



SHEMOT

Shemot

How to Deal with a Rebellious Child?

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HOW TO DEAL WITH A REBELLIOUS CHILD? THE SECRET TO CLOSING THE DISTANCE

ABSTRACT

The people whom we love the most have the ability to hurt us the most.

Children may rebel against their parents, sometimes to the point that the love seems left behind. Parents may, intentionally or not, be absent from their children, neglecting to see what their children really need. Spouses, through carelessness or ignorance or worse, may alienate themselves from their better halves.

What can we do when that happens – when members of our family, those we love the most and are closest to, seem so far away? What can we do when someone we love runs from us? What can we do when a Jew leaves the fold to wander down a distant path? What can we do when our own child, or sibling, or spouse, distances himself or herself from us?

We can learn from Moses.

Moses, the shepherd, followed one little lamb down the wayward path, realizing that it wasn't running away but was simply thirsty and looking for drink.

Every act of rebellion is simply a loved one of ours thirsting for something to drink. It is our job to open the well.

Every act of skepticism is simply a Jew thirsting for something spiritual. It is our job to open the well of Torah.

1. Bedtime Thirst (Humor)

It is bedtime for little Dovid.

But, five minutes after saying good night to his parents, a little voice is heard: “Daddy...daddy...daddy...”

“Yes,” says the father.

“I'm thirsty. Can you bring a drink of water?”

“No. You had your chance. Lights out.” A few minutes later: “Daddy...”

“Dovid, go to sleep!”

“But I’m thirsty. Can I please have a drink of water?”

“I told you no! If you ask again, I’ll have to come in there to teach you a lesson!”

Ten minutes later, a small voice whimpers, “Daddy...”

“WHAT?!” yells the father.

“When you come in here to teach me a lesson, can you please bring a drink of water?”

2. Love Hurts Locally

The people who are closest to us are usually the ones who most frustrate us. Any parent can attest to the wonders of a child’s creativity as bedtime approaches: “Mommy, I’m hungry. Daddy, I’m thirsty. I want a story. Fix my blanket. It’s too hot. It’s too cold. I have a booboo...” anything and everything to delay the inevitability of sleep.

We love our children, of course, but it is precisely because we love them so much that they can frustrate us to no end. May we be frustrated – if we can even call it that – by our loved ones only by such inconsequential and natural occurrences like the stalling of bedtime.

Unfortunately, it is true that the people whom we love the most can also hurt us the most. The people whom we cherish and want to bring close sometimes seem so far away. Children may rebel against their parents, sometimes to the point that the love seems left behind. Parents may, intentionally or not, be absent from their children, neglecting to see what their children really need. Spouses, through carelessness or ignorance, may alienate themselves from their better halves.

3. Love Hurts Globally

The same phenomenon may be found in the global family of the Jewish people. Our Jewish bothers and sisters, the people who are the closest to us, sometimes seem to be far away.

Whether it is on combustible topics like Israel, or personal ones like religion, Jews can at times feel alien from one another.

Although nowhere in the Torah are such distinctions made, Jews today are divided by different affiliations, communities and politics. There is one standard, as set by G-d in the Torah, but a Jew is no less a Jew regardless how he or she behaves.

However, when a fellow Jew, sadly, does wander off down paths of barbed cynicism foreign to the Jewish soul,

it pains us – the same way it pains parents when their children hurt themselves in one way or another, with artificial substances or in other ways. Because for us Jews, there is only one divine substance, and everything else is but an artificial hologram of it.

So, what can we do when members of our family, those we love the most seem so far away? What can we do when someone we want closest runs from us? What can we do when a Jew leaves the fold to wander down a distant path? What can we do when our own child, or sibling, or spouse, distances himself or herself from us?

We can learn from Moses.

4. Hero of Exodus

This week, we begin reading the second of the five Books of Moses, *Sefer Shemot*, the Book of Exodus. This book speaks of the Jewish people's gradual descent into Egyptian bondage; it speaks about their pain and suffering, and about their miraculous liberation. The hero of this book is Moses.

Moses, the prototypical Jewish leader, had the most unlikely of upbringings. He did not grow up in a nice Jewish home. Moses grew up in Pharaoh's palace.

Before the well-known, Passover-part of the story, a twenty-year-old¹ Moses was forced to flee the land of Egypt.² He escaped to Midian, where he married Tziporah, the daughter of Jethro, and where he lived for sixty years.

Do the math: Moses was eighty years old when he returned to Egypt to bring G-d's message of freedom. At the ripe age of eighty, most people are out on the golf course or enjoying Jell-O in a retirement home. Yet, at this age, Moses was just getting started. This, in itself, is a profound lesson.

But let's look back. What did Moses do these sixty years while living in Midian? Or, as a good matchmaker would ask, what did Moses do for a living? How did Moses support himself and his lovely wife Tziporah?

The Torah tells us that Moses was a shepherd. Now any mother must be thinking, "What type of profession is that for a nice Jewish boy? A doctor, a lawyer, an accountant, makes sense, but a shepherd? What a sheepish career choice!"

As is usually the case, the most unexpected paths often lead to the most divine destinations. As we shall see, Moses' first career as a shepherd, leading and tending sheep, trained him to be the tender leader of the Jewish people.

¹ See Shemot Rabba 1:35; Midrash Avchir.

² Pharaoh heard of this incident [Moses killing the Egyptian], and he sought to slay Moses; so Moses fled from before Pharaoh. He stayed in the land of Midian, and he sat down by a well... – Exodus 2:15.

5. The Burning Bush Episode

The famed episode of the Burning Bush, where Moses formally met G-d for the first time, was the turning point in his life. This is what caused him to leave Midian and return to Egypt to lead his people to their destiny.

But what was Moses doing when he happened upon that Burning Bush?

Moses was pasturing the flocks of Jethro, his father in law, the chief of Midian, and he led the flocks to the free pastureland, and [there] he came to the mountain of G-d, to Chorev.³

Moses was shepherding his flock when he came upon the Divine.

Of course, nothing in the Torah is happenstance. The fact that Moses was shepherding his flock, and that the Torah tells us about it, means that this occupation was the catalyst to his meeting G-d at the Burning Bush.

Why? What exactly happened when Moses was shepherding his flock?

6. The Midrash

The Midrash tells the story of what happened in detail:

When Moses was shepherding the sheep of Jethro, a little lamb ran off from the flock, and Moses ran after it. When Moses caught up with the lamb, it was drinking from a spring of water. Moses said to the lamb, “I did not know that you ran away because you were thirsty. You must be so tired.” Moses then picked up the lamb, put it on his shoulders and carried it back home.

Seeing this, G-d said to Moses: “You have the empathy to lead the sheep of a man of flesh and blood, so by your life shall you shepherd the sheep of G-d.”

G-d’s sheep are the children of Israel, and Moses became their shepherd.⁴

It was his quality of empathy that demonstrated to G-d what type of person Moses was and what type of leader he would become. If Moses would pursue one stray lamb, recognize its thirst, its travels and its tiredness, and then carry it back to the flock, surely he would do the same for G-d’s flock, the people of Israel.

This story tells us what we must do when confronted with a stray lamb – whether that happens globally (as when Jews stray from the Torah path) or locally (as when members of our immediate family distance themselves from us).

³ Exodus 3:1.

⁴ Shemot Rabba 2:2.

7. Emulating Moses Globally

We, Jews, the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, are one flock. But sometimes a lamb runs off. We usually think that the lamb runs off because it is angry, rebellious, unloved, or just difficult.

But Moses tenderly followed just such a lamb and saw that it was simply thirsty. Said Moses, “I should have realized that all this time you were thirsty – thirsty for love, for knowledge, for true soulful G-dliness.” Moses thus picked up the tired lamb and carried it on his shoulder.

When Jews do not articulate that they are thirsty, it does not make them any less thirsty. When Jews distance themselves from the flock, when they run away, it’s not because they are trying to leave – it’s because they are thirsty! We simply have to follow them, acknowledge their thirst, and put them on our shoulders, easing their burden and salving their limbs tired from their wanderings.

8. Emulating Moses Locally

The same is true when our loved ones distance themselves from us, when they run away, it’s not because they’re trying to leave – it’s because they’re thirsty! We simply have to follow them, realize and acknowledge their thirst, and put them on our shoulders.

Often times as parents, or as children, or as spouses, we feel so hurt that a loved one has run off that we simply shut down. It’s too painful for us to reach out, to follow that wandering lamb, to take the risk in bringing it back.

We are afraid that the child or parent, the spouse or friend, no longer cares and is no longer thirsty for our love – that should we approach the person, we will be rejected.

And then we remember the example of Moses, following that one lamb, recognizing and acknowledging its thirst, and picking it up from its tired journey to soothe and comfort it and return it back home. And, as we remember what Moses did for a mere animal, we know that we must do the same for those dearest and nearest to our hearts.

9. Water Source (Parable)

Still at a loss just how to? The following parable may help:

A king was traveling with his child through the desert. And when a king travels, his entire entourage travels

along – ministers, guards, attendants and servants, all at the ready to serve their master and carry out his will.

Suddenly, the procession ground to a halt. The king's child had a request. "Water," said the crown prince. "I want water."

The king convened his cabinet to address the crisis. "My son is thirsty," he said to his ministers. But how is water to be obtained in the desert? (In those days, kings and their courts drank things like wine, beer, ale, mead, etc. – not plain water.)

After much deliberation, two proposals were laid before the throne. "I shall dispatch my ablest horsemen on my fastest steeds," proposed the commander of the royal cavalry. "They will ride to the nearest settlement and fill their water skins. Within the hour, there will be water for the prince."

"I shall put my men and equipment to the task," proposed the chief of the royal engineering corps. "They will erect a derrick and sink a well right here, on the very spot at which we have stopped. Before the day is out, there will be water for the prince."

The king opted for the latter proposal, and soon the royal engineers were boring a well through the desert sand and rock. Toward evening they reached an aquifer and the prince's thirst was quenched.

"Why," asked the prince of his father, after he had drunk his fill, "did you trouble your men to dig a well in the desert? After all, we had the means to obtain water far more easily."

"Indeed, my son," replied the king, "such is our situation today. But perhaps one day, many years in the future, you will again be traveling this way. Perhaps you will be alone, without the power and privilege you now enjoy. Then, the well we dug today will be here to quench your thirst."

"But father," said the prince, "in many years, the sands of time will have refilled the well, erasing its very memory!"

"My dear son," said the king, "you have spoken with wisdom and foresight. This, then, is what we will do. We will mark the site of this well on our maps, and preserve our maps from the ravages of time. If you know the exact spot at which this well has been sunk, you will be able to reopen it with a minimum of effort and toil.

"This we shall do at every encampment of our journey," resolved the king. "We shall dig wells and mark their places on our maps. We shall record the particular characteristics of each well and the method by which it can be reopened. So whenever, and under whatever circumstances, you will travel this route, you will be able to obtain the water that will sustain you on your journey."⁵

⁵ Parable by Chassidic Master Rabbi Yechezkel Panet (author of *Mareh Yechezkel*, 1783-1845), as told by Rabbi Zvi Meir Steinmetz, written by Yanki Tauber.

10. Wells of Truth

Our lives are a difficult and dehydrating journey. We thirst for the wells of truth. Says the King of the Universe to us His princes and princesses: “From afore time, I have dug water wells throughout the planes of existence by which you shall slake your thirst and drink to your soul’s content. These wells are everywhere along your journey; all you have to do is remove the sands of time.”

When a lamb strays, when a person strays, when a child, when a prince or princess seems to wander, to get lost, it is only because they are so thirsty and are looking for the well.

It is our job to help them reopen it and drink their fill.

11. Thirst Quencher (Humor)

The young salesman was disappointed about losing a big sale and, as he talked with his sales manager, he lamented, “I guess it just proves that you can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make him drink.”

The manager replied, “Son, take my advice: your job is not to make him drink. Your job is to make him thirsty.”

12. Conclusion

Our job as parents, as children, as siblings, as fellow Jews is not to force our loved ones to drink – that will only alienate them more. Our job is to live our lives in such a soulful way that our loved ones will thirst for such soulfulness.

Every Jew, in his or her heart of hearts, thirsts for the True Source of all water. It is our mission to offer that Divine Water in the most appealing way possible. We must do our best to show how the timeless truths of Torah are the true quenchers of a soul’s thirst. Then, we are guaranteed that our fellow Jews will never desire to stray from the flock.

The same is true for any family member that seems to run away, whether a rebellious child or wandering sibling:

We cannot force them to drink our love, but we can make our love so irresistible that they will be compelled to come close and be loved.

If this approach to care and love was good enough for the Creator of the World – when He picked Moses to shepherd His chosen people – is it not good enough for us?

It was good enough for King David.

In the words of the Book of Psalms:

*He [G-d] built His sanctuary,
Resembling the highest worlds,
Established, like the earth, forever.
And He chose David, His servant,
And took him from tending sheep,
From following ewes,
And brought him to tend Jacob, His people,
Israel, His heritage.
And [David] tended them with a faithful heart,
And he led them with a skillful hand.⁶*

May we, too, shepherd our loved ones, our brothers and sisters of Israel, with the care and empathy that Moses and King David had shown their flock, and may this lead to the rebuilding of the Holy Temple ... and the anointing of the descendant of David ... with the coming of the immediate and eternal Redemption. Amen!

Shabbat Shalom!

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⁶ Psalms 78:69-72.