced fire into the world by rubbing two stones together. Thus, the seminal act of Post-Creation. Much can be done with fire; cooking, industry, the building of an advanced society. The Havdalah blessing made over fire at the conclusion of each Sabbath commemorates that event.

We can see this principle at work everywhere. Movement is the unmistakable evidence of life; locomotive energy the stamp of the Creator. That is why when somebody dies, he stops moving; when a baby is born it cries and thrashes about. A child that does not survive birth is called stillborn, the absence of movement synonymous with the absence of life.

And it is as true of the most gigantic star systems as it is of the smallest particles of matter. The "steady-state" model of an eternally static universe has long been discarded. The preponderance of data available today shows a universe in perpetual motion, its greatest parts hurtling away at hundreds of thousands of miles per hour from the center ever since the Big Bang. The microcosm is no less animated, an only recently discovered world of subatomic particles racing about at unimaginable speeds.

But the human contribution to these worlds of movement is unique. The cities and states we build are not meant to be a blind peopling of the planetary surface, filling up all vacant space with more of the human mass. Rather, it is meant to be the fulfillment of a Divine will that seeks the spread of civilization and the refinement of all that is good and noble within us.

So the next time your kids are "bouncing off the walls," try to keep in mind that their restless energy is an expression of the creative force that stands behind every living thing from the beginning of time. It can be a great source of strength in the wearying work of childraising.

Sources: See Ketubot 59b for the Mishnaic statement on insanity; Rabbi Miller's comment was from Tape #924; the remarks on fire and Havdalah were adapted from Rabbi Zalman Sorotzkin's Oznam L'Torah.

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