

Parenting from the Parsha- Parshat Vayetzei- “Allowing Our Children to Dream”

“There are some people who live in a dream world, and there are some who face reality; and then there are those who turn one into the other.”

– **Douglas H. Everett**

This week's Parsha opens with Yaakov Avinu's dramatic dream- a grand vision of a ladder connecting heaven and earth, angels, and of course the vision of G-d Himself promising to take care of Yaakov on his journey. And beginning with this dream, we see a continuing phenomenon of dreams playing a prominent role in the narratives of the next few parshiyot culminating with the various dreams in the Yosef story. Various dreams occur in different contexts and play varied roles, but their prominence in the storylines is clear.

In Jewish tradition, dreams are considered a powerful tool. The Gemara Brachos 57b says that “a dream is 1/60th of the level of prophecy”, and many sources in Chazal reinforce this connection between dreams and prophecy, including the fact that most prophetic visions occurred during a dream-like state. The concept of having a great vision of what could be, both on a personal and national level, is part and parcel of our national consciousness and aspirations.

It raises the question of the role of dreams in childhood and parenthood. Should a parent encourage their children to dream and “shoot for the stars”, or is the proper path to encourage a more realistic sense of reality and expectation? If the answer depends on the age of the child, at what age do things shift? Should our children (and we) ever really stop dreaming? Are we supportive enough of our children's dreams?

It is no secret that young children, with their abundant naivete, love to dream, and to dream big. Most of us have memories of wanting to grow up to be Mickey Mouse, a fireman, a professional baseball player, or an astronaut. Those dreams result from a combination of naivete and the amazing imagination our children are blessed with. And during those early childhood years, we as parents are meant to help our children develop their imagination and their capacity to dream. At that crucial stage in our children's social, cognitive, and psychological development, our job is to encourage our children and their thoughts/feelings in the most accepting way possible, to help each child build a healthy sense of self and feel supported. If a young child comes and tells us that he wants to be Mickey Mouse when he grows up, and our well intentioned response is “Oh, honey, that's not possible”, that sense of disappointment (even though its true) could impact his desire to continue dreaming, or to share with us other dreams.

And then our children get older- and throughout each remaining stage of childhood until early adulthood, for most of us the older we get and more aware of the limitations of the world, we naturally tend to lose that capacity to dream. What role should a parent play in all of this? Should we continue to encourage our kids to dream? Until what age?

It seems that on the one hand, part of parenting requires us to prepare our children for real life, which includes realistic expectations and accepting certain realities. On the other hand, having dreams and

hopes enables a person step out of their immediate realities and to “think big” about what could be- an important and valuable exercise regardless of the results. It seems, therefore, that our job as parents is to find the right balance between these two roles, with perhaps the imagery of Yaakov’s ladder being the most fitting. We have to raise our children to have their feet firmly planted in the ground while their heads reach up to the sky. Our children should feel rooted in the realities of the practical world, and be realistic in their expectations, while never ceasing to have their heads in the clouds, thinking big and dreaming big. How we manage that balance might depend on each child, their age, and their individual personalities and needs, but to strike that balance is key.

And of course, even as we get older, we should never fully lose that ability to dream, to hope. That part of us that fuels ambition and fantasy should always exist in our hearts and minds- both on a personal and national level- “היינו כחולמים”. We must make sure that the dreaming is always tempered with realism and pragmatism- the ladder reaching up to heavens must always be firmly planted in the ground- but we should never stop reaching for the heavens. Perhaps that is even one thing we can learn from dear children.

Wishing everyone a great week!