

GOING AGAINST THE TIDE

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Going Against the Tide - Easier Said Than Done

"And Hashem said to Moshe: Say to the Kohanim [priests], the sons of Aaron, and say to them: To a dead person he shall not become impure." [21:1]

"Say'... and 'say' to them,' [the redundancy] is to teach that the elder [Kohanim] must take caution with the young Kohanim [that they not defile themselves to a dead person]." [Rashi, based on Talmud, Yevamos 114a]

Although perhaps the most famous, this is certainly not the only instance where our Sages caution the elders to keep an eye on their youth. The exhortation "To caution the elders regarding the youth," is also found with regard to the eating of insects (Yevamos 114a) and with regard to the eating of blood (ibid.). What is unique about the warning to the Kohanim in this week's Sidrah is that the warning originates from the repetition of the word "say" - i.e. say it once [for the elders] and say it again [for the young]. In other places, Chazal (our Sages) derive this idea from grammatical nuances, such as "Every soul among you may not eat blood (Vayikra/Leviticus 17:12)." Why then is it only with regard to the warning that the young Kohanim not defile themselves that the Torah does so by "saying it once and saying it again?"

Were one to ask a parent, "Who is your child's educator?" They would likely respond by heaping (hopefully) lavish praise on their son's rebbes and their daughter's teachers. Were you then to press further, "Who else?" Perhaps they would begin naming off General Studies teachers, principals, and of course themselves as parents. Yet, says the Oznayim La-Torah, they will likely forget to mention their child's most influential and significant mechanech (educator) of all - his peers! We don't live in a vacuum. The most valiant and well intended efforts to give our children a "good education" - one that consists of learning not only a blatt gemara but also acquiring fine character traits and a refined personality, as well as a commitment to strict adherence to halacha - can be completely undermined if the child is not surrounded by peers who share the same viewpoint. You can go blue in the face teaching a child not to talk during davening, yet if there is a serious talking problem in your shul, you are likely fighting a losing battle. We teach our children the importance of the laws of Shabbos; yet if we were to send them to schools where their peers did not keep Shabbos, it would only be a matter of time before they began questioning what they've been taught. "If it's so important - why isn't anyone else doing it?"

This is not to say that one who grows up in such an environment is sure to sway from the Torah path, nor does it mean that if we do surround our children with friends that have an appreciation for Torah life that we're guaranteed success. But it does play a huge role in the chinuch of our children - a role that simply can not be ignored.

This was a lesson that was "learned the hard way" by early European immigrants to Canada and America. While at home a strict adherence to halacha was taught and practised, children were sent to public schools (there was an extreme dearth of chadarim, yeshivos and Beis Yaakovs) where they mingled with others to whom halacha was not an issue. Many of them went on, to their parents utter dismay, to abandon their well-intended efforts at chinuch and even to intermarry.

While we hope that one day, when they are older, children will be firm enough in their faith and beliefs that they will be able, if necessary, to "go out into the world" and deal with people that have opposing views, to subject them to such an onslaught when they are still young and impressionable is ill-advised. The gardener begins by planting his tree in a planter, where he can control its soil and climate, and keep it under the protective roof of a solarium. Only later, when the tree's roots have developed and its branches are strong, does he take the tree outside where it can now vie with the elements and stand strong against the storm-winds it will soon face.

Baruch Hashem today we have fantastic schools and yeshivos which are stocked not only with top-notch teachers and rebbeim (no self-gratification intended), but also with peers from families that are teaching their children the same values we are. (Though one should never let one's guard down - bad apples can come from even the best of trees!) Can you imagine, then, how difficult it must have been to be a small Kohen during the time when the Beis Ha-Mikdash (Holy Temple) still stood, and bodily purity was a daily concern?

At home, the young Kohen would be taught to exercise extreme caution not to defile himself by walking through a cemetery, touching a dead rodent, or even by sitting on a chair that had been used by someone who was impure (certain types of tu'mah [defilement] can be imparted to chairs, which can then transfer that tu'mah to a person). There's no sitting on the bus for young Kohanim - after all who knows who sat on the bench before them! If they were to defile themselves, even to a lesser degree of tu'mah such as touching a rodent, there would have to be a call home to get mommy to send them another lunch, because the lunch with which she sent them to cheder likely had bread and fruits which were terumah (priestly tithes), and could only be eaten when ritually pure.

Yet their friends that they played with and learned with, young Yisraelim (i.e. non-Kohanim), likely displayed utter disregard for all these laws - after all, they do not eat terumah and have no commandment to refrain from defiling themselves. This dichotomy could only have caused the elder Kohanim extreme difficulty in imparting to their youth an appreciation for these critical laws.

What do you do to counteract the natural tendency of a child to be influenced by his peers? You

warn them again and again and again - until you're absolutely sure they understand your message loud-and- clear. This is why, says the Ozneyim La-Torah, specifically with regard to the Kohanim the Torah uses repetitiousness in order to teach its warning regarding the youth. When going against the tide, you've got to say it once and say it again.

Have a good Shabbos.

This week's publication is sponsored by the Pavel family, in memory of R' Yitzchak ben R' Yekusiel Yehudah Pavel, whose yohrtzeit is this Friday. May his memory be a blessing.

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