

# The Secret of the Candles: How to Maximize Our Children's Potential

One of the goals of Jewish parenting is to help our children to grow and reach their potential. However, many parents do not have an exact formula to accomplish this herculean task. If one looks deep enough into any halacha, there is a deeper moral teaching lying below the surface. The halachos of Chanukah are no exception. Within them is a halacha that gives us an insight into this fundamental parenting challenge. As we better understand the nature of a child's obligation to light Chanukah candles, we will discover a profound insight into our ability to foster and develop real growth in our children.

One of the dilemmas that parents face in child-rearing is how hard to push their children. Should they take a strict approach or a more laid-back approach? This dilemma is reflected in the laws of Chanukah. There are many sources in halachic literature that discuss the mitzvah for children to light Chanukah candles. Is there an obligation to teach our children to perform not only the basic mitzvah, or are we also obligated to train them to perform mitzvos on a higher level and to do the mitzvos in a more *mehudar* (beautiful) and enhanced manner? R' Yosef Karo in the *Shulchan Aruch*, *Orach Chaim* 677:2, writes, "a child that has reached the age of *chinuch* is obligated to light candles." The *Magen Avraham*, 677:8, has an amazing qualification of the *Shulchan Aruch's* ruling: the obligation is referring to a child who has his own house. He notes



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that according to the *Shulchan Aruch*, in general, the head of the household lights on behalf of the whole family. This is normative Sephardic practice. However, the *Magen Avraham* adds that it is possible that a child would not light even according to Ashkenazic practice, where each member of the household lights in order to fulfill *mehadrin* (the enhanced form of the mitzvah). The *Magen Avraham* bases his ruling on a comment of the *Shiltei Hagiborim*, *Shabbos* 9b (Rif pages). A similar view is found in the Meiri, *Shabbos* 21b, s.v. *Mitzvas Chanukah*. The ruling of the *Magen Avraham* challenges an explicit ruling of the Rama, *Orach Chaim* 675:3, that children who have reached the age of *chinuch*<sup>1</sup> (training) should also light, since Ashkenazic practice is that each member of the household lights.

## The Chofetz Chaim: Parenting With Simplicity

Why do the *Shiltei Giborim* and the Meiri rule that unless a child has his own house, he is exempt from lighting? Isn't there a general mitzvah to train our children to perform mitzvos? Furthermore, why does the *Magen Avraham* follow an opinion that rejects the ruling of both the

*Shulchan Aruch* and the Rama? Rav Yisrael Meir Kagan (the Chofetz Chaim) writes, *Beur Halacha* 675:3, s.v. *ULedidan*, that the *Shiltei Giborim* certainly agrees that we are obligated to train our children in mitzvos. However, his position is that *chinuch* only applies to mitzvos that adults themselves are obligated to perform, not to the extra stringencies that adults perform to beautify a mitzvah. Therefore, children are only obligated to perform the basic mitzvah that only applies if one has his own home. The additional sets of light in the home are considered *mehadrin*, and children have no *chinuch* obligation to perform an aspect of the mitzvah that is only considered *mehadrin*. The Chofetz Chaim adds in the *Mishna Berurah* 675:14, that even according to the Rama, who holds that children should light, there is no need to require the child to light more than one candle. This is because lighting more than one candle represents *mehadrin min hamehadrin*, and children are not obligated to go to such lengths to fulfill the mitzvah of *chinuch*. Accordingly, the Chofetz Chaim agrees with the line of reasoning of the *Shiltei Giborim*, but with a more limited application.

## The Piaseczno Rebbe

R. Kalonymous Kalman Shapira (1889-1943) was appointed the Grand Rabbi of Piaseczno, Poland at the age of 20. He distinguished himself as someone uniquely sensitive to the psychological needs of others, especially of children. His work *Chovas HaTalmidim*, The Students' Obligation, continues to be a widely studied work on educating children. When the Nazis invaded Poland in 1939, R. Shapira's son, daughter-in-law and sister-in-law were killed and R. Shapira was forced into the Warsaw ghetto. There, he was forced to work as a shoemaker at the Schultz factory to pay for his food. Though no longer an official leader, R. Shapira continued to take seriously his commitment to the community. He took on an informal pastoral role at the factory, inspiring others through his words, and delivering a weekly sermon to his followers every Shabbat. Aware of the importance of his work, he transcribed his sermons, placed them in a milk canister and buried the canister before the liquidation of the Warsaw Ghetto in May 1943. Included in the canister were instructions to the finder to send the sermons to R. Shapira's brother who lived in Israel, and to then have them published. The canister was discovered by a Polish construction worker after the war. The contents were, as requested, delivered to Israel and published under the title *Esh Kodesh* (Sacred Fire).

## Rav Tzvi Pesach Frank: Inspiring Our Children for Greatness

Rav Tzvi Pesach Frank, *Mikraei Kodesh*, Chanukah no. 15, provides a different perspective to this

discussion. Rav Frank differentiates between the two levels of *mehadrin*. He explains that a child who is living in his parents' home has no obligation to light, just as children over bar/bas mitzvah have no obligation to light to fulfill the basic (non-*mehadrin*) mitzvah. Therefore, the mitzvah of *chinuch* is never triggered. This is why the *Shiltei Hagiborim* and Meiri do not insist on the child lighting. However, if a child has his own home, he would be *obligated* to light because of the mitzvah of *chinuch*. Once he is lighting, he should fulfill the mitzvah properly and fulfill the *mehadrin min hamehadrin* aspect by lighting the number of candles corresponding to the night of Chanukah.

According to Rav Frank *zt"l*, the mitzvah of *chinuch* requires children to fulfill mitzvos in the most scrupulous way possible. He cites the Ritva, *Sukkah* 2b, who proves from the Gemara there that the mitzvah of *chinuch* requires us to enable our children to perform mitzvos fully and scrupulously like an adult, without compromise.

This concept is inherent in the fabric of the mitzvah of lighting Chanukah candles itself. The *Pnei Yehoshua*, *Shabbos* 21b, s.v. *Mai Chanukah*, asks: Why did we need the entire miracle of the oil burning for eight days? Why couldn't we just use impure oil based on the principle of *tumah hutra b'tzibur*,<sup>2</sup> that impurity is permitted in case of public need in the Beis Hamikdash? The *Pnei Yehoshua* answers that while it is true that they could have used impure oil, Hashem wanted to show how precious their rededication of the *Beis Hamikdash* was to Him, and that He was with them.<sup>3</sup> Rav Yosef Engel, *Gilyonei Hashas*, *Shabbos* 21a, offers a different

explanation. He suggests that anytime something is done for the first time, it must be done in the most pristine and purest way possible. The *chachamim* of the time could have relied on using impure oil, but since they were rededicating the Beis Hamikdash, they wanted to set the tone and level of performance in the Beis Hamikdash for all those who came after them. They wanted to perform the mitzvah in its purest form. R. Engel's message is equally applicable to how we train our children to perform mitzvos.

## The Foundations of Inspirational Chinuch

*Chinuch* and Chanukah come from the same Hebrew root and convey the same idea: to dedicate and start from the beginning to set a pattern of behavior. Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman (the Piaseczno Rebbe), *Chovas Hatalmidim* pg. 8, teaches that the word for education, *chinuch* (and Chanukah), doesn't just mean beginning — there are other Hebrew words for that. It refers specifically to the ability to take something and prepare it in a way that enables it to fulfill its potential; to take it from potential to actual. When the Chashmonaim were rededicating the Beis Hamikdash they weren't just starting the *avodah* (service) again. They were preparing it to be used for its true purpose. The same applies to *chinuch*. The verse in Mishlei states:

חֲנֹךְ לְנֶעֱרַע עַל פִּי דְרָכֹוּ גַם כִּי יִזְקֶינָה לֹא יִסּוּר  
כַּמְּנֶה.

*Train a child according to his way, even when he gets older, he won't stray from it.*  
**Mishlei 22:6**

The aforementioned Ritva in *Sukkah* states that from this verse, we see that the purpose of *chinuch* is to prepare



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our children to perform mitzvos throughout their lives. This is why the mitzvah experience of a child needs to mirror the experience of an adult.

The mitzvah of *chinuch* — as explained by Rav Tzvi Pesach Frank — and the connection between *chinuch* and Chanukah, provide a model for us to help our children reach their potential. We need to ensure that their educational experiences are as pure and idealistic as possible. We need to pursue and maintain lofty goals and aspirations for our children's spiritual growth. In Tehillim 127:4, it is written:

כְּחֵצִים בְּיַד גִּבּוֹר כֵּן בְּנֵי הַנְּעוּרִים.

*Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, so are the youth.*

Rav Shamshon Refael Hirsch, in his commentary on Tehillim, explains that when an archer aims his arrow, he sets it on a trajectory higher than his intended goal. So too, when educating our children, we must aim higher than our realistic target in order for them to

reach the actual target.

In order to have lofty aspirations for our children, we have to really believe in their potential. This idea can be found, of all places, in a ruling of the Rama in an obscure chapter about the laws of milk coming from non-kosher species. The Gemara, *Sotah* 12b, states that when Moshe Rabbeinu was an infant, he would not nurse from an Egyptian wet nurse because it was inappropriate for the mouth that would eventually speak with the *Shechina* to nurse from someone who ate non-kosher food. The Rama, *Yoreh Deah* 81:7, rules that Jewish children should not nurse from a non-Jew. The Vilna Gaon, *Beur Hagra* ad loc. notes that the source for the Rama's ruling is the Gemara's comment regarding Moshe Rabbeinu. Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky, *Emes L'Yaakov* Shemos 2:7, asks: we understand why Moshe Rabbeinu, who was destined to be the greatest prophet ever, couldn't nurse from a non-Jew. Why does the Rama apply this to all Jewish

children? Rav Kamenetsky answers that we learn from this ruling that we should raise every Jewish child with the perspective that he/she has the potential to speak with the *Shechina*. In order to maximize our children's potential we need to make sure their educational experiences are pure and uncompromised, and always believe in their ability to achieve greatness.

## Endnotes

- 1 See *Sukkah* 42a and *Chagiga* 4a. See also *Mishna Berurah* 343:3, which explains that the age of *chinuch* is dependent on the understanding of each individual child and therefore is subjective, not objective.
- 2 *Pesachim* 77a, *Toras Kohanim* (Vayikra 24:2), Rambam (*Hilchos Temidim U'musafim* 3:10).
- 3 Rav Yonasan Sacks shli"ta in *Y'mei Chanukah*, Siman 7 page 114, adds that according to the *Pnei Yehoshua* it makes sense why there is a concept of *mehadrin min mehadrin* specific to Chanukah. Because the rabbis did not rely on the basic requirement at the time of the miracle and went above and beyond to find pure oil, we too perform the mitzvah in an extremely scrupulous manner.