

WHY BRING THE CHILDREN?

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Rabbi Frand on Parshas Netzavim-Vayeilech

*These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 429, Treatment of an Invalid Sefer Torah.
Good Shabbos!*

Why Bring The Children To "Hakhel"?

We learn in Parshas Vayeilech about the mitzvah of "Hakhel," whereby the entire nation gathered in Jerusalem once every seven years (at the conclusion of the Sabbatical year) for a communal reading of the Torah. The pasuk says, "Gather together the people -- the men, the women, and the small children..." [Devarim 31:12].

Rashi spells out the details of Hakhel, based on the Gemara [Chagiga 3a]: The men come to learn; the women (who in those days did not have the educational background to really learn the Torah) come to listen; and the children come to bring a reward to those who bring them. The simple reading of the Gemara is that there is in fact no inherent purpose for the children to come. The men can learn. The women can at least listen. But what are the kids coming for? They will not even listen properly.

In light of this, it is hard to understand the meaning of the Gemara when it says, "to give reward to those who bring them". What does this mean? If, in fact, there is no purpose to bring the children, then what reward should be granted to those who bring them? There is no mitzvah to bring a sack of potatoes!

The Nesivos answers this question very practically. All the Jews from throughout the Land of Israel came to Jerusalem for Hakhel. So who was left home to watch the kids? Where would they find

baby sitters? Obviously, the adults had no choice but to bring the children. Since the children had to be brought anyway, the Torah commanded that they be brought, so that there would also be a mitzvah and the associated reward involved in bringing the children.

Reb Yerucham, as well as the Sefas Emes interpret this Gemara in a slightly different fashion. When the Gemara states that the children are brought "to grant reward to those who bring them", the intent is not that there is no inherent value in bringing children to Hakhel. In fact, there is something to be gained from bringing them even if they do not have the intellect to learn or the patience to listen. Merely being present at an event like Hakhel -- in an atmosphere permeated with holiness has an effect on the children, not necessarily immediately, but in years to come.

For example, the Gemara [Jerusalem Talmud: Yevamos] says that the mother of Rav Yoshua ben Chananya used to take his cradle and place it in the Beis Medrash, just so the baby should absorb the sound of Torah.

So too, explain both Reb Yerucham and the Sefas Emes, parents who make the effort to expose their children to positive experiences in life, despite the fact that the child ostensibly does not gain anything concrete from the experience at the time, will be rewarded. Merely making the effort to expose them to a positive environment will allow the parents to reap reward in the future.

I recently bought a book for my wife called, "A Day in the Life of Israel". Sixty of the best photographers in the world were assigned a city or an area in Israel and told to take photos on a given day, the best of which would appear in this book. I saw one photo of a newborn nursery in Bnei Brak. There is a picture of rows of little infants in plastic cribs lined up in the nursery. In one of the cribs, there is a picture book opened to pictures of Rav Shach, the Steipler Gaon, and the Chazon Ish. There in the cradle, in the hospital, pictures of Gedolim [great Torah luminaries] surround the baby. This book is not a religious book. It is a secular book. Nonetheless, the caption on this photo is "Education starts early in Israel".

This illustrates our explanation of the previously quoted Gemara in Chagiga. Even though the child's only care in the world at this point is when he is wet or hungry, somehow on a subconscious if not a conscious level, his environment has an effect on him. Parents who make the effort to put their children into a good environment -- even though at the time the efforts seem in vain -- will eventually receive reward, in the form of the development of spiritually developed children. This is what our Sages mean when they say, "to grant reward to those who bring them".

Now, Write For Yourself This Song

The Ponevizer Rav (Rav Yosef Kahaneman 1886-1969) instituted a custom -- still in effect to this day -- whereby there are weeks of special learning for the public at large that take place on an annual basis within the confines of the Ponnevizer Yeshiva. These weeks of special learning are known as a Yarchei Kallah.

Rav Shmuel Rosovsky once relayed the following insight, in the name of the Ponevizer Rav, at the first Yarchei Kallah following the Ponnevizer Rav's passing. We are taught that before Yehoshua captured the city of Jericho he met an angel: "It happened when Yehoshua was in Jericho, that he raised his eyes and saw, and behold! -- A man was standing opposite him with his sword drawn in his hand. Yehoshua went toward him and said, 'Are you with us or with our enemies?' He said, 'No, for I am the commander of Hashem's legion; now I have come'." [Yehoshua 5:13-14].

This is an inexplicable dialogue. We do not understand Yehoshua's question and we do not understand the angel's answer. The Gemara [Megillah 3a] explains the dialogue. The angel told Yehoshua that because of the siege of Jericho, they failed to do two things. The previous night they neglected to offer the daily sacrifice of the evening and now they were neglecting the study of Torah. Yehoshua asked the angel for which of the two sins he was coming to chastise them. The angel responded "for the sin that you have done now" (neglect of Torah study).

The meaning of the angel's response is hinted at by the allusion of the word "now" (ata) in the response, which is reminiscent of the command "Now (Ata), write for yourselves this Song" [Devorim 31:19]. The song refers to Torah. However, Tosfos in Megillah asks how we see from the words of the pasuk that the above explanation reflects what Yehoshua was asking the angel? Tosfos answers because the angel said "Ha-lanu ata..." [Are you on our side?] The word "lanu" [us] connotes the pasuk "the Torah was commanded to us (lanu) by Moshe" [Devorim 33:4].

They were talking in code. Yehoshua used the word "Lanu" as a code for Torah tzeeva lanu Moshe [The Torah was commanded to us by Moshe.] and the angel used the word "Ata" as a code for "Ata Kisvu lachem es haShira haZos" [Now you write for yourselves this Song].

The Ponevizer Rav asked, if they are already speaking in code, then why didn't the angel use the same code word (lanu) back to Yehoshua that Yehoshua had used in the first place? The Ponnevizer Rav offers a beautiful answer. There are two aspects to Torah. First, there is a command to learn Torah. But sometimes it is tough to learn; sometimes there are legitimate excuses why not to learn. However, there is more to Torah than merely the obligation to learn Torah. Torah is also a song. A song is part of a person's existence. Song comes from the soul. It is part of the innermost feelings of a person. It is part of his essence.

The angel was, in effect, telling Yehoshua that he was not merely chastising them for not learning. For that, they would have had a legitimate excuse -- they were busy; they were placing the city under siege. But if Torah is what it is supposed to be for a Jew -- part of his essence -- like a song, then a person literally can not go a day without it, regardless of the excuse. Because this was not the case, the angel came to complain. Torah must be more than merely a series of commandments. Torah must be "the Song of our soul and the essence of our existence".

It may be 'tough' to learn, but if we are truly attached to Torah, we will not ever contemplate failing to learn. We can not do without it.

Transcribed by [David Twersky](#); Seattle, Washington.
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