

TORAH EDUCATION--CAUGHT NOT TAUGHT

by Rabbi Dovid Green

Jewish education is an issue which generates much thought and discussion. Much has been written about the subject. It is/was very common in traditional circles to start learning Torah with young children with Leviticus. Consequently, this parsha sparks discussion among the commentaries about Torah education for children.

The underlying issue, which is clear from the commentaries, is that children are profoundly impressed by the things that their parents are passionate about. This applies for both good and for bad. For instance, what a child sees his parent get upset over, makes a strong impression on him. If the traffic slows down to the parent's dissatisfaction, and the parent gets irate and puts everyone's life in danger with the short stops and fancy maneuvers to get past the offending drivers, the child learns from that what matters to the parent.

On the other hand, if a child sees that a parent conducts himself with patience and self-control, then the child will take note of this, and it will take its place in his subconscious. The child will attribute value to these character traits.

There is a story about a righteous man who lived in Northern Israel. He would bring his son to shul (synagogue) at communal prayer times. Another congregant would do the same. This second congregant would constantly pester his son to be sure to look in the prayer book, and say all of the words, whereas the righteous man would sit with his son beside him intently concentrating on his own prayers. One day the congregant asked the the righteous man as follows. "Why aren't you educating your child to pray properly? You just let him sit there in shul and you ignore him. How will he learn to pray properly?" The righteous man replied, "I am educating my child to pray. I am accomplishing this by praying the right way, and setting that example for my son. As he grows he will emulate this example. You, on the other hand, think you are educating your son correctly by pestering him incessantly. All you are teaching him to do is ignore his own prayers. He will in turn pester his own children in the same way."

It's clear that if being Jewish is important to us, and we want it to be important to our children, we must show them that it's important.

There was once a man who was a mason by trade. He had a son whom he was sending to study with the local melamed (Torah teacher). The man was behind in his payments to the melamed, and because of his own poverty the melamed would be forced to drop this man's son, so he could take

on a regularly paying customer. Unfortunately, there was a shortage of bricks at the time, and the mason was getting little work done. He had heard that a rich man was looking for someone who would build a brick oven for him. (The brick oven was used for both cooking and heating.) This mason then took on the job. Having no bricks available to him, he set out to carefully dismantle his own brick oven which he then used to build the customer's oven. The proceeds were given to the melamed to pay for his son's studies. It was a very cold winter in the mason's house that year. Nevertheless, the mason's priorities couldn't be clearer. The impression this act left on his son stayed with him, and it was the foundation of all that he achieved later on in his life.

We must always know that we can't live in a vacuum. If we are not giving the values of Torah and Mitzva observance to our children, than other values will take their place. There is certainly no shortage of negative influences in the various forms of popular media. Inevitably, children emulate these examples, and instead of being raised with the attitudes we would hope to convey, they emulate popular figures whose lives leave much to be desired. Is that what we really want?

The Torah has been the educational priority for Jews for literally thousands of years. It has successfully formed in us a desire for scholarship and great accomplishment. We are known as the people of the book. Which book has that saying always referred to? Torah has truly been an elevating factor for our nation. Let us not relegate it to the past. Make quality Torah education for children your priority.

Good Shabbos!

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