



The Ziegler School
of Rabbinic Studies

בית המדרש ע"ש זיגלר

בשביל החיים
Walking with Life

Edited By
Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson
and Deborah Silver

דרכיה דרכי נעם

PARENTING

RABBI DEBRA ORENSTEIN

INTRODUCTION

I was a rabbi and scholar-in-residence for 14 years before I became a parent. During that time, I developed a (still evolving) talk entitled “Raising Spiritually Fulfilled Children.” I would often begin by telling the audience that I was an unimpeached expert on childrearing for one simple reason: I didn’t have kids.

This ice-breaker hints at a key truth about parenting: people who parent, and those who don’t, can both feel inadequate. The on-the-job training that children offer to even the best-prepared and -intentioned parents is truly humbling. At the same time, people who don’t have children often feel excluded from the conversation about how best to rear the next generation.

In the field of parenting, there are no experts, only loving people doing their best to mentor, teach, and raise children. The Hebrew word for parents, *horim*, comes from the same root as *Torah* and *morah*, teacher — all echoing the similar Hebrew word, light. Parents and teachers, like Torah, instruct and, hopefully, enlighten. As we attempt to transmit and spark holy light, we must never forget that our children are also purveyors of light. Their souls, too, are God’s lamp.¹

The average toddler speaks more comfortably and personally about God than the average Jewish educator. Teens generally have more zeal about social injustice than (adult) *Tikkun Olam* committee chairs. Our “daydreaming” children can focus on a single blade of grass with a relaxed awareness that it would take an adult practicing Jewish meditation years to master.

We might say that the first rule of Jewish parenting is a *lo ta’aseh* (prohibition): Thou shalt not squelch. We must deliberately protect children’s natural affinity for ritual, limits, repetition, consistency, nature, empathy, marking time, music, spirituality, and the present moment – all good for them and also “good for the Jews.”

THE GOLDEN PATH: FINDING BALANCE

Somewhere between blindly affirming our children’s instincts and relentlessly offering instruction lies a golden mean. Parenting is a balancing act – and not just because of over scheduling. Parents must regularly balance different values and interests, as well as priorities. The following are four pairs of values that apply in parenting. Each pair can be seen as two ends of a continuum, two principles held in tension, or even a paradox.

PRESENCE AND PERSPECTIVE

The twin values of presence and perspective reflect children’s innate wisdom and their need for guidance. By “presence,” I mean the spiritual disposition and life skill of relating to the present moment. Infants are experts, transitioning from moment to moment and from mood to mood with little or none of the looking backward and projecting forward that adults tend to do. Some of what we label “dawdling” or “not paying attention” in older children might better be called “exploring and engaging in the world” or “paying precise attention” – to something else. Of course, adults sometimes need to hurry diminutive scientists and artists out the door in order to get to work or school. But we can’t consistently err on the side of “practicality” over presence, and then be surprised when our children lose their curiosity, enthusiasm, and wonder. Children are our teachers in this area.

Parents and teachers can guide children by giving them a vocabulary for their natural attention to the present moment. When we use words to express and memorialize the character of a moment, that facilitates sharing it, even as it supports the value of staying present. *Berakhot* (blessings) are the Jewish way of directing our attention to what is currently happening and of sanctifying the present moment. They are deliberately brief, enabling us to connect with the moment without overwhelming it with long passages or protocols. Blessings express gratitude and connect us to both God and community. They also promote mindfulness. The ultimate blessing that sacralizes the moment is *Sheheyanu*, so fitting for children’s many “firsts” and milestones: “Blessed are you, Adonai our God, Ruler of time and space, who has given us life, and sustained us, and enabled us to reach *this time*.”

¹ Proverbs 20:27



PARENTING

Perspective complements presence; it sees beyond the present moment. Perspective is a specialty of elders because it is developed and enhanced through life experience. Children need maximal guidance. The first time you have the flu, fall in love, or wait on the tarmac, it is likely to seem like nothing less than “full catastrophe living.” Remembering this will help us be gentle and empathic with our kids. Elders can provide children with the context to see their problems, and even their triumphs, in perspective.

Rituals, in contrast to blessings, point out the long view. The circumcision ceremony looks back to Abraham and Isaac, forward to the baby’s marriage, and (through Elijah’s chair) on ahead to the Messiah. The seven marriage blessings span from creation and the Garden of Eden all the way to messianic times in a peaceful Jerusalem. The Passover Seder begins with our ancestors as displaced slaves and idolaters, and culminates with the hopeful cry, “next year in Jerusalem.” As our children grow and participate in these rituals, they get a sense of the sweep of history and the possibility for change and repair.

PREPARATION AND PRACTICE

So much of parenting falls into one of these two categories: either we are prepping children for Passover (through books, model seders, songs, and conversations), or we are (finally!) celebrating the holiday. Either we are laying the groundwork for a visit to grandma’s, an upcoming surgery, a milestone at school, a playoff game, or we are living out those developments. Failing to prepare kids can lead to all sorts of difficulties, as can preparing them without following through.

“Preparation” and “practice” correspond to two Jewish values: *kavannah* and *keva*. *Kavannah* comes from the root *k.v.n.*, meaning direction, so it comes to signify both preparation and intention: that which directs us to where we are going. Therefore, “having *kavannah*” means “having focus and a sense of meaning.” *Keva* refers to regularity. Its root *k.v.’a* is used in the blessing “to affix a mezuzah.” *Keva* is consistent practice: that which is fixed. Ideally, a set practice (*keva*) grounds and supports spiritual intentions (*kavannah*). Children need both discipline and inspiration, parameters and play.

Two essential commandments of Sabbath observance can be explained in light of *keva* and *kavannah*. *Zakhor* (“remember Shabbat”) represents *kavannah*. It enjoins us to remember and prepare for Shabbat during the week (with purchases, invitations, advance planning and cleaning). It covers the affirmative commandments of rest, rejuvenation, and *oneg* (taking pleasure in Shabbat). Shabbat is “in memory of the exodus from Egypt” because it both reflects and promotes our freedom. We don’t just collapse in front of the TV; we affirmatively rest. We eat the most delicious food of the week and enjoy leisurely conversation and singing around the table. We nap, spend time with family and community, take walks, make love with our spouses. It’s enough to make anyone a stickler for the rules!

Shamor (“keep Shabbat”) is the *keva*. It means observing Shabbat on the day itself, through all the myriad “thou shalt nots.” The list of restrictions in a traditional observance can be daunting, especially for children – e.g. no coloring, cutting, cooking, carrying, shopping, or playing musical instruments. But even without a strictly halakhic Shabbat observance, it is crucial to do things differently than during the week. Through set practices with limits and boundaries, we make space for something different and holy to enter.

When it comes to Shabbat, we over-emphasize *keva* and under-emphasize *kavannah*, both for ourselves and for our children. Most Jews can more readily reel off the list of what Shabbat forbids than discuss what it encourages and makes possible. In many communities, the same *keva/kavannah* imbalance applies to prayer. We insist on proper formulas, attendance, and attire with our kids, but we neglect to talk about intention: how should prayer make us different and better? What do we mean by “talking to God,” and how does a *minyan* help? For other *mitzvot*, the reverse is true. Most parents do a wonderful job of communicating the *kavannah* of Jewish learning to their children, but they fail to make it *keva*, and that undermines Torah in the household.



PARENTING

I chose the example of Shabbat because Shabbat is the most powerful – and most frequent – opportunity parents have to teach both Jewish practice and Jewish meaning. Moreover, this generation of children is in desperate need of what Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi has called “organic time” vs. “commodity time.”² If every Jewish family set a practice of turning off computers and televisions from Friday night to Saturday night, it would not only help bring Shabbat into our households, it would return our children to us in profound ways, as well.

There is a school of thought that advocates giving children “more choice” when it comes to Jewish practice. “We’ll see if she wants to attend Religious School,” or even, “when he is older, he can choose to become circumcised or not.” Most parents would never think of abdicating their role to this degree in other areas – e.g. by allowing children to decide whether to receive vaccinations or attend high school. The best way to provide a real choice for kids is to give them both *kavanah* and *keva* in relation to Jewish observance when they are young. Then they will be equipped with the intellectual background and emotional comfort-level they need to make decisions about Jewish learning and practice as adults.

PASSAGES AND “PEDESTRIAN MOMENTS”

Anthropologists have defined ritual as “repetitive protocols of behavior infused with meaning.” By this definition, both Yom Kippur and the Superbowl qualify. So do countless activities of childhood: from circle time, to bath time, to morning and bedtime routines. Children crave consistency and repetition. They need routine to learn and to feel safe. Any decent childhood is filled with countless protocols of behavior. The question for Jewish parents is: will those routines be infused with Jewish meaning?

Lifecycle ritual honors individuals, creates community, effects transitions, and tells our sacred stories. Regarding each of these four ends, our children generally operate at a deficit. Jewish parents throw (sometimes ridiculously lavish) Bar Mitzvah parties, but our children are not well-honored from day to day. We condescend to them, and we flood them with sexual and violent imagery. Children today don’t experience community in the same way that most of their parents did growing up. It’s no longer safe to venture out, unsupervised, to local parks and “make friends.” Children also tend to live far from grandparents and other extended family. With regard to effecting transitions, society swings between excess and neglect. We offer graduations from sixth grade with full pomp and circumstance, yet we become inured to the stresses our children suffer when they shuttle between households following divorce.

All the elements of ritual are important, but for Jewish learning and continuity the most crucial is telling the sacred story. If our children find Jewish ritual boring – whether lifecycle rituals, holiday celebrations, or everyday rituals like morning prayers – then we have failed to tell a sufficiently compelling version of the sacred story. Too often, we rely on basic, “pediatric” explanations. It’s fine for the first grade Hebrew School teacher to explain that Rosh Hashanah means “head of the year” and that we dip apples in honey for a sweet new year. But if that is still our message in seventh grade, we shouldn’t blame teens who want to drop out.

Life passages offer opportunities at every stage of development for parents to teach the sacred story. Toilet training? Don’t just read a story on the potty, teach the *asher yatzar* blessing for bodily functions, thanking God for the miracle of our bodies. Did a child learn to tie his shoes? Give him *gelilah* (the honor of tying and dressing the Torah) in junior congregation. This is a good time to send a message about what is worth holding fast and binding together. Did a teen earn her driver’s permit? Call her to the Torah and give her a special *misheberakh* (blessing) to celebrate this new level of freedom – and responsibility. Affirm the congregation’s trust in her to guard human life and health. Bless her parents, too, that they may witness her “go in peace and come in peace.”

² For more on this idea, see Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and Joel Segal, *Jewish With Feeling: A Guide to Meaningful Jewish Practice*, New York: Riverhead Books, 2005.



PARENTING

By speaking to what children care about, we honor them. By bringing them into the synagogue as well as bringing religious language into the home, we connect them to community. By relating ritually to their many “pedestrian” passages, we assist them in those transitions, and also communicate that we regard what they are going through as holy. By teaching them many, complex layers of our sacred story, we help them discover comfort, joy, beauty, meaning, and vibrancy in our tradition. In short, by connecting children’s lives and interests to Jewish texts and practices, we declare our children important and our tradition relevant.

Addressing everyday concerns of childhood also conveys a meta-message that is vital for living a purposeful and pious life: there *are* no trivial passages. Every moment is at least potentially sacred, and should be treated as such.

PEOPLEHOOD AND PERSONA

Both the community and the individual are precious, and it seems obvious that every Jewish child would know this. However, our messages to children are far from clear and consistent. Birthright Israel programs have blossomed because peoplehood can no longer be taken for granted. This generation of youth will not always, automatically, love Israel, nor will they necessarily define their identity as “Jew.” It’s not only a matter of demographics that a Jewish child today is less likely to marry a Jew than in prior generations; it is also a matter of expectations. What do we tell children, and what do they expect for themselves?

On a certain level, promoting peoplehood is easy. Children love community and fellowship. One great youth group, one meaningful summer camp experience, one inspiring trek through Poland and Israel can make all the difference. And while there are no guarantees of in-marriage – or anything else with respect to parenting, I believe we can rear a next generation of passionate and committed Jews, *if* we give our children large doses of community and fellowship, together with significant exposure to our sacred story and a sense that there is a lifetime of Jewish adventure ahead of them.

Sometimes Judaism is portrayed as solely communal, even tribal. But being Jewish is not only a responsibility to the past and a legacy for the future. It is a gift to each Jew, right now. The tradition has something to say about who we are – not just as a people, but as individuals. Too many children have their identity wrapped up in externals. Who they are is seemingly contingent on their SAT performance, popularity, or athletic ability. The question “who do you think you are?” calls to mind the stereotypical cartoon of a frustrated parent, standing akimbo and barking out the question. But this is a question that we must ask – not rhetorically, but sincerely. Then, we need to share with kids who *we* think they are. They are infinitely and inherently valuable, created in the image of God. They are *mitzvahdik* messengers, perfectly equipped for their respective divine missions. As with peoplehood, expectations come into play. The media is not shy to tell our children that they are competitors, sexual objects, endangered, and cooler than their parents, among other messages. It’s important that we convey our values about who our children are: to themselves, their families, the Jewish people, humanity, and God.

PARENTS AND (OTHER) PEDAGOGUES

By law, the second verse parents are supposed to teach their children is Deuteronomy 6:4: “Hear, O Israel, the Holy One is our God, the Holy One is One.” The *second* verse?! What supersedes the *Shema*? The answer is Deuteronomy 33:4: “Torah was commanded to us through Moses, an inheritance for the community of Jacob.” This teaching does not depend on a literal understanding of revelation. Irrespective of what we believe about the transmission of Torah at Sinai or since, the *halakhic* “pre-school curriculum” suggests that elders must establish their authority first. Only then can even the most basic and cherished principles be taught. If a teacher does not have control of the classroom, it is difficult for children to learn. If a two-year-old is running the household, the whole family is in trouble.

The issue of authority raises the question of qualifications. Who is teaching? Think of everything we want for and expect of our children. And then consider: who do we need to become to raise people with those assets?



PARENTING

The *Veahavta* paragraph which follows the *Shema* provokes inquiry precisely along these lines. What are we communicating – at home and away; first thing in the morning, last thing at night; in our deeds and through our thoughts; in private and public spaces; verbally and non-verbally; in carpool and at Little League? How well are we practicing what we preach to the next generation? For example, how do we ourselves balance presence and perspective, preparation and practice, passages and “pedestrian” moments, peoplehood and persona?

In fact, what *do* we say most often to our children? Whether the answer is: “I love you,” “clean your room,” “what a *mentsch!*” “get over here,” or even “*Shema Yisrael*,” we are sending a message. And we send an even bigger message by how we live out (or fail to live out) our words. The *Veahavta* asks: what do our children hear us saying, see us doing, and witness us being, if not “at all junctures” then at least characteristically? It is partly because of this demand that parenting is a grand spiritual adventure. As much as we help our children grow, they help us grow more.

PRAYERS

In *To Raise a Jewish Child*, Hayim Lalevy Donin offers a necessary disclaimer and some great advice: “After having done everything right, you will still need a little *mazel*. Add a prayer.”³ I join my prayer to yours that all our children will grow up to create lives of *Torah*, *huppah* (marital happiness), and *ma’asim tovim* (copious good deeds).

³ Hayim Halevy Donin, *To Raise a Jewish Child: A Guide for Parents*, New York: Basic Books, 1977, p. xviii.



PARENTING – TEXT 1

תלמוד בבלי קדושין ל:ב - לא:א

ת"ר, שְׁלֶשֶׁה שׁוֹתֵפִין הוּן בְּאָדָם: הַקב"ה, וְאָבִיו, וְאִמּוֹ, בְּזִמְן שֶׁאָדָם מְכַבֵּד אֶת אָבִיו וְאֶת אִמּוֹ, אָמַר הַקב"ה: מַעֲלָה אֲנִי עֲלֵיהֶם כְּאִילוֹ דְרַתִּי בֵּינֵיהֶם וְכַבְּדוּנִי.

BABYLONIAN TALMUD *KIDDUSHIN* 30B

Our rabbis taught: There are three partners in a person: the Holy One, blessed be God, the father, and the mother. When one honors one's father and mother, the Holy One, blessed be God, says, "I ascribe merit to them as though I had dwelt among them and they had honored Me."

STUDY QUESTIONS

- Does this text teach anything about children? About theology?
- Can you analyze this text from a parent's point of view, a child's point of view and God's point of view?
- Why are the words "to them" in the final sentence plural when the preceding clause is singular?
- Compare this text with the text about the three partners in a person from Unit 2. [BT Niddah 31a] What can we learn from the similarities and differences?



PARENTING – TEXT 2

תלמוד בבלי סוכה מב:א

קָטָן הַיּוֹדֵעַ לְנַעֲנֵעַ. תָּנִי רַבֵּנּוּ: קָטָן הַיּוֹדֵעַ לְנַעֲנֵעַ - חַיִּיב בְּלוּלָב, לְהַתְעַטֵּף - חַיִּיב בְּצִיצִית, לְשָׁמֹר תְּפִילִין - אָבִיו לּוֹקֵחַ לוֹ תְּפִילִין. יוֹדֵעַ לְדַבֵּר - אָבִיו לּוֹמְדוֹ תּוֹרָה וּקְרִיאַת שְׁמַע. תּוֹרָה מֵאִי הִיא? - אָמַר רַב הַמְנוּנָא: (דְּבָרִים לַג) תּוֹרָה צְנָה לָנוּ מִשָּׁה מוֹרְשָׁה קְהֵלַת יַעֲקֹב. קְרִיאַת שְׁמַע מֵהָיָא? פְּסוּק רֵאשׁוֹן. הַיּוֹדֵעַ לְשָׁמֹר גּוּפוֹ - אוֹכְלִין עַל גּוּפוֹ טְהוֹרוֹת, לְשָׁמֹר יָדָיו - אוֹכְלִין עַל יָדָיו טְהוֹרוֹת... הַיּוֹדֵעַ לְפָרוֹס כַּפּוֹ - חוֹלְקִין לוֹ תְרוּמָה בְּבֵית הַגְּרָנוֹת.

BABYLONIAN TALMUD SUKKAH 42A

A minor who knows how to shake [is subject to the obligation of lulav,” says the Mishnah. The Gemara comments:] Our rabbis taught: A minor who knows how to shake is subject to the obligation of lulav; if he knows how to wrap himself, he is subject to the obligation of wearing tallit fringes; if he knows how to look after tefillin, his father must acquire tefillin for him; if he knows how to speak, his father must teach him Torah and the reading of the Shema. What is meant [in this context] by Torah? R. Hamnuna replied: [The Torah verse] “Torah was commanded to us through Moses, an inheritance for the community of Jacob.” What is meant by the Shema? The first verse. If [a minor] knows how to take care of his hands, he may eat food that has been prepared in ritual purity even though his hands [touched it]... If he knows how to spread out his hands [in the priestly benediction], terumah [the food set aside for priests] may be shared with him in the threshing-floors [where it was publicly distributed].

STUDY QUESTIONS

- How do you decide what children are ready for, in general and in their Jewish development?
- What techniques have you used yourself to help prepare children for Jewish practice?
- In your experience, do parents' words and deeds, and children's first words and deeds, carry a lifelong message?
- If we were to follow the intent of this text completely, how might it affect the way Judaism is practiced in homes, synagogues and schools?



PARENTING – TEXT 3

תלמוד בבלי קדושין כ"א

תְּנִינָא לְהָא דַּת"ר: הָאֵב חַיִּיב בְּבִנּוֹ לְמוּלוֹ, וְלִפְדוּתוֹ, וְלִלְמֻדוֹ תּוֹרָה, וְלְהַשְׂיֵאוֹ אִשָּׁה, וְלִלְמֻדוֹ אוּמָנוּת וּ"א: אֵף לְהַשְׂיֵטוֹ בְּמַיִם. רַבִּי יְהוּדָה אוֹמֵר: כָּל שֶׁאֵינוֹ מְלַמֵּד אֶת בְּנוֹ אוּמָנוּת - מְלַמְדוֹ לִיסָטוֹת. לִיסָטוֹת ס"ד? אֵלָּא, כְּאִילוּ מְלַמְדוֹ לִיסָטוֹת.

BABYLONIAN TALMUD *KIDDUSHIN* 29A

A father is obligated in relation to his son to circumcise him, to redeem him [in a pidyon haben ceremony if he is first-born], to teach him Torah, to marry him to a [good] woman, and to teach him a trade or craft. Some say, [he is] also [obligated to] teach him to swim. Rabbi Judah says: If he doesn't teach his son a trade or craft, he is teaching him thievery. Thievery?! Can you really think so? Rather, it is as if he is teaching him thievery.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- What do the various elements teach you, both as specific parental obligations in their own right and as examples of broader categories?
- The Talmud distinguishes on this same page between paternal and maternal obligations. Do you?
- Why is it important to teach a child to swim? What kind of swimming?
- Do you think there is anything missing from this list?



PARENTING – TEXT 4

FATHER AND SON

A tale is told about the Zhitomer rebbe who was once walking with his son when they noticed a drunken father and his drunken son stumbling along. The rabbi said to his son, “I envy that father. He has accomplished his goal of having a son like himself...I can only hope that the drunkard is not more successful in training his son than I am with you.”

(Voices of Wisdom: Jewish Ideals and Ethics for Everyday Living, Jonathan David Publishers)

http://www.myjewishlearning.com/daily_life/relationships/TO_Parent_Child/Jewishteens.htm

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **What do you deliberately model for your children?**
- **Have you ever discovered that you were modeling something unintentionally?**
- **Who are the other models for our children’s behavior, and what say, if any, can and should we have about them?**
- **Are there techniques we can use to model more effectively?**



PARENTING – TEXT FOR GROUP STUDY

THE *SHEMA* – AS A PARENTING MANUAL

Listen, Israel! The Holy One your God, The Holy One is One.

Blessed be the name of God's glorious kingdom for ever and ever.

You shall love The Holy One your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your resources. These words which I command you today shall be upon your heart. Repeat them to your children, speaking of them when you sit in your house and when you go on a journey: when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them for a sign upon your arm, and they shall be frontlets between your eyes. Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.





Published in partnership with the
United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism,
the Rabbinical Assembly,
the Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs
and the Women's League for Conservative Judaism.



ZIEGLER SCHOOL OF
RABBINIC STUDIES
AMERICAN JEWISH UNIVERSITY

15600 MULHOLLAND DRIVE • BEL AIR, CA 90077