

The Chag to Thank our Schools and Educators

RABBI SHALOM BAUM



When I used to visit Debbie's family in Michigan, I often davened at the Magen Avraham shul in Southfield. That shul had a *minhag* that I have never seen in any other synagogue in the world, in that all of the local educators were given designated seats in the front of the shul. This was an intended as a demonstration of the major roles played by *mechanchim* in building and maintaining the Jewish community. Because educators are on the front lines, they are honored by seats in the front of the shul.

I have thought about this practice over the last couple of months. The symbolism of this exhibition of respect goes well beyond the location of a seat in shul. It represents the importance in the community of teachers of both Judaic and secular studies. This has been especially true since our schools were physically shut, forcing our local educators to pivot to virtual teaching. Although there has been a learning curve for many teachers, students and their parents, our local educators continue to instruct our children in knowledge, inspiring the character development of the next generation.

Many of us, in whatever field we work, have also had to work in a very different work environment. Others of us have unfortunately lost their positions or have been furloughed. All of this is difficult, to say the least. We as a shul will continue to be here to do what we can to help. Yet with Shavuot approaching, I wanted to share a perspective on our educators.



I believe that medical professionals have worked courageously and heroically in areas of physical and psychological healing during these difficult times. In addition, our educators, who are on the front lines of spiritual care, passionately continue to nurture the precious souls of our children. They have done this in the face of the same pressures that we all encounter, including having to work under the same roof as our own children, who demand our attention, and having to perform for our employers and jobs. In addition, many have to teach 20–100 children per day, while

simultaneously being analyzed by a wonderful but demanding parent body. This scrutiny is acceptable, if done with the proper respect and communicated in an appropriate setting. Clearly the pressure that many parents are feeling may contribute to some unintended but inappropriate reactions. Similarly, discussions relating to the structure of our institutions and the requisite number of teachers and administrators that are needed in our schools are worthwhile in the proper context and forum. They can be spoken in a sensitive, nuanced and decorous manner that recognizes the dedicated work and life mission of these professionals. Our own children will also benefit by our showing even more love and respect to their spiritual mentors, enabling these educators and parents to build confident and grateful Jewish children and a better community. This approach may encourage more of our children to be future lay and professional leaders in their respective communities. Throughout my career as a rabbi, at times to the chagrin of some, I have stood up for the particular needs and talents of individuals and families, even when it might have seemed to challenge the system or establishment. Yet this cannot be done coarsely, and without displaying respect for the people who should be sitting in the front.

As Shavuot approaches, we take out time to appreciate and salute the role of Yeshiva educators. There is a practice recorded in the writings of a great 13th century halachist, the Rokeach, R. Elazar of Worms, to bring young children to a local educator on the day of Shavuot. The ritual involved giving the child treats at home and culminated with a celebration and learning experience together with the teacher in a synagogue or local Beit Midrash. The Rokeach (Laws of Shavuot) explains how this was a reenactment for the child of the experience at Sinai, as if the parent brought the child to witness the sound and light show of Matan Torah. Today, this is embodied by the strong educational partnership between parents and communal institutions. Of course, at the core of this relationship is trust and communication, but it should also include the necessary reverence

for the frontline workers in our community. There is a halacha of standing up for teachers (Shulchan Aruch YD 242:6), just as there is a mandate to rise when seeing the Torah pass by (Shulchan Aruch YD 282:2). Special emphasis is also placed on having children greet a Sefer Torah (Rama OC 149:1). This is more than a physical act; rather, it is a sign that we have deep admiration for the Torah and for its ambassadors and that, in raising our children, we nurture this humility and respect. A single negative, cynical or even partially misinformed conversation about our local schools on social media, at a quarantined Shabbat meal or at a socially-distanced front lawn conversation, especially in front of children, can undermine the educational goals we strive to achieve. As the Talmud states, "It is foolish to rise in front of a Torah and fail to do the same for its teachers" (Makot 22b).

Honoring our frontline workers helps temper our cynicism and is an expression of gratitude. Healthy criticism, which has a place, only finds an affective listening audience when it is presented in the context of goodwill and appreciation. While we all can see what is wrong with the status quo, and no institution or person has yet been perfected, we must each evaluate whether we display proper gratitude. Because we usually fall short of this objective, our liturgy is filled with scripted texts of thanks, such as *Modeh Ani*, *Modim*, and *Birchat Hamzon*. The Sefer Hachinuch (606), in explaining why we need to be coerced to say thank you, proposes that "maybe if you say it, you'll mean it" (CP WS 2005).

Expressing our gratitude induces us to think more clearly and to ultimately give more consistent expressions of the truth.

Studies have shown that individuals tend to overestimate how often they feel and express true thankfulness. A recent study, available at <https://royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/10.1098/rsos.180391>, found that people seldom received expressions of gratitude for their efforts in providing for others, with a rate estimated at about 5%. This is not a defense but a symptom of entitlement that is the antithesis of our *ethos* and

halachic system. We should consider whether, in our conversations, written correspondence and personal interactions, we are more grateful or disparaging. It can be a productive and even healthy exercise to review what we have written in the past or what we have recorded, or even to ask the people closest to us for feedback.

The Metzudat Dovid (Tehillim 92:2) says that there is an ethical component of expressing gratitude, which falls under a broader category of doing what is “good and straight”. One of the few mitzvot that is associated with the holiday of Shavuot is Bikkurim, the bringing of the first fruits to the Kohen, as the holiday marked the opening day of this ritual. The farmer does not wait until the fruit tree bears fruit or until the botanist advises that the crop will be plentiful. From the outset of there being even a “small fig”, the farmer must not only bring the fruit but make a verbal and public testimony of gratitude for the good graces that have been bestowed on him, even in the face of ongoing economic challenges and uncertainty. This is the culture of our community and the qualities that build great people and institutions, as well as our nation. It is particularly on Shavuot,

when we celebrate our Torah, that we choose to honor our educators and the fruits of their labor. If we must be grateful for a single fig, then we should be overwhelmed by gratitude for the leadership, endurance and sustainability of our institutions. This sustainability will come from a partnership of commitment. At times, it may require schools to determine how they can do things even better and it will surely require community members to continuously reevaluate how they spend funds. We should not allow our true desire and need to save money to be at the expense of the relatively few Jewish educators in the Modern Orthodox community.

A Sefer Torah, which is the lifeline of a Jewish community is cherished, protected and lifted. Similarly, Torah teachers, administrators and all educators who teach Torah values and knowledge, whether through a shiur or in a science classroom, should be honored and cherished. May we all spend this Shavuot, in isolation, thinking about how great it will be when we all come back together and again have the privilege of standing up for a Sefer Torah and our teachers.

