THE IMPORTANCE OF Perspective Taking

Many indirect forces shape our children's values and raising a mensch is so much more complicated than only telling them what to do. Longitudinal studies that identify the core ingredients associated with raising an empathic child identify a subtle process typically present in such families.

Parents who raise children who become kind and charitable adults expose them to discussions that show respect for those with whom they disagree. Imagine a family sitting around a Shabbat table discussing an issue about which they feel passionately. Parents who show contempt or disrespect are conveying a very powerful message to their children. They are modeling an approach to conflict that includes disdain and contempt for those who view the world differently. Whether the discussion is about family members, friends, or the leadership of the local shul or yeshiva, showing respect for those with whom we disagree is a very potent lesson for children.

A crucial facet of this process is the parental promotion of perspective-taking in their children. It is common sense that children who are encouraged to see things respectfully — through the eyes of others, even those with whom we disagree — are getting an important lesson in one of the basic building blocks of empathy. Parents whose discussion style is associated with instilling the proper values in their children are also more likely to actively encourage their child’s participation in family discussions. These parents pull their children into discussions with adults and supportively challenge their child's thinking in an atmosphere that is marked by respect for the views of others, including those of their child.

After giving a lecture that included a discussion of this topic, a Rabbi in the audience told me the following story. He had just taken a position as the leader of a shul that had had a rocky relationship with the previous Rabbi. He was shocked to hear that the son of one of his congregants had just become engaged to a non-Jewish woman. He met with the young man to understand how this happened and to try to dissuade him from his decision. The young man explained that all of his life, the conversation he heard around the Shabbat table was dominated by his parents' bitter complaints about the previous Rabbi. When company came over, this too was a major topic of conversation. He asked the Rabbi: “How do you expect me to view this religion? I was a young, impressionable boy and my view of Judaism was mainly informed by the bitter anger my parents and their friends felt toward their spiritual leader. I see no reason to continue to belong to a religion that was so devalued by my parents and their friends.”

Who do you want your children to marry one day? Somebody who comes from a family where the views of others are dealt with respect, and where there is an effort to understand the opposite viewpoint? Isn't that an essential building block of a good marriage? Were your future daughter-in-law or son-in-law exposed to a home environment that taught them to live with the grays?

There is a fascinating Rabbi Nachman story that explains the significance of the Torah being given in the arefel, in the mist. We acquire wisdom in the fog. “The people kept their distance but Moshe approached the fog where G-d was.” Rav Nachman explains this passage as having the following implication: “For when they saw the mist, the obstacle, they kept their distance.” But Moshe approached, into the obstacle, which is precisely where G-d was hidden.

Even the most basic examination of the Talmud is an education in the core value of Jews being comfortable with uncertainty. How often in Talmudic discussions do we see a high level of comfort with concluding: וְאֵלֵךְ (that is indeed a question) or וְזֶרֶד (we will have to wait for the coming of the Messiah to come to a conclusion about this issue). The Talmud tells us that the reason we adopt the opinions of the house of Hillel over the house of Shammai is that the house of Hillel was able to appreciate the perspective of the members of the house of Shammai and take that perspective into account in making their decisions.

Adapted from Balanced Parenting by Rabbi Raphael Pelcovitz and Dr. David Pelcovitz

1 Shemot 20:17.
2 Likutei Moharan, 115.

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