



# Being There for Our Children

Thoughts for Rosh Hashanah 5771

By Rabbi Reuven Spolter, Director of Recruiting and Special Projects



Each year as the High Holidays approach, we face the same question: what will really be different this year? Can I really make a significant change? These aren't easy questions. Making meaningful changes require a shift not only in attitude, but in actions. Change is hard work, and the resolve we find in shul at neilah often eludes us during the long months of winter.

For me these questions have taken on a different tone of late. As my children have grown I they prompt me to think about Teshuvah in terms of my role as a parent. Parenting (like Jewish life), is an endless task. The demands seem infinite, whether in terms of financial obligations (especially if you live in chutz l'aretz and have to pay for yeshiva tuition) but even more so in time and energy. I find myself wondering: Do I do enough? Do I spend enough time with my children, especially the older ones? Am I helping them develop properly? And, as my older son recently celebrated his bar mitzvah, I ask the opposite question: Am I too controlling? Am I allowing and encouraging him to develop on his own? (No, you can't win).

One particular passage from the Rosh Hashanah tefillah caught my attention. On the second day of Rosh Hashanah we read the story of Akeidat Yitzchak, and Avraham Avinu's willingness to slaughter his son for the sake of God. Avraham acts as a model of readiness and alacrity throughout the story. When God calls to Avraham to instruct him, Avraham immediately responds הני – "Here I am." (22:1) *I'm ready. What do you need?* Upon receiving God's instructions we read that ישכם ובוקר – "Avraham rose in the morning" (22:3) to fulfill God's command, without delay. Rashi comments simply, נזדרז למצוה - "he hurried to [fulfill] the commandment." He acted with alacrity. He was ready. When Avraham stands, holding the knife over his beloved Yitzchak and the

angel calls out to him, once again we find him with his steady response: הני – "Here I am." (22:11)

What can I do this time? I'm still ready.

Yet, on one occasion, Avraham responds again with readiness, but he adds a crucial word which dramatically changes his message.

ויאמר יצחק אל אברהם אבי  
ויאמר אבי ויאמר הני בני  
And Yitzchak said to  
Avraham, and he said, "My  
father," and [Avraham]  
said, "Here I am, my son."

This time it's not just הני. This time it's בני הני. Why does Avraham add this small, simple word? What does he

mean by it? And what must we learn from it? In his analysis of this verse Kli Yakkar wonders: What does Yitzchak mean when he says, "My father"? It seems that he starts to say something – or wants to, and then stops. It is almost as if he wants to ask something, but then stops himself. How does Avraham answer him when he says, "I am here, my son"? By addressing these questions, Kli Yakkar offers a powerful lesson to each of us as parents. Kli Yakkar explains,

לפי שהרגיש יצחק שרצון אביו להעלותו לעולה וחשב אם כן אינו מרחם עלי כרחם אב על בנים ונהפך לי לאכזר, כי לא ידע עדיין שזה רצון בוראו. על כן קראו "אבי" לנסותו אם יענו, שעדיין קבוע בלבו שהוא אביו, או אם כבר הסיחו מלבו כאילו אינו בנו, כי בזה רצה לידע מי יהיה הנשחט. וכאשר ענה לו "הני בני", והורה לו שעדיין כל געגועיו עליו אמר לו אם כן "איה השא לעולה". ואמר לו, "אלקים יראה לו השא לעולה בני", לא אני בחרתי בך כי אם אלקים, ואני ואתה שנינו חייבים בכבודו. אז וילכו שניהם יחדיו בכוונה אחת, לאפוקי עד הנה היו חלוקים בדעתם:

Yitzchak sensed that his father wished to offer him as a sacrifice, and he thought, "If this is so, he will not have compassion on me



like a father has compassion for his son and he has become a threat to me.” For he did not yet know that this was the will of the Creator. Therefore he called [Avraham] “my father” to test whether he would answer him – that the fact remained set in his heart that he was his father, or whether he had already removed him from his heart as if he is not his son. In this way he wished to know who would be the slaughtered [sacrifice]. Only when [Avraham] answered him, “I am here, my son”, and indicated to him that all of his longings were upon him, [only then] did he say to him, “If so, where is the ram for the sacrifice?”

*We tell ourselves that we need to work to support them, and of course we do. They understand that. But we could make more time, if it was higher on the priority list*

Yitzchak knew that something was wrong. He couldn't put his finger on it, but he sensed that something was somehow different. Was Avraham still his father, or had he suddenly changed and decided to sacrifice him for a “greater” cause? To answer this question, he only needed say one word: “Father...” Are you my father, or have you emotionally shut me out? Avraham answered his son clearly: הַנְּנִי בְּנִי – “I am here, my son.” Yes, I am still your father who loves you as always, and who puts you before everything else. Only when he heard his father's gentle reassurance could Yitzchak fully express what was really bothering him and inquire about the lack of an animal for sacrifice.

No, we don't sacrifice our children, at least not literally. And all dedicated parents truly place the needs and desires of their children at the top of their priorities. But we sometimes broadcast a very different message: in the way we speak to our children, the choices we make, and most importantly, the manner in which we choose to invest our time. With the demands of work, household, prayer, study, and exercise (hopefully), how much time do we leave to spend meaningfully with our kids? (This question might apply more forcefully to Orthodox men than women, but even that is changing.) How many evenings (other than Shabbat) does the family sit down for dinner

together and engage in a meaningful conversation? If dad (or mom) has time for work, and then book club, and yoga, and a shiur (all great and important things), why doesn't he have time for me? Is it a fair complaint? Not always. But there is often a shred of truth to the question. Like Yitzchak, our kids can sense when something is off.

, perhaps by returning from the office earlier each week, or setting aside time for each child individually.

Late in the summer, the Mishnah Yomit program finished shas and began with Berachot anew. I have been feeling for a while now that I need to learn more with my children (my wife has mentioned it a few times) and this seemed like a great

opportunity. The first day, my son was resistant. I bribed him. But by the third day, he was bringing the mishnah to me. Over the past month we've learned all of Berachot and half of Pe'ah, usually in the fifteen minutes between minchah and ma'ariv in shul.

Over vacation things slipped a bit, and we've fallen behind. As the school year begins and winter shortens the day, I wonder about my resolve. I want to keep this good thing going, but will I make the extra effort after a long day at work, when I'm tired and so is he? I hope so, but there are no guarantees.

At least this Rosh Hashanah, Avraham Avinu's reassuring words to Yitzchak echo in my mind: הַנְּנִי בְּנִי. He was there for his son.

Will I be?