

Four Points for Renewal **By Moshe Hauer**

Jewish life throughout the generations has been punctuated by upheaval, by trends and events that threatened the basic fabric of Jewish life and family. The symptoms of these trends could be observed in the significant number of defections of young Jewish men and women from the community. These young people were disenchanted with their Jewish life and environment and were as such easily attracted by the "greener pastures" of very different ideals and lifestyles. As a community, we always had the choice to view the cause for these defections individually, as the particular issue of those involved, and address them accordingly. Alternatively we could view the problem as one of the environment from which they came, that same environment in which their more successful peers were growing and thriving. Perhaps something needed to be done not only to address the disenchanted youth by outreach efforts, but to reach inside to refine and enhance the environment from which they were choosing to escape.

The Baal Shem Tov in the eighteenth century and Rav Yisroel Salanter in the nineteenth found themselves in such periods. Each saw their community's young being drawn away from the traditions of their families by the allures of "enlightenment". Each chose to view the situation globally, communally, and to see what could be done to enhance and refine the Jewish environment of the traditional and observant masses, to make the community healthier and its grasses greener, to ensure that the youth would yearn to stay within its warm folds. The revolutions which they generated were internal, eventually changing the way normative Jewish life was lived, and the way the community as a whole practiced its Yiddishkeit. The changes improved Jewish life across the board and prevented untold numbers of further defections.

In our own time, in our own community, we are experiencing similar issues. Our youth are not drawn by exciting new intellectual movements or streams; they are drawn instead to lifestyles and behaviors that are empty and self-destructive. Meaningful numbers of our children have become disenfranchised and disconnected from the ways of their families and community, and you do not need to look very far or too closely to find them. Alcohol and drug use are widespread - widespread - amongst our youth. As a rabbi I find it unfortunately necessary to advise all parents of middle and high school students to educate themselves about the symptoms of substance abuse and the behaviors associated with it, and to carefully monitor all of their children for any appearance of these symptoms or behaviors. Many of our youth - the rebellious and the exceptionally obedient - are experiencing serious psychological disorders indicative of a very deep, existential confusion. Why? Why is this happening? Should we continue to limit ourselves to efforts of outreach to youth at risk? Or is it time that we consider that something needs to be addressed in the mainstream, to make our families and community healthier and more attractive to all of our youth?

It seems to me that we do need to address the issues in the mainstream. And I believe that we - all of us - need to address this together. Whether we preside over a school, a shul, a family or our own self, we need to look together at the environment for which we

are responsible and identify the areas needing improvement and meaningful, transformational change. I would like to begin this process with four points that I believe worthy of serious consideration, four points that if seriously implemented could have a significant positive effect on our community and families.

I. Inspiring Joy and Privilege

At Sinai the Jewish People enthusiastically accepted the Torah by the angelic response, "Naaseh veNishma", "we will do and we will hear". This response, expressing the Jew's unquestioned devotion and commitment to G-d's law, is rightfully considered the defining expression of our faith, moving us to encourage each other - or to simply tell each other - things like, "Just do it with faith; it is not for us to ask why." Yet this was not at all the nature and direction of that proclamation. Indeed, G-d never asked of us to do without asking. It was our exclusive initiative, and it came in response to G-d's most enticing proposal (Shemos 19:4-5): "You have seen that which I did to Egypt; how I lifted you on the wings of eagles and brought you to me. And now, if you will listen to my voice and observe my covenant, you will be my treasure amongst all the nations...."

G-d established His track record with us. He proposed giving us the Torah as an expression of the privileged status that we had already begun to taste through the miraculous Exodus. As such we trusted G-d and had faith in Him, recognizing that He truly loves us and would not burden us unfairly (see Rashi TB Shabbos 88b). "Naaseh veNishma" was not and could not be a forced response; it was an inspired response.

Indeed, the necessity of an established track record as a prerequisite to unquestioning faith is seen vividly in our own observance of Pesach. The entire Seder is built around questioning the premises of observance. On this night of all the nights of the year if we do not ask, "Why do we do this Mitzvah?" before we do it, we do not fulfill the Mitzvah (Rabban Gamliel, TB Pesachim 116a; Pesach Hagadah). It is by telling and experiencing the story of the Exodus that we establish that appreciation of G-d's love for the Jewish People, and create the trust in Him that in turn obviates the need for further questions. But we must establish this trust first.

We are often confronted by challenging questions, questions that sound like those coming from the wicked son, questions that belie a certain lack of trust in the whole structure of Torah observance. We - who may trust G-d completely - can sometimes react sharply and offensively, asserting that the questioner must have greater faith. "Just do it; it is not for us to ask why." Indeed, we may be correct. Their faith may be lacking. But it is our responsibility to create that faith by conveying to them the privileged history of our People; by sharing with them the vividly clear benevolence of G-d to us, His Chosen People. We must respond to their difficult questions without defensiveness and without offending them, but by understanding that in our day and age the trust that creates unquestioning faith must be carefully built. Inspired to trust, their questions will certainly change. Until that trust develops, it is never for us to say, "It is not for us to ask why."

Inspiring such faith and trust is unfortunately not as simple as conducting an exciting Seder. What is far more instructive is the attitude and posture exhibited by us as people of faith. Does our demeanor indicate this sense of privilege at the opportunities Torah offers? Does our body language sing aloud, "Ashreinu mah tov chelkeynu", "How fortunate we are! How goodly our portion!"; or do we instead convey a sense of strained duty and obligation? Indeed we are understandably stressed by the demands of contemporary observant life. Finding time for prayer and study in extremely hectic lives; bearing the huge burden of financing our children's Torah education; juggling the needs of our growing families and institutions; nothing is easy. When we look in the mirror we see the lines of stress and the tired eyes. And it ain't pretty. Yet we must not succumb to the pressures of our responsibilities and allow ourselves to project the feeling of "Iz shver tzu zein a Yid". We must demonstrate instead a Simchas haChaim, a joie-de-vivre, which will truly attract our children to join us in the path to fulfillment and true life.

Our children may not be at risk of becoming disenfranchised and uninspired due to the anti-semitism or abject poverty experienced by the youth of the times of the Baal Shem Tov or Rav Yisroel Salanter. But they are at risk of becoming disenfranchised and uninspired by seeing the Judaism of their parents and teachers bringing them - their parents and teachers - not joy and satisfaction, but stress and strain. As our Sages taught, the Mitzvah of loving G-d includes the Mitzvah to generate that love in others. Enthusiasm generates a following; bitterness leads to defection.

Point #1: Be a happy, fulfilled Jew. Create an environment of fulfillment and joy in your home, shul or school. Ashreinu mah tov chelkeynu!! Indeed - how fortunate we are!

II. Educating the Individual

The Torah spoke of four very different sons (Pesach Hagadah). Each had his own skills and sensitivities, and each had his own attitude. Each was to be responded to individually and particularly, with the response crafted to their needs. "The father should teach the child in a manner suitable to that child's mind and personality." (TB Pesachim 116a)

Once upon a time this may have been easier. After all, education was much more informal and limited. Young boys would study with their melamed for a number of years, and then naturally find their way. Some stayed on and grew in Torah scholarship, while others established their trade or craft. Young women generally had no formal education, and found their way through the original "home school". Informal and unstructured settings such as these lend themselves more naturally to the individual needs of the specific child.

Today all this has changed. Boys and girls are - and need to be - educated in schools, in structured Jewish educational environments, until at least the age of seventeen, and usually beyond. Indeed with the tremendous changes in contemporary society, this

prolonged "incubation" period in a nurturing Torah environment is critical. At the same time, it must be recognized that institutional frameworks are simply not able to teach each of their hundreds of students "in a manner suitable to that child's mind and personality". How can we expect every one of our community's children to thrive and grow through all those years of more-or-less single curriculum schooling?

The Talmud (TB Berachos 58a) teaches that when one encounters a huge crowd of Jews - six hundred thousand - he should bless G-d Who is "Chacham haRazim", "wise to the unique workings of each heart". Seeing so many Jews reminds us of their individual uniqueness, "As their faces are different from each other so are their minds and personalities". Yet the growth of the observant community has not significantly enhanced our openness to divergent paths for our children; if anything the opposite is true. Our standardized expectations and definitions of success - stated or implied - are very limiting and very frightening to the individual child who may be either not capable of meeting them, or - equally significant - not particularly drawn to them. What about those four different sons, each meriting individual understanding, guidance and teaching?

An individual's level of satisfaction and fulfillment is directly related to the level at which they are meeting their individual abilities and needs. There is nothing more frustrating and confusing than going through life as a square peg squeezed into a round hole, being expected to play someone else's part. Of course, everyone needs to be somewhat adaptable, and there is probably no way to have hundreds of individually tailored programs. But should we define our "mainstream" as including essentially the single model of the wise son? Shouldn't we use the blessing of greater numbers in our schools to provide greater variety of curricular offerings, instead of just offering the same essential program with minor variations for pace and depth? Even the wise sons are advised to seek to learn the specific areas of Torah that their own heart desires (TB Avodah Zara 19a). Shouldn't we, as individuals, parents and educators, be more encouraging and welcoming of different goals for different kids?

Point #2: One size does not fit all. Our task is to guide each child to find and develop their unique talents, strengths and interests. Our families, institutions and communities must broaden their definition of "success", and guide our children to achieve theirs.

III. Giving Time & Attention

The Talmud (TB Kiddushin 33a) discusses the requirements for giving proper respect and attention to Torah scholars, and tries to prove a point from the conduct of the residents of the city of Mechuza. The Talmud rejects this proof, saying that in that city there were so many Torah scholars that they simply did not grant them the appropriate individual respect. I often wonder if we make the same mistake, not with our Torah scholars but with our children and community members. Let's face it; when we were growing up, our families were smaller, our schools were smaller, and our shuls were smaller. There was no such thing as "easy come; easy go". Students just didn't disappear from our schools.

People were not invisible. We were individually known, and we were individually treasured.

All that has changed. We live in a beautiful, large community that is very welcoming and hospitable. I have heard from dozens of appreciative newcomers to our community who were enveloped with warm welcomes and sincere offers of help and friendship. At the same time, we are a big community, and people can live here and feel invisible. Their prolonged absence from shul can go unnoticed. Children can switch from school to school, from school to home, or from school to street, and nobody seems to notice. No school runs after them crying, "Come back my child! We miss you here! You belong here!" Institutions that once graduated fifteen students a year now graduate one hundred and fifteen - Bli Ayin Hara - and our children can get lost in the crowd.

Even the family dynamic has changed. I once heard a very vivid account of this change from someone who was taking his son to the bus to summer sleep-away camp. He arrived at the appointed place to see a few boys standing alone on the street corner (their luggage went the day before). Thinking he had come to the wrong place, he checked with them and found out that he had indeed come to the right spot. He was incredulous to discover that their parents had dropped them off, said "good-bye" and left. "When I went to camp, my parents came, saw me on to the bus, and then waited until the bus left. My father used to run after the bus for a block, waving furiously and throwing candies through my open bus window." That child was cherished by his parents, and he knew it. The head counselor of his camp knew that this child was being sent to the camp to gain whatever positive experience could be derived from a month in the mountains with a different environment, activities and role models. Today's head counselors will tell you that many of their charges are sent to camp to give their parents a break.

We need to spend real time - quality and quantity - with our children. As the old saying goes, "Nobody dies saying, 'I wish I had spent more time with my clients.'" We would all do well to recall the startling commentary of Ralbag (Shmuel I 12:24), who asserts that Shmuel haNavi's children did not follow in his ways because he was too busy to be sufficiently attentive to them. We are all too busy. On the rare occasions when our unending responsibilities briefly subside, we often choose to keep that time for "ourselves", whether we use it to nap, to exercise or - leHavdil - to learn Torah.

We need to spend more time and give more attention to our children. They have to see clearly that there is nothing more important to us than them. They should see us as equally interested in spending time with them as they are interested - or, more accurately, as they crave - to spend time with us. We must find the way to experience the time spent with our children as that "time for ourselves". Institutionally we must create an environment where every adult and child feels visible and noticed; that their shul or their school truly cares for them.

It is a fact that very many of our young people who act out do so to overcome a hopeless sense of insignificance. They feel that their parents/teachers/community do not care for them and take no pride in them. They seek only acceptance and attention. And they will

go to terrible places to get it. The saddest irony of all is that as they do what they do to gain the attention they crave, we - their parents/teachers/community - turn farther away from them, usually overwhelmed by our own sense of fear and shame.

Point #3: Give every child time, and give every child attention. Let every child see that you are looking for ways to spend more time with them, not less. Buy board games!!

IV. Kindness & Fairness

Torah life includes two broad categories of obligation: Mitzvos Bain Adam laMakom, religious obligations, and Mitzvos Bain Adam laChaveiro, interpersonal obligations. They are two halves of one whole. Both are critical elements of a complete Ben Torah. It is clear however that for the sake of inspiring our children and students to follow in our ways, it is our behavior in the interpersonal realm that will do it best. As the Talmud (TB Yoma 86a) describes:

"You shall love Hashem your G-d"; you shall make His Name beloved. Read Torah, study Mishna, apprentice amongst great Torah scholars, and make your interactions with people pleasant. What will people say about you? "How fortunate is his father who taught him Torah! How fortunate is his teacher who taught him Torah! Woe unto those who have not studied Torah! Look at this person who studied Torah; how pleasant are his manners, how perfect his deeds!" ... But one who reads Torah, studies Mishna, apprentices amongst great Torah scholars, and is dishonest in his dealings and unpleasant in his interactions with people; what will people say about him? "How unfortunate is his father who taught him Torah! How unfortunate is his teacher who taught him Torah! Look at this person who studied Torah; how corrupt are his deeds, how ugly his manners!"

Appreciating Torah and spiritual values requires a certain degree of sophistication. But everyone appreciates and understands the value of character, of kindness and fairness. To develop a following, to make G-d's Name beloved and to inspire our children to follow His ways, we must act in a way that inspires admiration. They will only admire Yiddishkeit when they see its proponents and practitioners as people of character, kindness and fairness. And they don't always get to see that.

Please do not get me wrong. I am not referring to isolated high-profile cases of outwardly observant Jews involved in high crimes and misdemeanors. I am referring to you and me, the kind of character we demonstrate when we finally get home after a long day. Observing ourselves at home, would we call ourselves kind people? Would we call ourselves pleasant people? Would we call ourselves fair, consistent and considerate? Children become very alienated from the ways of parents and teachers who they see as hypocritical and unfair, accusatory and unkind. We may take to heart the words of the great commentator Meiri. In a well-known Mishna in Pirkei Avos (2:5), Hillel instructs us not to judge our friend until we reach his place. The usual understanding of this Mishna is that we must not rush to criticize others when we perhaps would similarly fail

were we to find ourselves in the same circumstances. Meiri however quotes an entirely different explanation:

If you encounter a stranger in your town and you see him behaving with magnificent and glorious character, don't assume that this is his true self, until you have a chance to see him in his place, where he lives. Only when you observe his behavior at home and see it as consistent with his public persona, then you may view him with admiration. Alas there are so many lowly and simple people who pretend to be something that they really are not!

Our kids do see us at home. And home is where we "let our hair down", where we can finally be "ourselves" after a day of sometimes forced pleasantness and correctness with the strangers with whom we work and play. Do they see us as kind, pleasant and fair?

And it is the children who struggle who are the ones to see the worst of us. When they struggle, we - their parents and their teachers - get frustrated and short. We do not always work to understand them; we too often quickly cut them down. Qualities such as giving the benefit of the doubt, empathy and understanding are often in short supply. Our behavior does not always leave a great impression.

And at the very same time, we will continue to push hard for Torah and Mitzvos. We will make sure to study Torah, to Daven well, and to observe exactly the laws of Shabbos, Kashrus and Tzenius. We will readily and forcefully remind our kids and students of their responsibility to learn and to Daven well ("say all the words"; "look inside"), and we are always ready with the do's and don't's of daily observant life. They identify us with Torah, but in the realms that they can appreciate - kindness and fairness - they may not see enough worth admiring and emulating.

Point #4: We need to remake ourselves to be kinder and gentler. We need to unambiguously restore the image that Hashem wanted His Torah to project: That it begins and ends with Gemillus Chasadim, with acts of true loving-kindness.

I wrote at the outset that I wanted to begin a process, to share a few points for consideration. I have made those points, at times perhaps harshly and strongly. I hope I have not over-stepped my bounds, and that these suggestions have merit. What I can say with some certainty is that we as a community are facing a serious crisis of continuity. I do not think we will solve the problem by "tinkering", by little ideas or by modestly targeted preemptive or reactive measures. We do need something a bit more broad and, yes, revolutionary. We all need to look at the issues and speak to them carefully and directly, and to make the necessary transformative changes. I pray that Hashem bless us all with the wisdom and the courage to understand what we need to do, and to then get it done.