

WITH ALL DUE RESPECT

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

(Vayikra 21:1) "Speak to the Kohanim, the sons of Aaron, and say to them..." "Speak... and say to them," - This [the doubled wording] comes to caution the elders regarding the children (Le- hazhir ha-gedolim al ha-ketanim). (Talmud, Yevamos 114a, quoted by Rashi)

This passage is one of the biblical sources for the concept of chinuch - education. The Torah places an unequivocal responsibility on the shoulders of parents and educators to ensure that children are given a proper and adequate Jewish education.

Baruch Hashem, in our times, there is an unsurpassed proliferation of Jewish schools and educational organizations. New schools and yeshivos abound. Seminaries, outreach organizations, kollelim, chavrusa programs. Torah education is growing in ways unknown to previous generations.

It is crucial to note, however, that Torah education, especially in regards to children, does not stop at giving a child a working knowledge of the mitzvos (commandments) and halachos (laws) he has to follow. Chinuch in midos tovos (good character traits) is just as (and maybe even more) important. As Chazal, our Sages, put it: Derech erez kadmah le-Torah (good character is a precursor to the Torah.)

It is an oft forgotten fact that the primary responsibility of education is not on the school or yeshiva, but rather on the parents. (Devarim 11:19) "And you shall teach them [the laws of the Torah] to your children..." In western society, providing children with an adequate Torah education on one's own is a daunting, if not impractical task. So, each morning we dress our children and send them off to their schools and yeshivos, where they are educated in our absence.

Chinuch, however, does not stop when the doors to the cheder close. Actually, that's when chinuch begins. Education does not mean simply teaching a child the concepts and framework of a Torah life; that they get in school. When a child walks through the door of his home is when the real test begins: do his/her lessons in Torah and derech erez carry through to their behaviour outside of school.

Everyone, then, who has a child at home, is a mechanech (teacher). As mechanchim, we have to teach our children about the taryag (613) mitzvos. One of the mitzvos is kibbud/morah av ve-eim, honouring and revering your father and mother. Parents often feel that to teach a child to respect and revere them - even to demand it - is somewhat self-serving. I believe that this is why we are often lax in demanding the respect required of our children; we somehow feel a tinge guilty. No doubt, a great deal of this laxity can be attributed to the laissez-faire attitude that prevails in today's

society. The democratic ideals of the day somehow carry over into our homes. The family unit is no longer run by the parents as it once was - it is a democracy where all have an equal say and chutzpah is not only tolerable but is seen as a healthy expression of a child's self-esteem. And then we wonder why kids do whatever they want and have no respect for their parents, teachers, elders, or anyone for that matter.

Last week I also spoke about respect - respecting one another. The respect I refer to here is a totally different concept: the respect and reverence that a child should have for his parents, teachers, and elders. This respect is not a natural phenomenon. So often, I have heard people wondering why it is that, "When we grew up, we had a degree of fear from our parents; didn't talk back; weren't so demanding; etc." I kid you not that I have on numerous occasions found intelligent, thinking people chalking-up this change to some sort of mysterious transformation beyond our control. Genetic mutations? I hardly think so. If we do not teach them respect, if we tolerate chutzpah and poor midos and self-centeredness, then it is hardly a wonder that these poor qualities abound and flourish.

Now I am not, G-d forbid, advocating tyrannical, abusive parenting. But to accept aggressive, and sometimes atrocious behaviour in name of open-mindedness and encouraging self-esteem is ridiculous and is counter to Torah values. The home atmosphere should be warm, affectionate and friendly. Parents should strive to show love and affection for their children. But at the same time, children must be taught the mitzvos of kibbud (respect) and morah (fear) of their parents, and be made aware that a certain code of humility and reserve is expected of them in relation to their parents.

By not teaching our children these halachos properly, we are inadvertently infecting them with the sickness that sefer Chovas haTalmidim calls "machlas ha-yeshus, the disease of egotism." He writes (chapter 6) that one of the principle reasons that so few gedolei ha-dor (Torah giants) arise from our generations is because children grow up thinking that it is perfectly alright to contradict their parents and teachers (why not - we let them), which leads to them believe that they in fact have a clearer outlook on life than do their elders. The key ingredient to kinyan Torah, the acquisition of Torah knowledge, is humility. Since these children wind up with so little humility, he says, they do not have the proper "ingredients" to grow up to become true Torah scholars.

I recently came across the following story, which inspired me to write about this topic. Rabbi Yosef Yitzchok of Lubavitch zt"l told:

Once, when I was about six years old, my father called me to his room and told me to make the blessing on the tzitzis. I replied that I had already made the blessing earlier in the day.

"Nevertheless, say the blessing," said father. I refused.

Father slapped me lightly - this was the only slap I ever received from him - and said, "When I tell you to do something, you must obey."

Tearfully, I burst out: "If one must recite the blessing for Hashem, then I have already done so; and if one must recite the blessing because of your command... well..."

Father replied: "One must recite the blessing for Hashem. But every father has been entrusted with the task to educate his children, and he must be obeyed."

This kind of soft, loving, yet firm direction is what children need from their parents. If we don't give it to them, then it is we who are guilty when they grow up with poor midos and a lack of derech erez. Perhaps, homiletically, we can find a remez/hint to this concept in the words of Rashi: Le-hazhir ha-gedolim al ha-ketanim - to caution the elders regarding the children. To caution them that they should teach, and require, that boundaries are established and maintained which clearly define that there are elders and there are children; and that elders should be treated as such and children should behave as such.

There is so, so much more still to be said about this crucial topic. But alas we will have to cut it short for now. Perhaps, im yirtzeh Hashem, we will return to this topic in the future. The interested reader is referred to the superb guides on hilchos derech erez published by Project D.E.R.E.C.H. ((416) 782-4026 - thanks to them, also, for the title of this week's dvar Torah). Every parent should read these guides and become enlightened about this crucial area of Jewish law.

The burden is upon us. With all due respect (that is, our children's), our progeny will grow up to be respectful, humble, Torah-oriented Jews.

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