

Parenting from the Parsha- Parshat Vayigash- “Learning Torah with Our Children”

This week's parsha, Parshat Vayigash, once again has much that can be discussed regarding parenting- but I wanted to focus on one particular message that emerges from the parsha that I believe to be important.

After Yosef reveals himself to his brothers and dramatically reunites with them, he sends them back to Canaan with lots of food, animals, and provisions- and a request that Yaacov and the family relocate to Egypt so that Yosef can take care of the family. The Torah describes how the brothers hurried back to Canaan and informed their father that Yosef was alive, but that Yaacov initially refused to believe them out of shock. However, once they relayed Yosef's words and Yaacov saw the wagons of provisions that Yosef had sent, he finally believed the good news and celebrated the wonderful news.

Many of the meforshim wonder what it was exactly that convinced Yaacov that Yosef was finally alive, despite his initial disbelief. Rashi quotes the well known Midrash that what convinced Yaacov was a special sign that Yosef had sent to his father- by sending specifically wagons (עגלות), Yosef was signaling to Yaacov about the last topic that they two of them had learned together, namely the topic of עגלה ערופה, (a complex case where someone is found dead outside in the wilderness, and the Torah demands that the heads of the closest city demonstrate a level of responsibility for the death by participating in a ritual involving killing an ox near the river.)

Many of us have heard this Midrash before and appreciated the hint to it in the text of the Torah, but I believe it raises an important question for us to consider. We know that prior to the sale of Yosef, Yaacov and Yosef enjoyed a very special and unique relationship, as the Torah describes in the beginning of Parshat Vayeishev. Presumably, there were many aspects of their relationship that Yosef could have used as a hint to Yaacov of his existence- why did he specifically reference their Torah learning? Why not something else that symbolized their relationship- perhaps the כתונת פסים, the special coat that Yaacov had gifted Yosef and was probably the most poignant symbol of their close relationship? Or perhaps something connected to his mother Rachel, which on some level served as the foundation for their special relationship and would surely have aroused the emotions of Yaacov? Why davka reference their Torah learning?

Perhaps we can suggest that the Midrash is highlighting for us an important point regarding Yosef's perception of his relationship with his father. Out of all the various aspects of their exceptional relationship, what Yosef valued more than anything else was the opportunity he had to learn Torah with his father. More than the special coat, more than any other gifts or privileges that Yaacov had given to Yosef as a result of his unique love for him- Yosef cherished those moments of Torah learning together with his father, as his father passed down to him the Mesorah of the Jewish tradition. While we don't know the specifics of all that they learned, as it was all before the Torah was given- what is clear is that the Torah learning they did together had a profound effect on Yosef, and shaped the way he viewed his relationship with his father. So when deciding what medium to use to relay to Yaacov proof of his

existence, he referenced the aspect of their relationship that affected him most profoundly- their limmud Torah.

Simply put, we as parents must make time to learn Torah with our kids. Many years ago, when I was in the Gruss Kollel I had the privilege to have a private meeting with Rav Lichtenstein zt"l. As my wife was pregnant with our first child, one of the things I asked him about was regarding chinuch and raising children. Over the course of the ensuing conversation, there is one line that always stuck out to me- he said "you have to make sure to learn with your children, and you have to make sure to play basketball with them as well". (I later found this same quote attributed to Rav Lichtenstein in a later sicha he gave regarding raising children.) There are a few great lessons that I learned from this quote (some of which I hope to discuss at another time), but first and foremost his words definitely imparted to me the significance of making time to learn with my children,- and that this must be viewed as one of the basic responsibilities of a parent.

The Rambam, in his magnum opus the Mishna Torah, famously opens up his Laws of Talmud Torah by discussing the obligation that a father has to teach his son Torah, even before he discusses the general obligation that a person has to learn Torah himself. What the Rambam seems to be indicating is that more fundamental than a person's own Torah learning is the process of learning with your child. And perhaps we can even suggest that the Rambam is suggesting that one of the foundations to a person's own Torah learning is the studying that he does together he does with his children- as he passes on the mesorah of Judaism to the next generation.

In an essay he gave entitled "On Raising Children", Rav Lichtenstein stresses the importance of learning with one's children. He quotes Rav Soloveitchik, who once said that when one gets to Olam Haba, he is going to be asked "Based on what do you deserve entry to Olam Haba?" And The Rav added that personally, he would mention three things, one of which was that he learned with his children.

Learning Torah with one's children is not simply an obligation- it is a privilege in so many ways. For years, I have been fortunate every Shabbat morning to spend time learning with each of my children, and in many ways it is the highlight of my week. First and foremost, it is special time set aside on a weekly basis that I can give my full attention to each child, which in and of itself is valuable irrespective of the content. In addition, from a practical perspective it has encouraged me to learn many topics and subjects that I might not have focused on, that I now am privileged to learn. And even topics that I have learned before, I find that each child and age brings a unique and fresh perspective to the subject, often enhancing my understanding and appreciation for the topic at hand. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, our learning together gives me the chance to share my excitement and enthusiasm for Talmud Torah to my children. Having the opportunity to encounter the Dvar Hashem together, and shared experience that that creates, is an opportunity that I cherish (and I hope that my children do as well☺).

Of course, for each of us, learning with our kids can look different and take different forms. For those able to make time on a regular basis to learn with each child, the better. Those for whom that is

unrealistic or challenging, simply taking advantage of a Shabbat table or any other setting to discuss the parsha or other topics of Judaism, can be an invaluable experience. We learn from this weeks parsha that of all the various aspects of his special relationship with Yaacov, what Yosef cherished most was the shared Torah learning that he had done with his father. This is an incredibly valuable lesson for us to learn from in our lives as well.

I will conclude with a beautiful quote from the same sicha from Rav Lichtenstein, reflecting on the opportunity of learning with his kids- "One pays a price for this attitude of child-raising. However, that is a price that you should be very well ready and willing to pay, and thank G-d every morning for the ability to pay it. It is a source of joy beyond words."

Wishing everyone a wonderful Shabbat- Shabbat Shalom!!