

WE ARE THE CHILDREN

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"Moshe and Aharon were returned to Paro, and he said to them 'Go, serve HaShem your G-d -- who exactly will be going?' And Moshe said, 'With our children and our aged we will go, with our sons and daughters, our flocks and our cattle we will go, for it is a holiday of HaShem for us.' And he said to them, 'So it shall be, HaShem will be with you when I send you out with your children; see that evil is against your faces.'" [10:8-10]

Moshe told Paro that they were all going. Paro responded that he was not letting the children leave.

Why did Paro care? His advisors had already challenged him: "... do you still not realize that Egypt is lost?" [10:7] If he was prepared to let the adults go, his alleged enemies, those capable of work, then why not allow the children to go as well?

We could speculate that Paro still somehow thought that he could lose the battle, but win the war. Let the Jews go out to worship their G-d, to bring the plagues to an end -- but keep the next generation, and hope that the adults will return and not abandon them.

Even this answer, though, is insufficient. The Midrash tells us that the Jewish people were blessed with large families in Egypt, and were growing rapidly. Even if they had to abandon their children, they could still have continued. Though we might understand why parents would never leave their children, what did Paro think would happen if the adults left without them? He would still lose all of his working slaves, and fail in his goal of subjugating the entire Jewish people!

The Talmud says in Tractate Shabbos [119]: "Jerusalem was not destroyed, except because they stopped the learning of the little children." The Parshas Derachim explains that the Divine Presence rests upon Israel because of the children studying, and when the Divine presence rests upon Israel, no nation can destroy them. The Yismach Moshe adds: this is why, when Paro asked who was going, Moshe responded "with our children and with our aged we will go." This is because "it is a holiday of HaShem for us" -- our holidays exist as a sign that HaShem is with us. And this, according to the Parshas Derachim, can only be when our children are with us, bringing the Divine Presence upon Israel.

This was a spiritual war -- and Paro knew this concept. He knew that the strength of the Jewish people is in its children, in the next generation. If the adults left, they would be not a nation but an empty shell, soon to collapse upon itself.

We, for our part, must ensure that the voice of the little children is not silenced. Many in our generation had religious parents, or parents who perform several Jewish practices -- but who never transmitted those practices to us. Now it is our job to ensure that our own children benefit from a more complete education than the one we received.

Sending children to Jewish day school is not an easy decision for many parents. It is a financial sacrifice, to spend thousands of extra dollars to send children to what are often inferior structures. [Torah Institute of Baltimore is 50 years old, and only this week finally moved into a permanent home!] And many worry about the impact upon their children's secular studies, or social participation in the "melting pot."

Nonetheless, we fool ourselves if we imagine that the majesty of Judaism can be transmitted in a few late afternoon hours, especially when the kids are all too well-aware of their friends already playing outside. Judaism becomes a burden rather than a joy.

Day schools, by contrast, bring Judaism alive for children, who turn around and give Judaism their vitality. It is a joy to see bright-eyed children talking about the stories in the parsha, the holidays, and, as they grow, ever deeper Torah thoughts.

It is our responsibility to remember what Paro knew -- that Judaism depends upon the next generation!

Good Shabbos,
Rabbi Yaakov Menken