

Child Priests

By Mendel Kalmenson

"G-d said to Moses: *Say* to the priests, Aaron's sons, and *you shall say* to them: 'Let no priest become ritually impure through contact with a dead person...'"¹

Why does the verse repeat the bit about "saying"?

"The Torah uses the redundant wording to enjoin adults with regards to minors."²

The first "say" is addressed to Moses. The additional "and you shall say to them" is an instruction to the priests to instruct their young. (In grammatical terms, the colon belongs after the words "Aaron's sons," not after the words "to them.")

Wouldn't Sinai have been the perfect time to task parents with guiding those little hands?

This is the first Biblical reference to the parental obligation to educate their offspring.

But why here, why now?

Wouldn't Sinai have been the best time to give the command? The mood was set, the atmosphere was right. As the Midrash relates, before G-d agreed to gift us the Torah, He demanded a guarantor for its observance. After shopping around, the only ones He accepted as bond were the children, those who hold the future in their hands.³

Wouldn't that have been the perfect time to task parents with guiding those little hands?

Another question:

We are taught that every text is part of a context. But isn't our text a bit off?

After all, the theme of this text is about priests and their laws, implying that educating one's child is strictly a priest-thing. That can't be true. Doesn't Judaism view education as a universal ideal and responsibility?

Interestingly, the answer to both questions is the same.

Educating one's child is a developing process whose upgrading, not launching, is the subject of our verse's discussion. That parents are responsible to teach their children right from wrong, giving them the basics of education, is a given in Judaism, planted into our DNA by our forefather Abraham, about whom G-d testified: "I

cherish him because he commands his sons and his household after him, that they should keep the way of G-d to perform righteousness and justice."⁴

That parents have an obligation to raise the bar of their children's education whenever possible, however, is the revolution our verse introduces, as made clear by the priestly context.

In a stunning passage, Maimonides writes: "Not only the tribe of Levi, but every human being⁵ who desires and decides to devote himself to the service of G-d...becomes sanctified to the degree of the Holy of Holies... and he merits receiving his needs in this world like the Levites and Priests..."⁶

Every person can be a priest of G-d if he or she so desires

Every person can be a priest of G-d if he or she so desires.

Educating one's child includes creating that desire.

A Birthday Wish

This brings us to the next point.

Diligent and up-to-date parents might want to consider a relatively recent fundamental and sweeping innovation in the field of education.

This tremendous contribution to the world of child-rearing was made available to us by Rabbi Shalom DovBer of Lubavitch – who would later on become the fifth Chabad-Lubavitch Rebbe – when he was but four or five years old.

In honor of his birthday, Shalom DovBer visited his holy grandfather, the Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel, known as the Tzemach Tzedek. As was customary at this annual audience, his grandfather blessed him. But to the Rebbe's surprise, his young grandson burst into tears.

He had recently studied about G-d's revelation to Abraham after he was circumcised.⁷ Tear-stricken he asked his grandfather, "Why did G-d reveal Himself to Abraham but not to me...?"

The boy could have asked for anything. This was his chance to make a wish. Except that, unlike most birthday wishes made after blowing out the candles, this one was bound to come true.

His choice, made at a mere four or five years old?

To be honored with a G-dly revelation.

His request – and even more so, the accompanying tears – tells us volumes about the exemplary education with which he was provided. That a child at his tender age could display not just an appreciation, but a deep yearning for something intangible and divine is a testament to the groundbreaking mode of instruction his parents subscribed to.

One in which even a child could be brought to pursue meaning and piety, where spiritual matters were not considered beyond children.

Rabbi Shmuel and Rebbetzin Rivkah, parents of Shalom DovBer, did not view children as they had always been viewed – and still are by many – as selfish little beings, capable of doing the right thing only for the wrong reasons, fueled solely by incentive, and interested only in the here and now.

Altruism and the drive for spirituality are not superimposed values

They believed that children are pure beings, capable of sincere service of G-d.

Raising the Bar

This New Age approach to the rearing of children departs not only from secular norms and thought, but from religious ones as well.

Here is what Maimonides had to say about children.

"When teaching children – whether young in age or knowledge – we instruct them to serve G-d out of fear of punishment or in anticipation of reward. Only when they grow older and wiser do try to inculcate in them a spirit of altruism..."⁸

Elsewhere Maimonides writes:

"When educating young children it is necessary to encourage them with things they hold dear at their young age... Tell them you will provide them with candy and nuts [if they do the right thing]... since at their early age, their intellectual capacity is limited and they are unable to grasp the greatness of doing good for its own sake..."⁹

That seems to express the conventional wisdom of Maimonides' day, and indeed in his times, that perhaps children were incapable of reaching such spiritual heights.

But the reality has now changed. Rabbi Shalom DovBer taught by example that children should now be seen in different light. They, too, can be altruistic; they, too, can do good for its sake; they, too, can desire a connection with G-d.

Altruism and the drive for spirituality are not superimposed values but inherently belong to the human being, and need only be realized.

A Child's Sensitivity

There's a second story that serves as testimony to the novel and revolutionary path paved by the young Shalom DovBer. Note that this

"Is it not enough that I embarrassed the tailor

second episode highlights a positive change not only in matters between man and his Creator, but extends to his relationship with his fellow. **once, must I do it again?"**

Shalom DovBer was all of four years old when the local tailor paid his family a visit. He was delivering a garment he had sewn for Rebbetzin Rivkah. Intrigued by the tailor's interesting pockets, the boy put his hand inside one of them. To the humiliation of the poor fellow, out came a piece of leftover material.

All sorts of excuses tumbled out of his mouth—but the damage was done. He had been shamed.

After the tailor made his retreat, the Rebbetzin gently took her young son to task. She explained to him that the man had been embarrassed because of his actions. Mortified at having hurt the tailor's feelings, the boy burst into tears.

A few weeks passed, but all was not forgotten.

Shalom DovBer approached his father – the future fourth Chabad-Lubavitch Rebbe – and earnestly asked, "How does one repent for causing another person embarrassment?"

"What happened?" asked the curious father.

"I'd rather not say," the boy replied.

That night, his mother asked him why he chose to keep the story from his father.

In a display of extreme sensitivity he answered, "Is it not enough that I embarrassed the tailor once, must I do it again?"

It had been an accident. He hadn't rummaged through the tailor's pocket in search of extra material. Yet, upon hearing that the tailor was shamed, he cried. Not because he had acted wrongly but because someone had been wronged. Another Jew had been hurt and so had he.

This is called "priestly" education.

What's in It for Me?

These stories demand that we upgrade the vision we possess of and for our children. They *can* be altruists in pursuit of spirituality. They need only be developed.

Our children are ready. The question is: Are we?¹⁰

FOOTNOTES

1. Leviticus 21:1.
2. Rashi ad loc.
3. Midrash Rabbah, Song of Songs 1:4a.
4. Genesis 18:19.

5. This obviously includes non-Jews.
6. End of Laws of Shemitahs and Jubilees.
7. Genesis 18:1.
8. Laws of Repentance 10:5.
9. Maimonides' Commentary on the Mishnah, Introduction to Chapter *Chelek*.
10. Based on the Rebbe's teachings, recorded in Sefer Hasichot 5750, Parshat Emor; Likutei Sichot vol. 15. pg. 129ff.

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