

Two Gifts to Give Your Children this Rosh Hashana

Throughout the liturgy on the Yamim Noraim we refer to Hashem as “Our Father.” We talk to Hashem as *Avinu Malkeinu*, the father who is also the king. We appeal to Hashem’s fatherly side when we look for Hashem to act *ke’rachem av al banim* — we ask that Hashem be forgiving to us as parents are to their children. The gifts we can give our children this Rosh Hashanah are the same as those we are asking Hashem to give all of us as He tallies the *cheshbon* (calculation) of our lives. The Jewish calendar has many more scheduled opportunities for *cheshbon hanefesh* (introspection) than we have as parents. We can take advantage of this time of year for the reflection that will help us learn and grow as parents.

The parent-child relationship is only one paradigm of a caring, nurturing relationship. Though Rosh Hashana offers the metaphor of *av al banim*, it is also an important time to reflect on all of our meaningful relationships. The gifts we may offer our children may also be needed by others in our lives. Consider how a parent, spouse, sibling, or friend might benefit from these gifts as well.

Gift #1: See Them as They Are

Developmental studies tell us that five year olds need to be seen so that they can be free to venture off, leaving the enclosure of the teacher for new experiences to play and work. Six year



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olds need to be seen so they will not climb walls. But I have also found that seven, ten, and thirteen year olds need to be seen just as they also need their private nooks and crannies. They need the encouragement and validation that comes from our best attention to their efforts. They need the safety that comes from the belief that their teacher sees them, knows them. Mutual trust grows from this security. When all children feel seen, they are released to work.

Ruth Charney, *Teaching Children to Care*

When we work with teachers, we often talk about the importance of getting to know our students. Like all people, children have an intense desire to be seen, known, and understood. No child wants to be “the one in the blue shirt” or “the one with the curly hair.” Children are complex, and each child has characteristics that make him unique and different from the child sitting next to him. Sometimes, a child can be camouflaged by misleading behavior. A teenager can shrug and murmur a

bored “whatever” while burying their passion, resentment, or fear below. A middle-schooler can laugh to cover embarrassment or hurt feelings. A disrespectful kindergartener might actually be overtired or hungry. Children count on us, as teachers and parents, to see beneath the surface to who they are and how they feel on the inside. When Yonah runs to Tarshish rather than doing what is asked of him, Hashem doesn’t label him as the “rebellious prophet.” Hashem digs deeper, throwing him into the mouth of a fish, covering him with a *kikayon* until Hashem and Yonah both understand the reason for Yonah’s rebellion. It is only then that Hashem can teach Yonah the importance of his mission so that Yonah can grow into the prophet that Hashem wants him to be. It is our duty as parents and teachers to scratch beneath the façade our children present to really “see” what might be hiding just beneath the surface. Then, we, too, can teach our children to be the type of people we want them to be.

Hashem provides another model for us. We know from Yirmiyahu that Hashem “explores the heart and examines the inner spaces” (17:10). As teachers and parents, we have an obligation to engage constantly in getting to know our children — especially their hearts and their inner spaces. Though it is something we ought to do every day, our daily observations are not sufficient. The rush of daily life may cause us to focus on whether a child has said please and thank you, whether the table has been cleared, or the homework completed. Ensuring that children meet the benchmarks of family and school life can be consuming and we may come to neglect their inner selves. It might be hard to take the time to reflect upon what type of person she actually is, and what her needs are at this stage in her development.

Rosh Hashana is a time to look deeply. As we complete our own *cheshbon hanefesh*, examine our own souls, we must also turn to our children. Parents should reflect on their children’s strengths and challenges. We must take a step back from our daily parenting duties to reflect on the inner workings of each of our children. What will you see when you are really looking deeply?

For teachers, the beginning of the year lends itself to this kind of exploration, and many teachers devote a great deal of time to ice breakers and community-building activities. We encourage teachers to go further and ask students about their hopes and fears about the current school year. We want teachers to inquire about how individual students learn best, what their favorite activities are, and what makes them feel excited about school. We ask teachers to listen

beyond a student’s answers to **how** he might be answering a question or what he might **not** be saying. Getting to know each child individually takes time and strategy. Looking at the general picture of a child often leaves out the most important details.

In our tefilla on Rosh Hashana, we recite *Unetaneh Tokef*. We say:

וכל באי עולם יעברון לפניך כבני מרון, כבקרת
רועה עדרו מעביר צאנו תחת שבטו כן תעביר
ותספור ותמנה ותפקוד נפש כל חי.

All mankind will pass before You like members of the flock. Like a shepherd pasturing his flock, making sheep pass under his staff, so shall You cause to pass, count, calculate, and consider the soul of all of the living.

Hashem is assessing us constantly throughout the year, hoping to see our growth. Nevertheless, Rosh Hashana serves as a special time for a holistic review; a time that Hashem uses to focus on each person — one by one — to see us as we are. Though our powers of perception are infinitely poorer — Rosh Hashana and year round — we can follow Hashem’s example and turn extra attention to each child, one by one.

Gift #2: Allow Them to Change

As teachers, we often interact with children who are not in our classrooms. We see them in the hallway or at lunch. We might even have taught an older sibling of theirs. From these cursory interactions it is easy to make a snap judgment about a child. At the beginning of the year, when these children have made their way to our classrooms, we are often working hard to debunk those “first impression” stereotypes. What we know about Sara from her fourth-

The Judgment of Yishmael

One of the messages of the Torah reading for Rosh Hashana emerges from the episode involving Yishmael’s expulsion from his home. The Talmud comments on why God listened to Yishmael’s prayers:

וא”ר יצחק אין דנין את האדם אלא לפי מעשיו של אותה שעה שנאמר כי שמע אלהים אל קול הנער באשר הוא שם.
ראש השנה טז:

R. Yitzchak stated: a person is only judged based on his [state of] actions at the current moment as it states: Because God heard the voice of the child where he is [now.]

Rosh Hashana 16b

Despite the fact that Yishmael and his children were destined to sin, God judged Yishmael based on his current state and didn’t look into his future actions. This is an important lesson to keep in mind as we embark on the teshuva process.

grade experience in the lunchroom may or may not shape the way she acts in her fifth grade Mishnah class. Sara might have changed over the summer, or she might look very different in the classroom than she does in the lunchroom. Rambam teaches:

אמש היה זה שנאו לפני המקום משוקץ ומרוחק ותועבה והיום הוא אהוב ונחמד קרוב וידיד.
רמב”ם, הלכות תשובה ז:ז

Yesterday this person was hated before God, defamed, cast away, and abominable; today, he is beloved, desirable, a favorite and a friend.”

Rambam, Hilchot Teshuva 7:6

In a moment, everything can change.

Seldom do we think more about growth, change, and teshuva than we do during this time of year. Our belief in our ability to change is central to what makes the Yamim Noraim meaningful. In fact, as we change and improve ourselves, we actually change who we are. When we look at our own children, we see that they are not only bigger, more articulate versions of their younger selves. They have become different individuals — more generous, thoughtful, and complex — than the toddlers they once were. Rabbi Dr. Abraham J. Twerski tells a story about an alcoholic who said, “The man I once was, drank. And the man I once was, will drink again. If I ever go back to being the man I once was, I will drink again.” He is describing transformational change in which an old identity is cast aside in favor of a new one. As adults, transformational change is difficult and rare. For children, it is a natural part of growing up.

And yet, children are often held back from change. If we are successful in our first gift, of seeing and knowing our children, we may fall into the trap of expecting them to stay that way. We may still say that an absent-

minded child would “forget his head if it weren’t attached to his neck” long after he develops a new sense of responsibility. A disorganized child who now keeps a tidy room may retain her reputation for being sloppy. A child who has outgrown his selfishness may still constantly be given meaningful glances and reminded to share.

At this time of year, when as a community we are focused on teshuva, we must not only remember that people can change. We need to allow that change by embracing and accepting it as a new reality. We learn in the Mishna that it is forbidden to taunt a ba’al teshuva with tales of his past misdeeds (*Baba Metzia* 4:10). All the more so we should not unintentionally force our children into roles that they have cast off. Just as we want Hashem to allow us to turn over a new leaf, we must allow our children to reinvent themselves as their identities mature and develop.

Through these two gifts, it is possible that you will change who you are as a parent, a child, a spouse or a friend. Just as you have acknowledged the changes made by those you love, you

would like them to acknowledge yours in turn. Brene Brown devotes an entire chapter to her book *Daring Greatly* to parenting. In it she writes “I’ve sworn off the good-bad parenting dichotomy simply because on any given day you could file me under both good parent and bad parent, depending on your perspective.” She then goes on to talk about what really matters in parenting: engagement. “Are we paying attention? Thinking through our choices? Open to learning and being wrong? Curious and willing to ask questions?” Just as we would like Hashem to see who we are today and what we are doing right now, we need to do the same for our children. We need to treat our children as the flexible people that they are, capable of changing for the better. Just as Hashem saw the true Yonah and offered Yonah multiple opportunities to show his true self and to change his ways, we must offer the same to our children at home and in school. We should dedicate time during these Yamim Noraim to emulate the true reflection that Hashem offers us and make a deep *cheshbon hanefesh* of ourselves as Jews and as Jewish parents.

