

GENTLE WAKE-UP CALL

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

He discovered [the Jewish nation] in a desert land - in desolation; a howling wilderness. He encircled it, He gave it wisdom, He guarded it like the pupil of His eye. Like the eagle arousing its nest - hovering over its young; it spreads out its wings and takes them, it carries them on its wings. [32:9-10]

Moshe, in the above verses, reminds the Jewish nation of the Divine kindnesses that should have made us eternally grateful. The Torah describes the love shown by Hashem, using the metaphor of the eagle caring for its young. Rashi explains that when the eagle wakes up its children, it doesn't do so suddenly, so as not to shock them. Rather, it gently hovers over its nest as they sleep, its wings beating softly against the nearby trees and branches, until slowly they are aroused. Most birds, explains Rashi, carry their young in their feet, for they fear the attack of the mighty eagle from above. But the eagle, who fears from no other fowl, carries its young upon its wings, thus protecting them from the arrows of the hunters below.

However, isn't it sort of strange that the Torah's choice for a metaphor to describe the love of a parent for its child, is the example of the eagle rousing its young from their slumber? After all, wouldn't it be even more compassionate for the mother bird to simply allow her young to sleep on, until they awoke on their own accord?

More than two hundred years ago, there lived a great tzaddik, R' Yitzchak Isaac Eichenstein of Safrin zt"l, who, together with his pious wife Hinda zt"l, raised five sons, all of them Torah giants and leaders of their generation. The greatest and most well known of their sons was the holy tzaddik R' Tzvi Hirsch of Zidichov zt"l.

Hinda was renowned for her good heart and kind deeds. She also had the custom of rising every night at chatzos (halachic midnight), seating herself upon the ground, and quietly crying while reciting Tikkun Chatzos (prayers recited over the destruction of the Holy Temple and the Jewish exile). Even after she began to bear children, she continued her ritual. In fact, she would wake her sons with her, even when they were only infants, and sit them on the earth. They too would cry (and scream - though perhaps not for exactly the same reasons!). She explained that if she wanted to train her children that a Jew must wake up at chatzos, she had better get them used to it right away. If she "pampered" them (no pun intended) by allowing them to sleep through the night, who knows if in later years they would be able to break the habit.

While it might seem extreme, her logic apparently bore fruits. In later years, she was wont to say that

she has no fear of the Heavenly Court that will judge her after her death. "Even if I personally do not deserve a place in Gan Eden, they will have to give it to me because of my five pious sons!" She paraphrased the verse (Bamidbar 20:19), "I will ascend ba-mesilah (on the straight path)." The letters ba-mesilah, she would say, were an acronym for the names of her five sons, Berish, Moshe, Sender, Lipa, and Hershel...

It is told by one of the sons of the venerable sage R' Moshe Feinstein zt"l, that as a young child, he remembers his father coming into his room during the early winter hours, and placing his clothes on the radiator. A short while later, when his father would come to wake him, he would find his clothes warm and cozy; it made getting out of bed to learn a little bit easier.

Perhaps this is why, explains the Bobover Rebbe zt"l hk"m, the Torah uses the metaphor of the eagle arousing its young. To indulge ones youth, even if done out of compassion and fatherly love, is ultimately neither compassionate nor loving. He quotes the holy Sh'la, who comments on the verse (Eichah/Lamentations 4:10), "The hands of compassionate mothers have boiled their own children," that indeed, the over-compassionate mother, by indulging her children with misplaced love and lack of discipline, ruins them. She teaches them to be spoiled, self-centered individuals.

According to the famous teaching of Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair (Shekalim 9b), zerizus - energeticness and alacrity - is the quality with which one begins one's ascent to serving Hashem and becoming a more complete individual. There is no greater gift we can give our children than to help them conquer their natural tendency to laziness. This is true compassion - not giving in to hollow sensations of sympathy and love, but rather to consider what we can do for our children to help them become the best, most well-adjusted individuals they can be.

The eagle arouses its youth with great gentleness and care; but it doesn't let them sleep. The Torah, by way of its metaphor, is trying to distil for us the attitude with which we must relate to our children. We must arouse them to serve the Almighty gently and caringly. But we must be careful not to be misled by mistaken compassion, which leads us to indulge them and spoil them, thereby raising self-centered persons ill-adept to take on life's challenges and deal with others in a manner befitting a true ben-Torah.

Have a good Shabbos and a Gemar Chasima Tova.

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