

ROLE MODELING

by Lawrence Kelemen

The Jewish tradition relates that the single most effective tool for planting greatness in our children is personal example. The rabbis of the Talmud long ago explained, for example, that a child speaks in the marketplace the way he heard his parents speaking at home." About 2,000 years later, American sociologists wrote:

"There is general agreement that parental and especially maternal language displays provide the dominant input to a child's language learning processes... More succinctly, children tend to speak as their parents speak because parents provide the principal language models."

...If parents and teachers respond to disobedience with anger or harshness, their children and students will likely do the same. If parents and teachers are dishonest or steal, the odds are that their children and students will internalize these behaviors too. Whether or not we intend to do so, through example we plant our own behavior in our children. Unless they make heroic efforts to uproot these seeds later in life, our children will grow up to be very much like us.

When queried about the greatest challenge he faces today, the principal of a private American high school related this complaint to me:

"Parents spend thousands of dollars a year in tuition to send their children to our school, where along with calculus and chemistry we are expected to teach them some semblance of ethics. Then, on Sunday, the parents take their child to an amusement park and lie about the kid's age in order to save five dollars on the admission fee. To save five dollars they destroy a \$10,000 education!"

In contrast, a mother whose child attends a similar private high school told me this story:

She went to the market with her children. When she was checking out, the clerk failed to properly credit her for a promotional item. After unsuccessfully trying to rectify the matter with the checkout clerk, the woman approached the store manager and explained the mistake. The manager was busy, not terribly interested in the woman's complaint, and initially uncooperative. However, eventually the manager reached into his cash drawer and handed her two dollars compensation. On the way home, the woman realized that the manager had given her too much money. She was already late, however, and could not return to the market.

That night, the woman could not sleep. She kept thinking about the money in her wallet that did not

belong to her. In the morning, she rushed the children to get ready for school early, left with them ahead of schedule, and drove straight to the market. There, in front of her children, she explained to the manager the mistake he had made the previous day. The manager was not interested in the story but took the overpayment and returned it to the register drawer.

Months later, the woman's son took a difficult test at school. Most students did poorly on the test, but her child received a mark of "A+". Indeed, in front of the class the teacher praised the boy for his perfect performance. Then, because so many students had received low grades, the teacher decided to review the correct answers aloud with the class. During the review, the boy realized that he had actually made a mistake on the exam but the teacher had failed to see it. Throughout the review the boy struggled with his desire for the "A+". Ultimately his conscience triumphed. After class he approached the teacher and pointed out the grading error.

At home later that day, the boy told his mother the story. She praised him for his willingness to sacrifice his "A+" on the altar of honesty. Her son explained that a battle had raged inside of him while he listened to the review. But then he remembered his distraught mother trying to give some cash back to a market manager. The boy told his mother that in that moment his internal battle ended and he realized what he was going to do. (As a pleasant postscript to the story, the teacher was so impressed with the boy's honesty that she rewarded him by giving him the "A+" despite the mistake.)

Most parents and teachers feel that values and perspectives must be planted by personal example. However, in practice we sometimes try to build into our children behavioral routines that we personally have not yet mastered -- with disastrous results: Children who believe that their parent or teacher is making a legitimate request will view the educator's inconsistent behavior as hypocrisy. Because children are naturally idealistic, they disrespect a parent or teacher who seems to be a hypocrite. On the other hand, children who believe that their parent or teacher is making an arbitrary request -- more personal preference than ethical absolute -- will view the educator as an autocrat, also unworthy of respect. Either way, we look bad when we impose standards that we fail to meet.

In the short term, because we have authority over our children, they sometimes cooperate with even hypocritical demands. However, when they grow old enough to become independent, obedience ceases and the real values and perspectives we planted through our own behavior (for better or worse) show themselves. If we want to raise children who will grow into good adults, we must plant the seeds of goodness with our own sterling conduct.

Being a model is not easy. Our children see us at all hours of the day under all circumstances, making it impossible to maintain a facade of ethical refinement. If we have a temper or other negative traits, they will see these.

Moreover, as we struggle to behave appropriately at all times, we discover that good intentions alone do not produce good behavior. Sometimes, even when we do not want to get angry, we find ourselves slipping out of control. We have no choice but to work on ourselves. We must set aside

time to develop our character, especially our patience.

In some traditional Jewish circles, people join a "vaad" -- a group of five to 15 people, led by a traditional Jewish scholar. The Torah program is complex, long-term, often counterintuitive, and highly effective. I saw members of one vaad work on themselves until they no longer got angry. I saw members of another vaad develop so much integrity that it became impossible for them to break their word, even when the commitment was as small as "I'll be off the phone in a minute." These are great achievements, and they exert profound influence on the vaad members' children.

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Originally excerpted from "TO KINDLE A SOUL" - ancient wisdom for modern parents and teachers. Published by www.leviathanpress.com, distributed by www.targum.com, and by the author at www.LawrenceKelemen.com.