



GETTING THEM TO GET ALONG

There is the well-known incident of the proselyte challenging both Hillel and Shammai to teach him the Torah while standing on one leg. Shammai refused, perhaps sensing the insincerity of the request. Hillel responded: Do unto others as you would have done to you — that is the Torah entire, the rest is commentary, now go and learn it (*Shabbat*, 31a). Hillel’s answer supports the centrality of *bein adam l’chavero* in Torah thought and Torah living. Children and teens in today’s world are exposed to endless examples of bad interpersonal behavior, disdain for those who are different, and mean-spirited discourse between disagreeing parties. How do we raise and educate our children to have the will and skill to live by the Torah’s golden rule? I believe it is both

necessary and possible to do so, if we consider what we value, live, and teach.

From early in their development and through their teen years, youngsters seek clues about what is important and valued by watching and listening to adults. When children are greeted after returning from school with questions about their test grades, they have every reason to believe their family values academic achievement. If they are encouraged to win every game and claim every trophy, they learn that individual success is valued above all. We communicate how much we value interpersonal relationships when we ask about them, when we celebrate children’s acts of caring, and congratulate teens on their diplomatic navigation of friends’ conflicting opinions. Through such communications and actions, we help

demonstrate that relationships and how we deal with others matters.

We cannot inculcate Hillel’s golden rule in the next generation if we communicate that we value something — but live in such a way that directly contradicts those values. The school/family that voices how much they value caring social behavior, but then describes “those people” who are different or complains about having to spend time with a particular person or group, will quickly be seen as hypocritical. In contrast, we build upon our values and strengthen their transmission when we demonstrate lived examples of *bein adam l’chavero*.

This can be challenging for parents and educators since much of adult social life occurs outside the view of children and students. We may therefore need to unmask our actions

— to make youngsters aware of both what we do and why we do it. For example, we might routinely bring food to community members in need — doing so while children are at school. If we ensure children see the food preparation, and if we tell them, “we are cooking for the Levine family who just had a baby, because it is nice to help people,” we convert our private actions to a public lesson.

Equally important is being exemplars of acceptance of difference and respect for all. Sharing with children and teens that a social media post makes us angry, but that we are taking time to calm down before responding, sends an important message. We can directly explain to our children and teens the reality that there are points of view, lifestyles, and practices that are strange to us, and that we don’t agree with, but we can and should treat every person with maximal respect, as being *b’tzelem Elokim*. The final ingredient in raising and educating caring children who can get along with others is seemingly the most obvious, yet it is often omitted. We assume that social skills will be learned just as easily as children learn to walk and talk. Simple social skills — such as making eye contact and answering questions are learned by most children without any direct instruction. Parents and educators teach more complex social skills

in many ways. In early childhood, we tell children to use their words, share their toys, wait their turn, and more. We continue throughout their childhood and teen years, discussing and explaining social conventions and manners. We teach indirectly as well, pointing out the behavior of characters in books and videos, helping children learn to recognize their emotions and those of others, and to act with care and compassion.

One of the most important social skills and social tools we can offer is that of perspective taking — being able to put ourselves in the shoes of another. Neurological research has identified a 10-section empathy circuit in the brain. Evolutionary biologists and psychologists confirm that we are social animals, innately wired to care for our fellow creatures. As is true of any characteristic, some are born with greater empathic abilities than others. But all can grow their empathy muscles.

Curiosity is a powerful tool for empathy development — especially curiosity about the lives and experiences of others. Consider the Canadian-based program, Roots of Empathy, that brings infants into elementary and middle school classrooms. Simply observing and learning about an experience of the world quite different than their current one expanded the perspective

taking of participating students, who also demonstrated enhanced empathic abilities, decreased aggressive behavior, and improved emotional intelligence (see research summary at www.rootsofempathy.org). Exposure to other perspectives requires careful and intentional approaches in our somewhat insular schools and communities. We can promote respectful curiosity about those who are different while concurrently communicating the richness of Torah living.

Learning any new skill and developing mastery of it requires considerable repetition and practice. Teaching children and teens to get along is no different. We will need to value, live, and teach the lessons of caring and empathy many times over. It is a labor intensive but very worthwhile investment with dual benefits. Since psychologists have demonstrated that those with strong people skills, emotional intelligence, empathy, and strong friendships fare better in life, our efforts clearly enrich our children’s lives. These efforts help young people develop the will and skill to live by the Torah of Hillel — not only how to get along with each other, but how to respect, support, nurture, and grow those around them — which benefits both our Jewish communities and the world at large.



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