

Hanokh La – Na’ar Al Pi Darko (Proverbs 22:6)
Shabbat Emor
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One of the best-known—and, I hope, best appreciated—of the many *mitzvot* that are incumbent upon us as Jewish adults, is to teach our children what it means to be a Jew and how to live a Jewish life. In the *Shema*, for example, (after being told to “love the Lord [our] God” with all our heart, with all our soul and with all our might, we’re also told “to teach them [i.e., words of Torah, words that help explain what God demands of us] to our children,” and to teach them well.

And that is not the only place where we are taught that, as important as it is for us to observe Judaism, it is perhaps equally important for us to influence our children to observe.

At the beginning of this week’s *parashah*, for example, we see that the command to Moses “to speak” is repeated. “*Emor*,” (“Speak!”) he is told, and then, “*v’amatrah*” (“and say!”). (Lev. 21:1). Why? The standard rabbinic answer is: “*l’hazhir ha-gdolim al ha-ketanim*,” “to caution the adults regarding the children.” (Yevamot 114a)

In other words, with respect to this aspect of observance, in addition to the mitzvah to observe, there is the mitzvah to ensure the observance by the minors over whom one has responsibility – or, at least, if not to “ensure,” then perhaps to teach them and to put them into the proper environment so that they will in fact observe.

There are other examples as well. For example, Jews are commanded not to eat certain (non-kosher) foods (see, e.g., Lev. 11:42, Lev. 17:2). But they must also see to it as well that their children are not exposed to those foods. Jews are commanded to observe Sabbath (see, e.g., Ex. 20:10), but are also obligated to create environments for their children in which the Sabbath is observed.

We see then that proper observance by the young is primarily not their responsibility but that of their parents. As Maimonides puts it (M.T., Laws of Forbidden Foods 17:28): Parents are obligated to reprove children and to separate them from situations where they might transgress in order to instruct them in the



ways of holiness, as it is written, “Train a child in the way he ought to go, and he will not swerve from it, even in old age.” (Proverbs 22:6)

Here in our congregation we have often, during the past several years, discussed whether to “require” Shabbat morning service attendance by kids or merely to “expect” it as we do today.

This is a complicated business. On the one hand, from the perspective of our religious school, attending Shabbat morning services is a vital part of our curriculum. We need the kids to attend in order for them to benefit from the rest of the program. It’s intrinsic to their study.

Yet, traditionally, as most of us are aware, it isn’t children who are obligated to observe *mitzvot*, it is their parents. So, at a recent school committee meeting, I suggested, not entirely in jest, that rather than require children to attend, we should simply require their parents to do so! The fact is, those that do attend, and those that bring their children with them, benefit enormously. Studies have shown that the greatest predictor of future Shabbat service attendance is whether one has been brought to Shabbat services by one’s parents.

This imposition by our tradition of responsibility to train one’s children properly makes perfect sense. After all, how does a child learn to give *tzedakah*?—if not from seeing it given? How does a child learn the value of *gemilut hasadim*?—if not from observing self-sacrificing adults? How does a child learn to fast on Yom Kippur?—if not by seeing others, who are so obligated, do so? From where, after all, does a child learn basic human values, if not from his or her parents and community?

This question has a direct relevance to the challenge that Israel, and all of us as members of the Jewish people, are facing today.

Among the most difficult challenges Israel is facing today is that her foe indoctrinates its young to hate rather than to love. Through textbooks and maps and guides—and you should examine them: they’re available online at, e.g., www.memri.org—Palestinian schools educate their children to despise Jews and Israelis. Jews and Israelis are depicted as evil and deserving of death.

As if that weren’t bad enough, children are also taught, from a very young age, that their own lives are not really worth very much, and that it would be of greater value (to them and to their families) for them to die.

I'm referring, of course, to the cult of martyrdom that is sweeping the Palestinian community.

An example, a particularly disturbing example, can be found on the website of the local radio station program called "Here and Now", (www.here-now.org) that broadcasts locally on WBUR. There you can see a photograph taken during a Palestinian demonstration in Berlin. It is of a father with his adorable little girl on his shoulders. The child, who is dressed in a powder-blue sweatshirt, is smiling. Wrapped around her waist is something that it's hard to imagine smiling about. It's a fake suicide bomber's belt, complete with three sticks of fake dynamite, with long white fuses taped to her body.

That father really believes in family education. He really believes that the best way to teach values to your children is to demonstrate to them what you think is important.

That father and that child do not exist in a vacuum. They live in a world gone mad, a world in which blowing oneself up in the presence of and therefore together with, innocent bystanders, is considered an honorable act of self-sacrifice. They live in a world in which children are taught these lessons not only in their homes but in their schools as well. As I looked at that picture, I thought of another one, by the photographer Ben Aron, who often photographs Jewish subjects, of a father with his child on his shoulders holding a lulav and an etrog. What a different message to impart to one's child!

That is why, ultimately, it is not enough for Israel to defeat terrorism militarily. It must also seek, as laughable as it sounds, to reform the Palestinian educational system. That, incidentally is the greatest mitzvah the U.N. could perform: to help bring a humane perspective to those whose are supposedly in their care. Otherwise, more and more fathers will continue to wrap fake suicide belts around their children's waists, hoping for the day when the child will wrap a real one around him or herself.

The problem is, unfortunately, not confined to the Palestinians but to their sympathizers as well.

Just last week, the Saudi ambassador to Britain composed a poem celebrating the "martyrdom" of the Palestinian teenage girl who blew herself up three weeks ago in a Jerusalem supermarket. As quoted in an article by Michelle Malkin, he said, "She embraced death with a smile, while the leaders are running away from death. Doors of heaven have opened for her."

As Tom Friedman would say, this is really sick. You may have read the story published a few weeks ago, written by Joel Greenberg in the New York Times shortly after that bombing, that purported to highlight the similarities between the Palestinian suicide bomber, Ayat Al-Akhras, and her teenage victim, Rachel Levy. Both were high school seniors, both had black hair, both wore blue jeans. There is a curious, seeming symmetry between those two young lives—except that one became a murderer, the other a victim.

There's another reason to question that symmetry. There was another victim in that attack; about whom not much was written in the American press. It's a shame, because he was a real hero that day. When Akhras entered the supermarket preparing to blow herself up, she was stopped by a security guard named Haim Smadar. Haim was born in Tunisia and obviously knew Arabic. This may have tipped him off. In any event, he had always been an excellent security guard: just last year he received a commendation from the mayor of Jerusalem for his diligence. Haim was a hard worker. Married for 30 years, he was the father of five, with more than his share of troubles. Two of his children are deaf.

In any event, when Akhras started to enter the supermarket that day, he stopped her. He struggled to shove her out the door, so that fewer people would be killed or injured. And he was successful. His last words, according to witnesses, as he prevented that lovely 18-year old from achieving even greater glory within her community were, “You are not coming in here. You and I will blow up here.”

That's a man whose father and mother I would like to have met. That's a man whose parents taught him the real meaning of true martyrdom.

So much is in our hands! We have the potential, through the way we live our lives and the messages we convey to our children, to bring much good into the world. That is why, in the words of our sages, we are “cautioned regarding the children.”

May we instruct them in the ways of our Torah. May we teach them that “*dracheha darkhei noam v'khel netivoteha shalom*,”—that the ways of Torah are ways of pleasantness and that all its paths are peace. May we, in the face of unspeakable evil, maintain our humanity and our love of life. And may we teach our children to do the same.

Amen.