

TAKING THE CHILDREN ALONG...

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

With our youngsters and with our elders we will go - with our sons and with our daughters...

Pharaoh had been overwhelmed by the notion of the plague of locusts. In addition, he was under enormous pressure from his servants. He summoned Moshe and Aaron, and hastily told them, "Go and serve Hashem, your G-d; who is going?" Pharaoh intended to offer that the adults go and serve Hashem in the wilderness. Moshe's reply, which has become a hallmark for the ages, is that our religious experiences must include all Jews, young and old. *"With our youngsters and with our elders we will go; with our sons and with our daughters, because it is a festival of Hashem for us."* (10:8-9) Pharaoh refused to allow them to go.

Kli Yakar explains that Pharaoh's argument was as follows: If, as you say, your intent is to go to the wilderness in order to bring sacrifices and serve Hashem, there is no need for the children to go with. It is the accepted custom among all nations that the priests, who are men, perform the services. Moshe conceded; perhaps you might be correct - if all we planned to do was to bring sacrifices. However, there is more. "It is a festival of Hashem (Chag Hashem) for us." A "Chag" is a communal celebration. Such, indeed, is the very nature of Jewish festivals: Half (of the day) for the service of Hashem, and half "for ourselves," to celebrate and rejoice (Gemara, Beitzah 15b). This, he explains, is the thrust behind Moshe's retort, "because it is a Chag for Hashem for us," and how could we possibly celebrate and rejoice without being surrounded by our families...

Judaism places great value on the mitzvah of chinuch. The continuity of Yiddishkeit depends on our success in passing over what matters to us to the next generation. Does this mean sending our children to yeshivos? Certainly! But it means much more. In the yeshivos, and the schools, kids are put through the "educational process." Some children find this extremely stimulating. Some don't. And, to be honest, there are times when "education" can be stale and uninspiring. It is not reasonable to expect children to grow up valuing their Jewish education simply because they've been told that it's the right thing to do. If we want our progeny to attach importance to their Judaism, and their service of Hashem, then it behooves us to give them reason to do so.

I am reminded of the story of a Gadol (Torah sage), who once overheard the following conversation between a Jewish immigrant who had grown up in Europe and his son.

Son: "Tatty, you work so hard, and you always look so tired. Why, Tatty?"

Father (with a krechtz): "My son, s'iz shver tzu zein a Yid - it's difficult to be a Jew."

After the son had left the room, the Gadol called the father over. "That's not the right way to speak to a child," he said. "If you're going to keep telling your son, s'iz shver tzu zein a Yid, then guess what he's going to grow up not wanting to be! You should be telling him, 'My son, s'iz zees tzu zein a Yid! My son, it's so sweet to be a Jew!' Sure, there are hard times too - but why harp on them. Show your son - by your own example - how sweet and fulfilling it is to lead the life of a Torah-observant Jew, and rest assured he will follow in your footsteps!"

The story is told of a Rosh Yeshiva, who, despite his great love for the Torah, didn't succeed in transferring his love to his sons. He once met up with a simple, albeit G-d fearing Jew, who had succeeded in raising many children, all of them G-d fearing, outstanding individuals with great love for the Torah. "I can't understand," questioned the Rosh Yeshiva, "what it is you did that all your children grew up to become such outstanding Jews, while mine didn't?"

In deference to the Rosh Yeshiva, the Jew didn't answer. Later, however, when telling over the encounter to a friend, he spoke his heart. "I've noticed such a difference in our Friday night Shabbos seudahs. The Rosh Yeshiva would sit at his table, relating deep Torah thoughts and insights to his family. Perhaps his children were not as intellectually gifted as he, or perhaps they just weren't interested in their father's discourses. Whatever the case, they couldn't wait for the seudah to end. That was prime family time he gave up.

"My Shabbos seudah on the other hand was a mixed bag. We sang zemiros, told stories, and all the children had a chance to say over what they learned in yeshiva and school. We never rushed, and we always made sure to have plenty of treats and delicious foods. My kids loved our Shabbos seudah - it was the highlight of their week."

Once upon a time, life wasn't as exciting and fast-paced as it is nowadays. There weren't so many thrilling distractions vying for our youths' attention and affection. Now more than ever, it's crucial to acquaint our children with the stimulating, exciting, and experiential aspects of Jewish life. The next time you go to do a mitzvah, take the children along. Let them live and experience the taste of a mitzvah.

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