The Children We Have

By

Rabbi Eliyahu Safran

*Believe me Rebbi, I only care about my child’s Yiddishkeit, and if he doesn’t go on the right path then I prefer that he should just die already*.

- spoken to Harav Aaron Leib Shteinman

A father approached the *Gadol HaDor* known for his wisdom, insight, deep sensitivity and understanding. The father was fervent in his faith and love for the Jewish people, so much so that he was adamant that if his child did not follow the “right” path he would sooner see him dead. Wouldn’t the great Rav, recognizing the father’s love of Torah and Hashem, praise the father for this level of piety?

No.

Rather than see in the father’s judgment something akin to Abraham’s sacrifice of his beloved son in *Akedat Yitzchak*, the Gadol saw only a bitter, judgmental man embarrassed and disgusted by his child. The Rav made clear that such a father was not expressing sacrifice but was *contemplating murder*, for his motives were selfish, cruel and callous.

The Gadol Ha’Dor counseled, “The child must be made to believe that his parents truly love him and that it hurts them to see their beloved child lose out on a life of real happiness.” Such love, the Gadol taught, would create the potential that the child could return to the path.

\* \* \*

Rav Aaron Leib Shteinman *zt’l,* passed away just over a month ago. It sounds incongruous to say that a man who reached the advanced age of 104 years was taken too soon but in fact it *is* true; he was taken from us too soon. That the Rav was a great Torah scholar is a given. His true greatness was in the humility, kindness and understanding that animated his wisdom, guidance and teaching. We know that God never abandons His people, but it is so difficult to imagine anyone who can fill the void left by this incredible human being; difficult to imagine a man who is able to speak with such wisdom and authority, with such caring and love.

\* \* \*

We read in *Shemot* (12:26-27), And *it shall come to pass, when your children shall say to you, What do you mean by this service? That you shall say, It is the sacrifice of the Lord’s Passover, who passed over the houses of the people of Israel in Egypt, when he struck the Egyptians, and saved our houses. And the people bowed their heads and worshipped.*

Rashi comments that the people “bowed their heads” in gratitude for the news of their redemption and for the promise that they would have children to carry on after them. And yet we are struck that this very same passage appears in our Haggadah to identify the “wicked son”.

Which begs the question, why would the Children of Israel bow their heads in gratitude if the children they were to have would one-day rebel; if their very future would be rest on a foundation of uncertainty? The Satmar Rebbe suggested that while it is true that sometimes a child is born with a nature that tends toward evil, it is important for a parent to *accept this* and still try to educate and guide the child.

His wise teaching makes clear that when it comes to raising a child to adulthood, perhaps the greatest quality that a parent can have is acceptance.

Would that such acceptance be more apparent in today’s observant community!

Listen to the *rasha* son, “What is this service to you?” His question sounds as one coming “from the outside”, challenging and taunting. We have been given a sense of this *rasha* as refusing to acknowledge that the service he questions has been ordained by God; that he is not asking *to learn* but to annoy and disrupt.

Isn’t that how those on the outside behave? Their purpose is not to engage but to create distance; to push further away.

Perhaps that *is* their immediate purpose but perhaps too, we push away too quickly. The Satmar Rebbe makes a clear distinction between such a son, an OTD son, and one who is truly evil. He calls on a father to educate and guide a son who leans toward evil but observes that that is not the case with one who hides his wickedness behind a veil of piety. Such people are truly dangerous.

So, it was that while Jews were told that there would be those among their children who asked disturbing and difficult questions, they were grateful for the warning.

In the same way, the Brisker Rav taught that before Rivkah knew that she was going to give birth to twins, she feared the turmoil in her belly was caused by a single child who would be “running back and forth between the *beis midrash* and the house of idolatry. So, it was she cried out, “If so, why am I thus?” But once she learned she would have two different sons with different personalities, she was calmed. Why? Why was she not tormented that one of her sons would be wicked? Because, the Brisker Rav went on, one can try to help a wicked child whose intentions are clear. One rooted in the *beis midrash* at the same time he is rooted in the house of evil is much more difficult to reach.

Different sons. Different parenting. Each to receive the guidance he required.

In our verse, we learn that the “…the people bowed their heads and prostrated themselves.” They did this *knowing that one in four of their children would be reshaim*! They knew that one in four of their sons would be cynical, and rebellious; that they would be OTD! But they did not hide their faces in shame; they did not turn away in scorn. They did not wish those sons dead. No. They bowed their heads in gratitude!

Could we expect the same from parents and educators today?

\* \* \*

Rav Aaron Leib Shteinman’s entire teaching and being stood in opposition to the arrogance and meanness that define the observant community’s dominant reaction and response to our OTD children.

In our community, the OTD child is often treated like a dangerous virus; a threat not just to himself but to his family, his yeshiva, and the entire community. Roshei Yeshivot expel not just the child who challenges and asks difficult and unpleasant questions but expels *the siblings* as well. The strategy is to isolate; to quarantine. No real thought is given to the child or the siblings. The yeshivot react as that father; making clear that as far as they are concerned it *would be better for the OTD child to be dead* than to be present and pose a difficult challenge.

With so many families with children *off the derech*, Rav Shteinman was asked whether having an OTD child was reason to avoid a connection with those families. In other words, should we *further* isolate the families? But the Gadol Hador did not consider the OTD child to be the deciding factor to not be *meshaddech* with the family; the deciding factor was how lovingly that family dealt with the child. “If parents lose contact with their OTD child, that is a deciding factor *not* to be *meshaddech* with that family! Whereas, if the family keeps in close contact with the child – then you can go ahead and marry into their family!”

Such thoughtful wisdom! It is *how* the family engages and loves their OTD child that determines the worth of the family, not whether they have an OTD child.

\* \* \*

According to “*Chadrei Chareidim*” ([www.bhol.co.il](http://www.bhol.co.il)), the Rav pleaded with educators of *yeshivot ketanot* that they should keep in mind two thoughts as the new school year began: One, to continually relate to each student as a *neshama*, a pure and precious soul. Two, to stop expelling students from yeshivas.

This message must have been met with astonishment. It was hardly the kind of message most educators receive at the beginning of a new year.

Rav Shteinman continued in his talk 3-4 years ago, by referring to Bava Kamma 62a, as he does in his published volume, “Leading with Love”. The Talmudic passage is concerned with a man giving a woman a gold coin to hold but telling her, “Be careful with it for it is silver.”

Rava rules that, should she damage the coin, she would have to reimburse the man the full worth of the gold because the owner will rightly claim that, regardless of the actual worth of the coin, she should not have damaged it. However, if the woman was merely negligent with the coin, she would be responsible only for the value of the silver, correctly claiming that she had only agreed to be responsible for a silver coin (*netirusa d’dahava lo kabilsi alai*) and not a gold one.

How are we to understand this passage?

To give the passage a more contemporary frame, suppose a man gave his friend small safe to guard, telling him that it contained $10,000. Now, such a sum is significant and should be guarded with great vigilance. But what if the locked box did not contain $10,000 but rather $100,000?

What if the friend negligently left the box on the back seat of a taxi? What would he say when he learned that he was responsible not for $10,000 but for $100,000? He would surely protest that he had never agreed to be responsible for such a princely sum. He would concede that $10,000 is a sum worthy of vigilance. But $100,000? That is another matter altogether.

“Had I known that there was $100,000 in the box, I’d have been even more vigilant!”

The Rav would consider his protest and his claim that he should not be liable for the additional $90,000 to be more than legitimate.

But what does all this have to do with teachers and students? Rav Shteinman suggested that, in a similar way, every single teacher, *rebbi*, principal of either boys or girls (equally so!) must fully understand exactly what is being entrusted to his safekeeping.

If a teacher thinks that his task is merely “to teach” – *d’varim peshutim*, a simple matter – then it is no great thing to teach, that “anybody can do that” he must immediately be set straight. Children are *neshamos*; they are *netirusa d’dahava*. They are more precious than gold. Do not for a minute think that they are merely silver. They are the most valuable possession of all *klal Yisrael*.

If a teacher is not able to take on the responsibility of safeguarding such treasure, he shouldn’t! Before setting foot in a classroom, each teacher must be clear about the responsibility he is taking on, and the treasure that is being placed in his safekeeping. He must know that to treat any child with less than *netirusa d’dahava* is negligence.

How much more so our own children! Are not parents the ultimate teachers? Each child is precious; each child is sacred.

\* \* \*

Our OTD crisis is fueled by parents and educators who respond with anger and hard-heartedness to the challenging and rebellious child, *not* by the *rasha* himself. The response to the *rasha* must be to love and reassure him. He must know that he can speak with you *no matter what it is that he says*. Turning your back on such a child closes off any chance of return, of growth, and of redemption.

Rav Aaron Leib Shteinman beseeched us to never close off a chance for return. He taught that love for our children keeps that chance alive.