



Likkutei Sichos

Volume 15 | Vayera | Chof MarCheshvan

The Spiritual Child

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1.

THE STORY

In connection with the twentieth of MarCheshvan — the birthday of the Rebbe Rashab¹ — the Previous Rebbe told a story² on Shabbos *parshas Vayeira*, about the Rebbe Rashab that happened when he was a child of four or five years old.

The Rebbe Rashab entered his grandfather's room, the study of the Tzemach Tzedek (to receive a birthday blessing), and the Rebbe Rashab began to weep. He asked: "Why did Hashem show Himself to our forefather Avraham, but He does not show Himself to us (that is, to the Rebbe Rashab)?"

The Tzemach Tzedek answered: "When a tzaddik,³ at ninety-nine years of age, decides that he needs to circumcise himself, he deserves that Hashem should appear to him."

2.

EVERYONE SHOULD WANT TO SEE HASHEM

We have spoken several times⁴ about the lessons in serving Hashem that can be gleaned from this story, like all stories about our Rebbeim passed down to us (especially those that our Rebbeim themselves publicized), which include lessons in how to serve Hashem. We will now focus on another detail of the story.

When relating this story, the Previous Rebbe was very particular in mentioning that the Rebbe Rashab was a child of **four or five** years. Since every

¹ In the year 5621 (1860); for a detailed biography, see "*Chanoch LaNaar*"; *Sefer Toldos Admor Mahorshab* (Kehot publ., 5732).

² On Shabbos *parshas Vayera*, *Chof MarCheshvan*, 5693 (1933); published in *HaYom Yom*, p. 103 (in an abridged form); *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 1, "*Vayera*"; vol. 5, "*Chof Marcheshvan*"; *ibid.*, p. 321.

³ See *Likkutei Sichos*, *ibid.* for two versions of this story (explained in *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 5).

⁴ See *Likkutei Sichos*, *ibid.*; et al.

word of a Jewish leader is undoubtedly accurate and extremely precise⁵ — especially when speaking publicly and then asking for the story to be printed — we must say that even **this** detail is included not only to highlight the greatness of the Rebbe —

[namely, that even as a very young child, the Rebbe Rashab was bothered why Hashem did not reveal Himself to him to the extent that it brought him to tears]

— it must also serve as a lesson for everyone as to how to serve Hashem.

Therefore, it is understood that although this story contains many lessons for everyone (as mentioned), there is also a fundamental lesson for those four or five years old.

In other words, this lesson is intended not only for an older person who is **spiritually** considered a child of four or five, who has not completed his education, meaning someone who is so dull-witted that not only does he not understand (on his own), but he resists instruction from others — even **he** can demand, and demand with inner fortitude [such as by crying, which shows that the situation bothers him more than he can handle,] that Hashem should show Himself just like he did for Avraham our forefather.⁶

[The reason — since Avraham is one of the three **forefathers** of every Jew in all the generations, every Jew (each one is considered a child) **inherits** that which our forefathers had.]⁷

But moreover, the lesson applies (primarily) to a child of four or five **literally**. Even he can be educated in such a way that he should demand strongly, to the point of tears, that Hashem should reveal Himself to him as he did for Avraham, our forefather.

⁵ Note Rambam's *Commentary on Mishnah*, "Avos 1:17."

⁶ See *Likkutei Sichos*, vol 1, "Vayera" (p. 24).

⁷ *Torah Or*, beg. of "Vaera"; see *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 16, pp. 52-3.

3.

EVEN CHILDREN?

One could ask, “How can we compare **every** Jewish child to the Rebbe?”

The Rebbe was holy from the womb; he was a prince, the son of a prince, and a semblance of his greatness was noticeable already from when he was a child (as our Sages say,⁸ “A pumpkin can be recognized at its blossoming stage.” {Likewise, a great person can be recognized even when he is a youngster.}) And obviously, at that age, he was already more perceptive⁹ than his peers and even those who were older than him. So, how can we learn from him how every child should be educated when the “age at which a child must {begin to} be trained” is for “each child according to his intellectual acumen and his knowledge”!¹⁰

Clearly, the story’s moral is relevant (not only to a prince in Israel, but) to everyone since, as mentioned earlier, the story was told publically and, subsequently, printed. This proves that this moral does not reflect a virtue of the elite royalty, about whom it says, “From his shoulders and up, he was taller than any of the people.”¹¹ Instead, the virtue exhibited was a quality that pertains to everyone.

However, seemingly, it would suffice to say that this is a lesson for older people (and even those who have not matured spiritually, as mentioned). Why must we say this lesson is relevant (even) to a **literal** child (in years)?

⁸ *Berachos*, beg. of 48a.

⁹ {In the original, “בר דעת.”}

¹⁰ Alter Rebbe’s *Shulchan Aruch*, “*Orach Chaim*,” sec. 343, par. 3.

¹¹ *Shmuel I* 9:2; as known (*Or HaTorah*, “*Vayera*” [vol. 4], 764b; et al.), this is explained to mean that even his “shoulders” were higher than any of the people (including their heads).

4.

THERE ARE STANDARDS

We can understand the reason by prefacing with the following idea: When it comes to education, there are quite a few benchmarks {when a child must begin to be trained}. Although the “age at which a child must {begin to} be trained” is for “each child according to his intellectual acumen and his knowledge,” as discussed above, there are, however, various benchmarks associated with specific ages.¹² We even have a general rule¹³ that “{a child who is} younger than six — do not accept him {as a student}; six years of age, accept him and stuff him {full of Torah knowledge} like an ox.”¹⁴ This elevates his education to a higher level, as is understood, but clearly, this approach begins at “six.”

This is the general methodology even though we say that this {the age at which a child must begin to be trained} depends on “a child’s health and build”¹⁵ (for a child who is “weaker,” we wait until he is “**seven** years old”).¹⁶ But “younger than six — **do not** accept him,” even if he is stronger than an average “seven-year-old.”

Meaning, the benchmark of a six-year-old being stuffed like an ox — receiving a comprehensive education — does not depend on the acumen and potential of the child. In its applicability, this benchmark is similar to the {mishnah’s} benchmark: “at thirteen — {the obligation begins} to observe the mitzvos.”¹⁷ Even an exceptionally enlightened child who is more mature than others who are already adults is still **exempt** from the obligation to perform mitzvos (biblically). He cannot be counted for a minyan, etc.

¹² See (in addition to the examples provided below in the *sichah*), for example, *Eruvin*, beg. of ch. 8 (regarding *eruin* and *sukkah*).

¹³ *Kesuvos* 50a; *Bava Basra* 21a.

¹⁴ {Just like an ox is forced to eat, so, too, should a student be compelled to study Torah.}

¹⁵ Rambam’s wording in *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Talmud Torah*,” ch. 2, par. 2; similarly, ch. 1, par. 6; *Tur*, “*Yoreh Deah*,” sec. 245; Alter Rebbe’s *Hilchos Talmud Torah*, sec. 1, par. 1.

¹⁶ *Bava Basra* 21a, *Tosafos*, s.v. “*kiven sheis kiven sheva*”; *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Talmud Torah*,” ch. 2, par. 2; ch. 1, par. 6; *Tur* and *Shulchan Aruch*, “*Yoreh Deah*,” sec. 245, par. 5 (and *Shach* there); Alter Rebbe’s *Hilchos Talmud Torah*, sec. 1, par. 1.

¹⁷ *Avos* 5:22.

5.

BEFORE AND POST SINAI

The explanation of this issue relates to what the Giving of the Torah accomplished in terms of the *avodah*¹⁸ of Torah and mitzvos.

Before the Giving of the Torah, mitzvos (and *avodah*) reached {only} to the root of mortal man.¹⁹ Therefore, what was relevant was the perfection of a person (a “creation”) in his *avodah* (through which he could draw down G-dliness from the root and source of creation). However, how he served Hashem and performed mitzvos (with which physical objects) was not terribly relevant.²⁰ For this reason, Yaakov successfully elicited {the spiritual effluence that we now achieve} through tefillin, with his *avodah* with the “sticks,” as explained in *Zohar*.²¹

After the Giving of the Torah, however, the *avodah* of Torah and mitzvos elicits a spiritual flow from the Creator, who is beyond the source of creations. A created being cannot initiate **such** a flow on his own; he can do so only because the **Creator** set it up so that when a certain mitzvah is performed, it draws {spiritual influence} from the Creator into the world. Naturally, this effluence only flows when the mitzvah is done precisely according to the measurements and requirements dictated from Above (at the Giving of the Torah).

[We could say that nowadays if a person were as righteous as Yaakov, he could use “sticks” to accomplish what Yaakov accomplished. However, the person would only be able to elicit a flow from the spiritual level that serves as the source of creations (commensurate with the greatness of that tzaddik’s *avodah*). However, he would not be able to draw down from the Creator. **This** is the *avodah* that began after the Giving of the Torah.]

¹⁸ {Divine service.}

¹⁹ See *Sefer HaArachim – Chabad*, “*Avos*,” sec. 3, and the sources listed there.

²⁰ See *Maamar “Zachor 5665,”* ch. 9; et al.; *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 3, p. 888; vol. 5, p. 327; see *Sefer HaArachim – Chabad*, “*Avos*,” sec. 4.

²¹ *Zohar*, vol. 1, 162a; see *Torah Or* 23c.

The same applies to the age requirements when a person becomes obligated. A child might be more enlightened than an adult, but this is only relevant to **his** perfection (as a creation). Regarding {matters after} the Giving of the Torah, there are strict guidelines about how to draw down effluence from the Creator, from Above. A man becomes obligated in this process only from the age of thirteen. Similarly, the optimal age for education (when a child is ready to be “stuffed like an ox”) is from six years of age.

6.

IT'S FOR EVERYONE

On this basis, we can clarify the issues in our story: Since the Rebbe Rashab was “younger than six” — despite his development, etc., at that age — when all is said and done (from the perspective of {after} the Giving of the Torah), he was on a level “younger than six.” He was at an age when he had not yet reached the optimal age for education.

By publicizing the story — which indicates that it is not unique to Jewish leaders, and the Previous Rebbe pointed out the nuance that the Rebbe Rashab was a child of four or five years — it is understood that this story is relevant for every Jewish child who is “younger than six.” After all, according to the guidelines of the True Torah, he is in the same category and level of education {as the Rebbe Rashab}.

EVERY LEVEL NEEDS CIRCUMCISION

In light of all of the above, by publicizing the story, the Previous Rebbe shared a lesson concerning the education of **actual** children. We can also understand how this story conveys (not just a lesson in *avodas Hashem*, even for children, but) a **fundamental innovation** regarding how to educate:

As known, Rambam²² expounds at length how a person ought to teach a child: One needs to encourage him “with things that delight him due his young years... — ‘Read, and I will give you nuts....’” Because “due to his young age and undeveloped intellect, the child does not grasp the virtue of this good.”

Yet, here, we expect a child to be moved to the extent that the absence of Hashem’s appearance consumes him to the point of tears. He ought **not** to be affected by a lack of material things, etc. However, we expect him to be troubled that Hashem does not appear to him. This means that we need to educate a child such that G-dliness becomes a “part of his life” (“things that delight him”) until he is really disturbed that Hashem does not reveal Himself to him and in the manner in which He revealed Himself to Avraham.

Were it not for this story of the Rebbe Rashab, we would not have known it was possible to inspire every Jewish child with such a feeling. Perhaps, because of a child’s nature to be drawn to material things, as Rambam explained, we have to educate the child and encourage him to use those things “**that** delight him.”

However, after this narrative, and especially after the Previous Rebbe told it in public and then had it printed, it is **clear** that by the Previous Rebbe doing so, he revealed — indeed, he opened a new channel and method of education — that **now** by providing proper education, we can break the boundaries of a Jewish child’s nature and train him to have spiritual aspirations so that he can have a wondrous yearning for Hashem to appear to him.

²² Rambam’s *Introduction to Mishnah*, “Sanhedrin,” beg. of ch. “Chelek”; see *Mishneh Torah*, “Hilchos Teshuvah,” ch. 10, par. 5.

If we should see a Jewish child who is not bothered that Hashem does not appear to him, it is not because this is something impossible for him to feel. Instead, his indifference is due to his **educator**. His educator does not speak words emanating from his heart.

8.

EVERY JEW CAN DO IT

Just as the lesson learned from the question and crying of the Rebbe Rashab applies to every child, as explained at length, so, too, it is understood that the answer of the Tzemach Tzedek to the Rebbe Rashab — “When a tzaddik, at ninety-nine years of age, decides that he needs to circumcise himself, he deserves that Hashem should show Himself to him” — applies to (the education of) every child.

The meaning of the Tzemach Tzedek’s answer is not that Hashem revealed Himself **only** to Avraham (because he decided at the age of ninety-nine to circumcise himself) and to others — for example, the Rebbe Rashab — such revelation would be impossible. If this were so, the Tzemach Tzedek only needed to answer briefly that the Rebbe Rashab could not be compared to Avraham.

Rather, the explanation is as follows: This is a lesson on how **everyone** can achieve {what Avraham achieved} — “Hashem appeared to him” — by deciding that in whatever spiritual state a person is in (even if he is a tzaddik ninety-nine years of age) he must circumcise himself. This means that he must work arduously to remove the covering, the obscurity, and the concealment of the world.²³

Such a sentiment is possible for every Jew because although Avraham was “righteous until ninety-nine” with “perfect days”²⁴ in serving Hashem, and naturally, **his** decision to circumcise himself (to remove the concealment of the

²³ Regarding this discussion, see *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 1, p. 26; vol. 5, p. 87, pp. 321 ff.

²⁴ *Zohar*, vol. 1, 224a; *Torah Or* 16a, 79b; see *Likkutei Sichos*, *ibid*.

world) was a more significant novelty than a similar decision made by someone who is not a tzaddik,²⁵ opening a new channel demonstrates a superior quality, as is known. After one person has worked at something and has brought it down into the world, this opens the channel for others to follow and accomplish the same with much less effort. {Thus, with less effort than expended by Avraham, every Jew can achieve a personal appearance of Hashem, who will show Himself to them.}

[All the more so does this apply after the Giving of the Torah. Now, with less effort and with greater ease, we can accomplish that which our ancestors accomplished through great *avodah* and effort.]²⁶

9.

HASHEM CAN APPEAR TO EVERYONE

This is the lesson (based on the Tzemach Tzedek's answer) regarding the education of children:

After we inspire a child with a deep yearning for Hashem to appear to him, we must explain that the path to accomplishing this is to always "circumcise" ourselves. We must take care to remove any covering or concealment.

This requires us to teach a child not to be influenced by the fog and concealment imposed by the world. The child should care not about "world" opinion but about what the **Torah** wants. This resolve should be so firmly entrenched that "even as he grows old, he will not depart from it."²⁷ This resolve should be so ingrained that he always remembers it. Still, even when he reaches a higher and a much much loftier level in serving Hashem, he must "circumcise" himself.

²⁵ See *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 5, p. 90, p. 323.

²⁶ See *Maamar Imras Hashem 5695*, ch. 3 (*Sefer HaMaamarim Kuntreisim*, vol. 2); see *Maamar Zachor 5695*, beg. of ch. 11.

²⁷ *Mishlei 22:6*.

This approach will enable him to experience, while he is still young {what Avraham experienced} — “Hashem appeared to him.” This experience will illuminate him and his surroundings in the manner described as²⁸ “Hashem will be an eternal light for you.”

10.

A NEW PATH

Our Rebbeim opened a new channel of education “between man and G-d.” Now, we can educate Jewish children to desire Jewish ideals (not for reward, etc., but) in a way that these (ideals) should be a part of their lives until they want these ideals so badly that they cry {and ask} why Hashem does not appear to them as He did to Avraham.

Similarly, this idea is applicable in matters “between man and man” and also in a story involving the one whose birthday it is {the Rebbe Rashab} that happened when he was a child:²⁹

When the Rebbe Rashab was four years old, a tailor brought in an article of clothing he had sewn for the Rebbe Rashab’s mother, the Rebbetzin. As she inspected the garment, the Rebbe Rashab, without any particular thought in mind, pulled out a piece of material from the tailor’s pocket. The tailor was embarrassed, and he began to justify himself, explaining that he had forgotten about this extra little piece of cloth....

After the tailor left, his mother, the Rebbetzin, mentioned that because of the Rebbe Rashab’s actions, the tailor was shamed. When the Rebbe Rashab heard this, he began **crying** bitterly.

A few weeks later, he went to his father (the Rebbe Maharash) and asked him how a person could correct the harm caused by the sin of embarrassing

²⁸ *Yeshayahu* 60:19.

²⁹ Printed in *Chanoch Lenaar*, p. 9; *Sefer HaToldos Admor Mahorshab*, p. 8.

someone. When his father asked him why he wanted to know, the Rebbe Rashab balked at repeating what had happened.

His mother, the Rebbetzin, asked why he wouldn't tell his father the whole story. The Rebbe Rashab answered that it was bad enough that he had transgressed by embarrassing someone. Should he now transgress by gossiping and speaking ill of someone, as well?!

11.

A NEW STORY, A NEW LESSON

At first glance, the embarrassment was not such a “big deal.” As the story relates, the Rebbe Rashab took out the piece of cloth “**without any particular thought in mind.**” In other words, the act wasn't deliberate.³⁰ [Moreover, it wasn't in public;³¹ only his mother was present.] Nevertheless, as soon as he heard that the tailor was embarrassed, the Rebbe Rashab took it so badly that he cried bitterly.

This shows us that the Rebbe Rashab was disturbed (not so much because **he** caused the embarrassment, and **he** would get punished, etc., but) because he was bothered by the **matter itself**. Namely, a Jew had been embarrassed.

Consequently, the Rebbe Rashab didn't want to tell his father. Although not answering his father's question might verge on being disrespectful, etc., and he would only be telling his father the story so that the Rebbe Rashab could **repair his sin**, the Rebbe Rashab couldn't bear having spoken negatively about a Jew (in whatever manner).

³⁰ Note that one is liable for the fine for humiliating another only when done intentionally (mishnah, *Bava Kamma* 86b).

³¹ Note that there is an opinion that the prohibition of embarrassing another person applies only when it is not done in public (cited in *Encyclopedia Talmudis*, “*Halbanas Panim*,” p. 210).

Since we have been told this story together with the emphasis that the Rebbe Rashab was four years old, this is proof that now we can educate every Jewish child, even at such an age, in this way.

12.

TAKE CARE OF ALL CHILDREN

From all the above, we can also learn the importance of the obligation upon every Jew to put effort into education. Both for their children and our children

— in accord with the well-known aphorism of {the Rebbe Rashab} whose birthday it is:³² “Just as wearing tefillin every day is a mitzvah commanded by the Torah to every individual regardless of his standing in Torah, whether deeply learned or simple, so, too, is it an absolute duty for everyone to spend half an hour every day thinking about the Torah education of their children, and to do everything in their power, and beyond their power, to inspire children to follow the path along which they are being guided —

and for other Jewish children whose parents (for whatever reason) did not provide them with a good education. In such a case, the obligation falls upon **every wise man**³³ among {the Children of} Israel to provide {these Jewish children with} a proper education.

In this way, we establish the “Army of Hashem” who will take us out of exile “with our youngsters and with our elders... with our sons and daughters,”³⁴ through our righteous Moshiach, very soon, in actuality.

— Based on talks delivered on Shabbos *parshas Vayera*, *Chof Marcheshvan*, 5736 and 5737 (1975 and 1976)

³² *Hayom Yom*, p. 13.

³³ *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Talmud Torah*,” ch. 1, par. 2; Alter Rebbe’s *Hilchos Talmud Torah*, sec. 1, par. 8 (who adds: “It is a **biblically mandated** [positive mitzvah]”); *Tur* and *Shulchan Aruch*, “*Yoreh Deah*,” sec. 245, par. 3.

³⁴ *Shemos* 10:9.