

# CHILDISH

*by Rabbi Pinchas Winston*

## **And you shall teach them to your sons . . . (Devarim 6:7)**

**We find, in this** week's parshah, the first paragraph of the "Shema," in which we are commanded to serve God with all our hearts, our lives, and all our property. We are also commanded to know Torah well enough to correctly teach it to our children, the next link in a Torah chain of tradition reaching all the way back in time to Moshe Rabbeinu and God at Har Sinai.

Most societies know the importance of education. Education is freedom. Ignorance is enslavement. Where societies largely differ is in content of education, and when to teach what and for how long. It is a significant difference however, because it is what determines the quality of society and the people who comprise it.

Even the Hebrew word for "education," which is "chinuch," says much. It comes from the word "chanukah," which means "dedication." Education requires dedication because that is what it teaches: dedication.

Dedication to what? Exactly. Whereas education around the world might focus primarily on teaching professional skills, chinuch teaches what in life is worthy of dedication. Time is precious and resources are valuable, and they should not be squandered on insignificant things in one's life.

Thus, Torah education inculcates the meaning of life from a very early age. While other young children the same age might simply be learning technical skills, Torah-raised children learn about morality on a level they can understand. By the time secular children are exercising new found freedoms to feed newly felt desires, cheder children are learning about self-control for a higher cause.

The difference in educational emphasis is made clearer from the following:

Rav Hamnuna said: "Jerusalem was destroyed only because they neglected [the education of] school children, as it says, 'Pour out [God's wrath] because of the children in the street' (Yirmiyahu 6:11)." (Shabbos 119b)

It is hard to imagine that child education could be so important that God would destroy His holy city of Jerusalem for it. This is what the Talmud says, however. It even says more:

The world endures only for the sake of the breath of school children. Rav Papa said to Abaye, "What about mine and yours?" [He answered,] "Breath in which there is sin is not like breath in

which there is no sin." (Shabbos 119b)

This is an interesting point to make. Even though the same words of Torah are spoken by people who know and understand them more deeply, they mean less to the world's survival than do the words of children learning Torah. Their purity makes such a difference.

How much of difference? The Talmud continues:

Resh Lakish also said in the name of Rebi Yehudah HaNasi: "School children may not be made to neglect [their studies] even for the building of the Temple." (Shabbos 119b)

This is a remarkable concept with an important implication. There is very little that pushes off the building of the Temple, one such exception being Shabbos. The Temple is the House of God on earth, the crowning achievement of mankind. The Final Redemption requires it, and yet, the chinuch of children is too important to expedite its construction. What does this say about the importance of chinuch?

It says the same thing about Shabbos as well. Even though some of the Mishkan service required the Jewish people to break Shabbos to perform, Shabbos was not broken for the construction of the Mishkan. Why break something that results in the very thing that you are building to accomplish: the residing of the Shechinah.

This is what the Temple is. It is the focal point of Creation because it is where God has designated that His Divine Presence should most be sensed. Miracles happened there as a matter of daily routine because that is what they were. The Temple existed on earth, but it was a portal to another spiritual dimension. It was where Heaven and earth literally overlapped.

The same is true of Shabbos. It is the day on which God rested from hiding Himself in Creation. It is the day He designated for man to be able to sense His Presence with a minimal amount of effort. All man need to do is rest, as explained in this week's parshah:

Six days may you work, and perform all your labor, but the seventh day is a Shabbos to God, your God. You shall perform no labor, neither you, your son, your daughter, your manservant, your maidservant, your ox, your donkey, any of your livestock, nor the stranger who is within your cities, in order that your manservant and your maidservant may rest like you. And you shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and that God, your God took you out from there with a strong hand and with an outstretched arm. Therefore, God, your God, commanded you to observe the day of Shabbos. (Devarim 5:13-15)

The rest, from mundane activities of the everyday world, has to be total. Sensing the Shechinah takes spiritual focus. Without it, it is a profanation for the Shechinah to reside in the lower world. Shabbos is supposed to be such a level of focus. The Temple was such a level of focus.

What about cheder children?

This is easy for me to personally answer. Though I know more than the average child in cheder (at least the early levels), and I understand more deeply what prayer is about, and what is supposed to happen during it, my focus is a combination of things that belong and things that do not belong. I am a product of the world in which I live, and it seems to "own" parts of my brain.

I am always amazed how, even during times of intense concentration, memories can flash through my head and distract me. I did not willingly conjure them up and they were certainly unwanted. Most of the time I cannot even figure out what triggered them.

It turns out that this is the way the brain naturally works. Things just get thrown from place to place in our heads. Sometimes it happens so subtly that we are not even aware of it. Prayer is not one of those times because we try to focus on God and remain focused on Him.

It is a lot worse if I have worries and pressures. At such times, no matter how much I try to concentrate, my mind jumps around and I can have advanced several blessings without even remembering how I got there. It can be very disconcerting.

Thus, as pure as I would like to be, I am a mixture of good and not-so-good. As innocent as I'd like to think I am, the truth, life took that away a long time ago. Now my life is a matter of ongoing war against the yetzer hara, of attack and counterattack, with good days and not-so-good days.

People wonder if God listens to their prayers. They want to know why He doesn't always give them what they requested. But that's only because they think that talking to God is like talking to a flesh-and-blood father, who may not be so pure himself.

Wrong, very wrong. God is so incredibly spiritually pure that we would burn up from humiliation just being in His Presence. Imagine bringing a gift to someone whose relationship you cherish, but wrapped in filthy rags. Don't you just cringe at the idea?

I can't speak for everyone, and shouldn't even for most people. I really can only say for myself. When I stand before God to pray, how pure am I? When I pray, how spiritually-refined is what I send Heavenward? How much profane "matter" is mixed in with what I hope to penetrate the holiest of spiritual realms? Should I really be so surprised when it comes back, "Return to Sender"?

It is what it is, and hopefully if I try hard enough, God will accept my prayers and learning. But sinless children have a huge advantage over me. Their starting point is one of purity, even if they do not yet fully understand what they are saying. This counts for such more than we know or appreciate.

In this respect, cheder children are similar to both Shabbos and the Temple. Their purity makes them fitting for the residing of the Divine Presence. The longer they maintain this purity, the longer this remains the reality. This is when children grow up to become tzaddikim, and have the power to balance out evil in the world. It is this that gives their prayers the power to work on behalf of the nation with success.