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STAM TORAH
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"LOVE AND WARMTH"

In a Yeshiva in Eretz Yisroel, a Rosh Yeshiva had a strong disagreement with the parents of one of his students. The parents ardently felt that their role as parents entailed their being rigid disciplinarians who were to demand obedience and compliance from their children. All of the Rosh Yeshiva's arguments to the contrary fell on deaf ears. They were convinced of the veracity of their arguments and they were sure that the tenseness they generated within their home was par for the course. The Rosh Yeshiva persisted however, until they agreed to seek the counsel of the great Torah sage, Rabbi Lazer Shach zt'l.

After listening to the parent's views, Rav Shach explained that according to the Torah, parents have a dual role, that of parents and of educators. As parents, their assigned task is to demonstrate unbridled love and devotion for their children, "as a father has mercy on his son". As educators however, their task is to instill fear and awe in their children. In regard to this paradoxical role, the sages teach, (Sotah 47a) "One should always push with his left hand and (simultaneously) draw close with his (stronger) right hand." In other words, the overriding characteristic must be love.

Rav Shach continued that this was all true in days of yore. However, in contemporary times when children are sent off to institutions which provide their Torah education, the latter role of the parents as disciplinarians is no longer necessary. Today, parents have one responsibility, to raise their children with love, devotion, and warmth.

Rav Shach then looked up at the parents and concluded, "In your home, you must generate a loving atmosphere and you must be attentive to their physical and emotional needs. The school will educate them and will discipline them appropriately. But the home must foremost be a place of nurturance. If, G-d forbid, a child does not find that security and acceptance in his own home, he will seek it elsewhere."

(25:27) "The lads grew up and Eisav became one who knows trapping, a man of the field; but Yaakov was a wholesome man, abiding in tents." On this verse, the Medrash (63:10) comments, "Rabbi Eliezer said: One must busy himself with his son until he is thirteen years of age. From that point on, he must say, ברוך שפטרגני מענשו של זה - Blessed is He Who has exempted me from this punishment." Based on this Medrash, the Shulchan Aruch (Oh'c 225:2) rules that on the day when a boy becomes a Bar Mitzvah his father states the aforementioned blessing.

The commentators are troubled by the vernacular of this unusual blessing. How can a father declare his gratitude for being exonerated from the responsibilities of his child? Aside from the fact that it sounds heartless and cavalier, the adolescent years are pivotal in regard to a child's development of a sense of self. This is especially true in our culture where adolescence is such a challenging and conflicting time. How can a father rid himself of responsibility for his child when he/she needs it most?

The Ba'al Shem Tov offered a novel explanation of the blessing. He explains that parents are responsible to educate their children. They are expected to do their utmost to instill in them values, ethics, and a moralistic view of life. To encourage their children toward the right path appropriate methodological disciplinary tactics are often critical. The child must realize the sweetness and goodness of doing what's right and the detriment of negative choices.

Chazal write (see Sanhedrin 91b, Koheles Rabbah 4:9) that while one's evil inclination is present immediately at birth, one's good inclination does not arrive until he/she is halachically considered an adult (Bar/Bat Mitzvah). Therefore, as long as a child is still a minor, external encouragement and guidelines are necessary components of his/her development. However, once a child becomes an adult the parent's responsibility changes. At that point they must educate their children with overriding love and warmth. They must demonstrate passion and devotion to their own values and beliefs. At that point, when rudimentary punishment and doctrinaire disciplinary tactics will no longer be effective, the most important commodity is the relationship that exists between the parents and the adolescent. Therefore, on the day of his son's Bar Mitzvah, a father thanks G-d for exempting him from the previous manner of education, i.e. a manner that involves punishment and rigid boundaries. From hereon a more advanced mature level of education must commence; one that is predicated on relationship and mutual respect.

History has proven that when a child is made to feel like an outcast, the results can be catastrophic. The Gemarah (Sanhedrin 99b) relates that Timna, a Canaanite Princess, wanted to join the family of the Patriarchs. When she approached them however, they distanced her. So strong was her desire to be close to the regal family that she became the concubine of Elifaz, the son of Eisav, claiming that it was better to be the maidservant of the Patriarch's family than to be a mistress in her own royal family. The product of that union was Amalek, the nemesis and sworn enemy of Klal Yisroel.

Avrohom Avinu was the paragon of chessed and his whole life was dedicated to assisting others. If he rejected Timna, he obviously had valid reason to believe that she was unfit to join their family. Still, our Sages write that the holy Patriarchs erred in their approach. Although they were justified in barring her entry into the family, "they should not have distanced her."

The Gemarah (Sotah 47a) - in a passage deleted by the Christian censors - relates that the great Tanna, Rabbi Yehoshua Ben Prachia had a disciple with whom he dealt very harshly. The end result was that the student practiced witchcraft and caused many Jews to stumble in sin. In fact, that student, (who was later crucified), was the "father of Christianity". Rabbi Chaim Shmuelevitz zt'l (Sichos Mussar) points out that if one reads the details of this Gemarah, it is clear that Rabbi Yehoshua ben Prachia's harsh response to this particular student - who was clearly an immoral person - was warranted. Still, Rabi Yehoshua ben Prachia should have dealt with him with greater sensitivity and warmth, even as he chastised and distanced him.

The Chofetz Chaim made a similar observation about the noted Communist, Leon Trotsky. Born Leib Bronstein, he attended a Yeshiva in his youth before being thrown out for his heretical views. He became an avowed atheist and would deliver virulent diatribes against religion and G-d. It was only Trotsky's opposition to Stalin that prevented him from becoming one of the foremost leaders of Communist Russia after Lenin's death. The Chofetz Chaim once commented sadly that who knows how different "Leibele's" life could have been if his Rebbe in Yeshiva had treated him with more warmth and love.

The Torah relates that despite Eisav's wickedness, (25:28) "Yitzchok loved Eisav for game was in his mouth; but Rivka loved Yaakov." How could Yitzchok have a special affinity for Eisav simply because he was a good hunter? It is hardly conceivable that, despite all of Eisav's iniquities, Yitzchok was completely duped by the façade that Eisav put on in his presence.

The Pletzker Maggid (Rabbi Pinchas Bar Yehuda, a disciple of the Vilna Gaon) explained that Yitzchok was well aware that the external piousness that Eisav displayed in his presence was feigned. However, Yitzchok was afraid that if he dealt too harshly with Eisav he would deepen Eisav's enmity and wickedness. He feared that Eisav would embrace the family of his half-brother Yishmael and become even more sinful and immoral than he already was. Yitzchok maintained a warm loving relationship with Eisav, not because he was fooled by Eisav, but because he was not fooled by him. Yitzchok understood that if Eisav was trying to fool him it was because he was trying to maintain a relationship with him. Thus, Yitzchok loved Eisav because, "game was in his mouth". In other words, Yitzchok put on a "counter-front" feigning his own love for Eisav and pretending that he was fooled by Eisav's piousness. All of Eisav's wickedness notwithstanding, Yitzchok understood that the only chance he had to draw him closer was by maintaining their relationship by preserving his dignity.

"Blessed is He Who has exempted me from this punishment."

"Yitzchok loved Eisav"

On Wednesday morning, 26 Cheshvan/November 6th, at 3:16 A.M., my wife and I were blessed with the birth of our son. [It was three years to the day after the birth of our daughter, Aviva Rochel (November 7th, 2004).] On Thursday morning, 27 Cheshvan, after being called up to the Torah, the special Mi Shebeirech prayer was said for the speedy recovery of my wife and newborn son, and that our son merit to be ritually circumcised next Wednesday, with G-d's Help.

27 Cheshvan is also the yahrtzeit (anniversary of the death) of my illustrious Zaydey (Grandfather), Rabbi Yaakov Meir Kohn, HaRav Yaakov Meir ben HaRav Yosef Yitzchak zt'l. Nothing in life is coincidental and it was personally meaningful to recite a blessing for our newborn son on the day of his great-grandfather's passing. As a student of Rabbi Berel Wein shlita, I have learned to appreciate the vital connection that Klal Yisroel has with its past and future. Our task is to perpetuate the customs and traditions of our ancestors in order to instill those values and beliefs in our progeny. May we be so worthy!

Zaydey was not only a great scholar and an acknowledged Rabbi, he was also loved for his convivial personality. His charisma and wit enabled him to develop deep relationships with the most unusual people.

My Mother related to me that Zaydey was constantly involved in collecting funds for various Torah institutions. On one occasion, he went to meet a noted philanthropist who had just recently donated a large sum of money to a secular organization. When the philanthropist asked Zaydey why he had come to see him when they had never met, Zaydey simply replied that he wanted to shake the hand that had so selflessly donated so much money to a charitable organization. Then, without saying another word, Zaydey stood up and left. A few months later, when the man donated another sum of money to a second secular institution, Zaydey returned and repeated his prior visit. A few months later when Zaydey went back for a third time, he walked out with a sizeable donation for a Yeshiva he was collecting for.

On another occasion, Zaydey was informed that a wealthy entrepreneur was in the hospital recovering from surgery. Zaydey went to the hospital and pretended that he "just happened to be there". They struck up a conversation, after which Zaydey got up and left. When the man returned home, Zaydey was able to solicit a worthy donation for a Yeshiva from him as well.

Although Zaydey possessed the gift of oratory, he understood that there was no greater connection than that of a deep and warm relationship.

He and (yblch't) Bubby had a home without doors (at least figuratively). Bubby never knew how many guests to expect on Shabbos and she cooked accordingly. Their home was

constantly graced with notable Torah personalities and leaders. It was truly a Torah home, built on the pillars of chessed and Torah study.

May our budding family follow Bubby's and Zaydey's example and build a home predicated on those same values; a home of vibrant warmth and positive relationships in which the sounds of joy, laughter, and Avodas Hashem unceasingly resonate. May we merit to enter our son into the covenant of our forefather Avrohom in its proper time; to raise him and his siblings for Torah, Chupah (marriage) and ma'asim tovim (good deeds).