

# STARTING WITH THE BEST MATERIALS

*by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann*

Parshas Va'eschanan, aside from containing a review of the Aseres Ha-Dibros (Ten Commandments), also includes one of the most fundamental paragraphs of Judaism - the first paragraph of the Shema. Significantly, although the Shema begins by telling \*us\* what to do ("Hear O Israel... And you shall love Hashem, your G-d... And these matters that I command you today shall be upon your heart," [6:4-6]) it does not stop there. One of the most basic tenets of our religion is the education (chinuch) of our children. They, after all, provide the continuity without which Judaism would stagnate and dry- up, not unlike so many other religions that have not withstood the "test of time." Therefore the Shema continues [6:7], "And you shall teach them thoroughly to your children," for only by providing our young with a thorough, insightful, and exciting chinuch, will we ensure success in raising generations of upright, G-d fearing Jews.

Even the most cursory examination of the Torah reveals that the mitzvah (commandment) of chinuch seems to have been placed upon the shoulders of the \*parents\* - not the \*teachers\*. "And you shall teach them thoroughly \*to your children\*, [6:7]" - "And you shall teach them \*to your children\* to discuss them [11:19]." Yet it seems that ultimately, it is the teachers that provide our youth with the lion's- share of their education. The (responsible) parents' role has been more-or-less relegated to reviewing with their child that which they have learned in Yeshiva/school, and whatever "chinuch" they can provide while seated around the Shabbos table. Nor is this merely a contemporary phenomena. Indeed, even in the times of the Talmud, and perhaps earlier, boys were for the most part taught by their rebbes. So why does the Torah place the emphasis on the parents' seemingly secondary role in their children's education?

I apologize to all the teachers and educators who are reading this week's Olas Shabbos, because to them the answer to this question is obvious and self-evident. A teacher can only work with what he's given. Imagine bringing a second-grade polyester remnant to a dress- maker, and telling her to sew with it an elegant gown. Ask a contractor to build you a palace - with a pile of crumbly, broken up bricks. Any craftsman will tell you - it all begins with the raw materials. With quality fabrics, the skilled seamstress can create clothing more elegant than the customer could herself ever have envisioned. Give an artist superior paints and papers, and watch him work his magic. But if forced to start with materials that aren't top-grade, even the most skilled artisan will usually struggle to produce quality work.

It is in this vein that the holy Alshich explains the first paragraph of the Shema. Chinuch begins at

home. The parents - by example of their own behaviour and priorities - provide the "raw-materials" with which every teacher hopes to begin creating his or her "masterpiece" student. First off, "Hear O Israel" - the parent must demonstrate his own interest in the Torah and halachah observance. "And you shall love Hashem, your G-d, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your resources. And these matters that I command you today shall be upon your heart." It is only after these conditions have been met; only after the parent - a child's primary and most predominant role-model - has demonstrated his own sincere commitment to all facets of the Torah, that the mitzvah of "And you shall teach them thoroughly to your children," (which indeed Rashi (ibid.) sees as a command primarily to the educators ["students", say Chazal, our Sages, are often called "children"]), can successfully begin.

It is written (Mishlei/Proverbs 13:24), "One who spares his rod hates his child, but he who loves him disciplines him with rebuke." So what's better - "the rod" or "the rebuke?"

The Bobover Rebbe zt"l explains (Kedushas Tzion, parshas Be'shalach pp. 104) that the child who has reached the point that he needs "the rod," refers to a child who is beginning in small ways to rebel against his parents and/or his Torah education. The parent wonders why his "gentle rebuke" has little effect on his child. Perhaps, were he to examine his own behaviour, he might find that many of the good things he would like to see in his child, are absent (in a more adult way) in him. At any rate, this child, having in some way begun to reject his chinuch, needs "the rod" to steer him back. Rebuke at this stage will not be enough, for he has lost a degree of respect for his parents due to their lack of commitment to the standard of Torah observance they seemingly desire to see from him.

But, "he who loves him, rebukes him." One who truly loves his child - who dearly wishes to see him going in the derech ha-Torah (path of the Torah) - will be sure to conduct himself in a manner congruent with the chinuch his child is receiving, so that his rebuke will be meaningful, and his discipline will hit its mark.

Ultimately, chinuch is an extremely delicate and complicated issue. Even given the best materials, not even the most skilled dress-maker will succeed every single time. But at the very least, we owe it to our children (and to ourselves) to re-examine our own lives, and make sure that in every way (seriousness of our tefilah, dedication to our own limud ha-Torah, importance attached to those who learn Torah, laws of lashon hara, honesty, deeds of kindness, etc. etc.) we are living-up to the standard with which we desire to educate our children.

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