

RIGHT AND WRONG

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Yitzchak had just come from Be'er LaChai Roi; he was living in the south. He went out to pray in the field toward evening . . . (Bereishis 24:62-63)

There are many ways to measure one's success in life, but one of the most important of all, explains the Torah, is the spiritual quality of the generations one leaves behind. And though "generations" can even mean one's deeds, as we learned back at the beginning of Parashas Noach, the simplest explanation is that it means the children to which one gives birth and raises.

In fact, Rashi mentioned on last week's parshah that:

Anyone who raises a righteous son, it is as if he does not die. (Rashi, Bereishis 18:19)

One obvious reason for this is that a righteous son mourns the loss of his parent as is fitting, saying Kaddish and performing merit worthy acts on behalf of the deceased parent for the entire 11 months after the death. This serves to increase the merit of the parent, something that one can usually only do while a person is alive. Hence, because of the child, it is as if the parent did not die.

Even after the 11 months are over, the child remembers the parent on days that Yizkor is recited, and on the day of the yahrzeit as well, when many often fast to the deceased parent's merit. This goes on year-after-year, which means that even after the parent is long gone, his or her merit can be increased vis-a-vis the living child.

And, of course, there is no greater testimony to a parent's spiritual greatness than the everyday actions of a child, even, and especially, when the child does not have his or her parent in mind. Not only God thinks this way, but human beings do as well, often attributing a child's good or bad deeds back to his or her parent. "Yitzchak? He's Avraham's boy . . ."

The interesting thing is that, in many families, there is much diversity. Within a single family there can be righteous children, and just the opposite. A family can contain both white and black sheep, and it is not always obvious to people, including the parents, which child is which. Righteousness is a relative concept, we also learned back in Parashas Noach, and we must take into account many elements that most humans do not factor in when judging the spiritual greatness of another individual.

Ultimately speaking, righteousness is measured not so much by what one produces in life, but by what one puts of himself into what one produces. As mentioned before, in Judaism, reward is a

function of effort not its result (Pirkei Avos 5:22), because as the Talmud states, the results are always in the hands of Heaven, except for the will we expend to achieve something (Brochos 34b). That we control, and with that, we define ourselves as human beings.

Some people grow up with little concern about money, and for them, giving a thousand dollars to charity is easy. Others, on the other hand, grew up always worrying about where their next dollar was going to come from, and for them, giving a dollar is very difficult. Whose act of charity gets more attention from the neighbors? Whose act of charity gets more attention from God?

What about the "A" student who continues to score high marks without having to study, and the "B" student who struggles to maintain his scholastic level even after spending much time and energy to learn and remember the material? Whom does the educational system favor more? Whom does God appreciate more?

Then what does it mean to raise a righteous child? If talents, which are usually God-given, even if human-developed, differ from person to person, as do the circumstances into which children are born, then how much of a chance does the average parent have at raising a righteous son or daughter? As much as we'd like to raise "happy" children, which certainly increases our chances of raising "happy" adults, which has to increase their chances of becoming righteous "citizens," there is so much is working against us that we can't control.

And yet, we do see, great people, such as Chizkiah HaMelech, who came from evil parents, and evil people, such as Menashe, his son, who descended from righteous parents. Happy people have emerged from unhappy households while miserable people have come out of seemingly happy homes. Are these merely exceptions to the rule, or are they the rule itself?

The story of Menashe, interestingly enough, has a happy ending. After undoing all of the good his father had done, turning many back to idol worship for 33 years, Menashe did teshuvah, and spent the last seven years of his life and reign working at righting his wrongs. It may have been too little too late, but it was certainly a lot better than nothing.

Why did he do it? How can someone become so evil, and then become so righteous? Was it something he ate for breakfast, or something he got from his father while growing up, something that wasn't strong enough to stop him from becoming evil, but strong enough to stop him from remaining evil?

Once, while discussing this idea with a close friend of mine, I was told something that I found really fascinating. He spoke about one of his sons who was struggling to remain religious, but with whom he tried to maintain a close relationship, regardless. He told me how years ago he had learned to separate who he was from who his children became, and this made it easier for him to relate to those of his children who were clearly not walking in his ways, and those of the Torah.

It was just one of those very rare moments in life when the two of them happen to be sitting in the

living room together, and in the mood for a heart-to-heart discussion. And, as he probed his son's views on life, the answers he received, he told me, blew him away.

In short, it turned out that his son believed a lot more in Torah Judaism than his present course in life seemed to indicate. He told his father that, at the time, it was difficult for him to do all the mitzvos like the rest of his family, but that he firmly believed in God, Torah values, and the World-to-Come. He even mentioned that though Torah learning wasn't for him, at least at the time, that he appreciated its importance, and planned to help support a Kollel one day if God were to make him successful in business.

"But, don't you think that he simply told you what he knew you wanted to hear?" I asked my friend.

He thought for a moment, and then told me, "At first I thought so as well. However, he is someone who has no problem telling me what he really feels, even when it goes against what I want. He has on many occasions in the past. Furthermore, my friend continued, "He said things that he just didn't have to say . . . things that he could have avoided and still have impressed me . . . things that I don't think he would have said had he not truly believed in them."

Then my friend told me something that made me smile, and which I took home with me. He said, "For the first time ever, I was able to see how my son was not as different from me as I had thought."

The Talmud tells three stories of people who in the last minute of life changed everything for the good. And, after each time it happened, the Talmud concluded by saying (more or less): There are those who acquire their world, that is, their portion in the World-to-Come, after an entire lifetime, and those who acquire it in a single moment (Avodah Zarah 10b, 17a, 18a). A single moment!

In what merit? Why do some do teshuvah, albeit at the last moment, and some go to the grave with an evil smile on their faces?

I know of another parent who was struggling with child of his, and who held out little hope for his future. Eventually the child got a job, and one day the parent happened to be talking to a fellow employee of his son, who told him, "You must be very proud of your son!"

The parent was confused at first, and could only answer, "Which son?" Perhaps the employee somehow happened to meet another child of his, who he knew to be better behaved. However, he became even more confused when the person mentioned his co-workers name, and began to tell some stories of his child's behavior towards other people, and his self-sacrifice for others. "Are you sure we're talking about the same person?" the father asked, incredulous.

After a brief description of his son, he realized that not only had the co-worker been correct about which son he was talking, but about how wrong he had been about his son. After thanking his son's fellow employee for the compliment, and taking his leave, he found a quiet and private place to sit down and consider what he had just learned.

As he sat that, looking out in the distance but not paying attention to what he saw, he felt tears welling up in his eyes and rolling down his cheeks. All of a sudden the child of whom he had been the least proud all of sudden made him the most proud. As he told me the story, which had happen some time ago, I could still see the remorse in his eyes for having misjudged his child.

At the end of the day, the best gift we can give to children is an accurate sense of right-and-wrong. I say "give," as opposed to "teach," because teaching it is only Stage One. Children can see all kinds of things growing up at home, some good and some not so good, but if they see a family built upon ultimate truths and committed to them, it gets under their skin. It becomes part of their consciousness, and it will affect the way they look at reality the rest of their lives. It will become their core, and no matter what they do in life, eventually it will surface and make them into better people, if they aren't already.

How great our children become or how much success they achieve in their lifetimes can depend upon so many factors that are beyond our control. But their sense of right and wrong? That they get from us, from the home in which they grow up. Rich or poor, comfortable or suffering, what children take with them is how their parents deal with reality and the opportunities in life. This can make a child righteous from the start, or at the very least, give them the chance to move in that direction, the extent to which only God can judge when determining who is truly righteous, and how much. Rich or poor, comfortable or suffering, what children take with them is how their parents deal with reality and the opportunities in life. This can make a child righteous from the start, or at the very least, give them the chance to move in that direction, the extent to which only God can judge when determining who is truly righteous, and how much.

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