



DEVARIM

Vaetchanan-Nachamu

The Secret of Parenthood

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THE SECRET OF PARENTHOOD

ABSTRACT

During a parent-teacher conference, a mother insisted that the teacher shouldn't have taken points off her daughter's English paper for calling her subject Henry 8 instead of Henry VIII. "We have only regular numbers on our keyboard," she explained. "No Roman numerals."

Often times the parent is more the problem than the child. The child, after all, is supposed to be naïve and innocent; the parent, one would think, should be more informed.

The opposite can also be true. Often times the teacher is the problem; perhaps the child isn't learning well because the teacher isn't teaching well. Perhaps if the educator was more dedicated – or educated – the pupil would be too.

How can we as parents provide our children with the best possible education? How can parents cooperate with their children's teachers in the best possible way? And how should educators, teachers and principals see their responsibility – as a job or something more?

The answer lies in two words from the *Shema* – “*V’shinantam l’vanecha – And you shall teach them to your children.*” It teaches us a surprising connection between parents and teachers, which is further illuminated by an episode that is described in the Second Book of Kings when the Prophet Elijah was ferried up to heaven in a fiery chariot and his disciple Elisha exclaimed “*My father, my father...*”

1. Parent Teacher Conference (Humor)

In its March 2015 edition, the *Reader's Digest* asked teachers and educators, to share their stories about “the hilarious, sweet, droll, and occasionally clueless things their students do or say.”

The *Reader's Digest* offered a \$1,000 prize for the best submission. Thousands of educators wrote in. I'd like to share one of the finalist's recollections:

During a parent-teacher conference, a mother insisted that I shouldn't have taken points off her daughter's English paper for calling her subject Henry 8 (using the Arabic numeral) instead of Henry VIII (using the Roman numeral).

“We have only regular numbers on our keyboard,” the mother explained. “No Roman numerals.”¹

¹ <http://www.rd.com/funny-stuff/funny-teacher-stories/3/>

2. Teach Your Children Well

after all, is supposed to be naïve and innocent; the parent, one would think, should be more informed.

The opposite can also be true. Often times the teacher is the problem; perhaps the child isn't learning well because the teacher isn't teaching well. Perhaps if the educator was more dedicated – or educated – the pupil would be too.

Within this chuckle-inducing incident lies the tension that often exists between teachers and parents. Parents think their children are G-d's gift – and they are, literally: G-d's gifts to them. Teachers think that children have to be educated, their skills honed and refined so that they can be the best G-dly gift possible.

And both parents and teachers are right. Parents are right in that their children are G-d's gift. Teachers are right in that this precious, priceless gift must be honed and polished and challenged to realize its fullest potential.

That being the case, how can we as parents provide our children with the best possible education? How can we as parents get along with our children's teachers in the best possible way? And how should educators, teachers and principals see their responsibility – as a job or something more?

The answers, as always, lie in the Torah

We find that – in the Torah – parents and teachers are compared to one another. And what's more so are children and students. And in this very correlation are imbedded invaluable and life-changing lessons.

3. Parshat Vaetchanan

This week's Torah reading – *Parshat Vaetchanan* contains Judaism's most famous prayer:

*Shema Yisrael... Hear, Israel, The Lord our G-d, the Lord is One.*²

The Shema, of course, doesn't end there. The next paragraph continues:

*And you shall love the Lord, your G-d, with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your means. And these words, which I command you this day, shall be upon your heart.*³

² Deuteronomy 6:4.

³ Ibid. 6:5-6

And then we come to the line that I would like to focus on today:

*V'shinantam l'vanecha – And you shall teach them to your children.*⁴

At first glance, this phrase, *v'shinantam l'vanecha*, seems to require no interpretation. This is a clear directive to mothers and fathers to teach their sons and daughters these truths, so that they may live the fullest, most sublime lives possible.

A beautiful ideal.

But if we look a little deeper, at the first level of Torah commentary, the writings of the ubiquitous and essential Rashi, we find a different interpretation:

Rashi⁵ states that the words “*your children*,” refer to “your disciples.” And Rashi brings proof for this from three different biblical verses. He writes:

We find everywhere that disciples are termed “children,” as it is said: “*You are children to the Lord your G-d*,”⁶ and it is said: “*The sons of the prophets who were in Bethel*.”⁷ So too, we find that Hezekiah taught Torah to all Israel and called them children, as it is said: “*My children, now do not forget*.”⁸ And just as disciples are called “children,” and as it is said, “*You are children to the Lord your G-d*,” so too, the teacher is called “father,” as [when Elisha said to his teacher Elijah] “*My father, my father...*”⁹

What compels Rashi to interpret this simple Torah verse in this sophisticated way? What is deficient in reading the verse literally that it refers to your physical children and not your students? What deeper lesson is the verse – and Rashi – trying to teach us?

Finally, why is Rashi stressing that just as students are called “children,” teachers are called “parents?”

4. Elijah and Elisha

One of the scriptural proofs Rashi cites (that disciples are called “children” and teachers are called “fathers”) is from the story of Elijah and Elisha in the Second Book of Kings.¹⁰ There we read how the Prophet Elijah left this world in the fiery chariot while his disciple, Elisha,

⁴ Ibid. 6:7

⁵ From Sifrei ad loc.

⁶ Deuteronomy. 14:1

⁷ II Kings 2:3.

⁸ II Chronicles 29:11.

⁹ II Kings 2:12.

¹⁰ II Kings, chapter 2.

watched:

*The sons of the prophets who were in Bethel came out to Elisha and said to him, “Do you know that the Lord will take your teacher [Elijah] away from you today?” ... And [when it happened] Elisha saw, and he cried, “My father! My father! The chariots of Israel and their riders!”*¹¹

The sons of the prophets obviously weren’t literal sons of the prophets, but rather their students/disciples. And Elijah certainly was not Elisha’s father, rather his teacher and mentor. Thus we see that students are called “sons,” and teachers are called “fathers.”

But 1) what is unique about this specific episode of Elijah and Elisha, what does it add over the Rashi’s other proofs? Additionally: 2) there are other places in the Torah¹² where “children” are called “students,” so why does Rashi bring specifically this proof? And 3) and what’s the connection between “chariots and riders” and education?¹³

To understand this we first must understand the word *v’shinantam*

5. V’shinantam – Be Sharp

Here’s another one of the *Reader’s Digest* submissions:

I recently asked a student where his homework was. He replied, “It’s still in my pencil.”

This was a sharp response from a sharp student. Moreover, pencils are sharp, and pencils bring to mind pencil sharpeners. Speaking of sharpeners let us speak about sharp minds.

And that brings us to the word *v’shinantam*, which Rashi explains as follows:

This is an expression of sharpness, meaning that these words should be sharply impressed in your mouth, so that if a person asks you something, you will not have to hesitate about it, but you will tell him immediately.¹⁴

There are different words for education in Hebrew. The word *v’shinantam* used here teaches us that education is not simply about imparting information or knowledge to a pupil; rather, the essence of education is about providing skills and tools so that the student emerges *sharp* –

¹¹ II Kings, 2:3, 12.

¹² See Rashi to Number 3:1. Also, throughout the book of Proverbs, ‘child’ is interchangeable with ‘disciple.’

¹³ For the following, see Likkutei Sichot vol. 9, pp. 33 at length.

¹⁴ Sifrei ad loc; Kiddushin 30a.

confident, sure, and secure. Once taught to the student in this manner, the lesson stays sharp in the student's mind and he or she has the ability to answer immediately for s/he is sure of his/her path.

How does Rashi know to interpret *v'shinantam* in this way? Why not say that education is simply imparting information and going to school?

Rashi derives this from the relationship between Elijah and Elisha. And, to teach us this invaluable lesson in education, Rashi quotes specifically this episode.

And how does this episode convey this idea?

Through chariots and riders.

6. Chariots and Riders

The Second Book of Kings describes Elijah's last moment on earth:

*And it was that they were going, walking and talking, and behold [there appeared] a fiery chariot and fiery horses, and they separated them both. And Elijah ascended to heaven in a whirlwind.*¹⁵

As his teacher Elijah was being whisked away to heaven, Elisha cried:

*My father! My father! The chariots of Israel and their riders!*¹⁶

This is a rather odd exclamation as your beloved teacher is being carried away to heaven in a fiery chariot.

But there is an obvious correlation between the term father, repeated twice to refer to his teacher, and the phrase, *the chariots of Israel and their riders*.

The literal meaning, as Rashi explains, is that Elijah and his prayers enabled victory for Israel in its wars fought with chariots and their riders. And such wars are a metaphor for life.

¹⁵ II Kings 2:11.

¹⁶ Ibid. 2:12.

Life is a perpetual battle between right and wrong. Choices abound, how to decide between matter and spirit, how to fuse the two, how to keep focused in a confusing world?

We need chariots and riders – artillery and weapons – to be victorious.

Elijah provided these tools to his students, exemplified by his chief disciple and successor, Elisha. Elijah fashioned the chariot, the tank, the heavy artillery for his students to handle any situation and claim victory in every battle.¹⁷

This is epitome of education – a teacher sharpening the minds and tools of his students, providing them with clarity and confidence, to resolve any discrepancy and answer any question without hesitation.

If you go to battle and you are lacking sharpness, even if you may have tools, but they are not sharp tools – you don't have the chariot, the tank, the heavy artillery – that can cause you to feel weak and get mired in uncertainty and doubt. But if your education has given you sharp “weapons” – powerful chariots – then you have the razor sharp tools and instruments to cut right through and be victorious.

When a teacher educates a student in such a way, they aren't called teacher and disciple, they are called parent and child. For this is an obligation that a parent has to a child: not only to impart information and knowledge, but to also provide tools and confidence, certainty and principles, sharpness and vehicles/chariots that will allow for the child/disciple to cut through any situation and address any conflict or challenge.

This is what a parent provides a child, this is what a good teacher provides a disciple – the ability to cut through sharply with confidence and never hesitate.

When there's doubt there is always hesitancy. Enter the *rav*, the teacher, who provides the tools and principles – the *rechev*, the vehicle – to reconcile confusing and disparate opinions, honing the pupil into a sharp and clear-headed disciple, without doubts or uncertainties.

¹⁷ Not by accident is Israel's most sophisticated tank called the *Merkaavah*, meaning “Chariot.”

7. Where Learning Begins

This is what education is all about. And this is also implied in interchanging the words child with disciple, parent with teacher.

A five-year-old child, who begins learning *Chumash*,¹⁸ the Five Books of Moses, looks around his classroom and sees many children studying. Nowhere does he see a father. Rather, a hired teacher educates the children chapter and verse.

The five-year-old child comes upon the verse in our portion, *v'shinantam l'vanecha*, “and you shall teach them to your children,” and he is perplexed, if not downright hurt. How come his father (or his friend’s father) is not fulfilling the commandment of “teach them to your children?”

Is my father, or my friend’s father, transgressing a clear Torah directive to educate his child?

To which Rashi, who came to clarify the literal meaning¹⁹ for the five-year-old student of verse, clarifies: “*Your children*” refers to your disciples. The father himself can hire a teacher – or send his child to school – to fulfill his personal obligation to teach his child, and when he does, the teacher is called “father” of the student and the student is called his “child.” The teacher takes the place of the father, and the pupil takes the place of the son.²⁰

8. Parents and Teachers

But why indeed does the verse not say directly, *v'shinantam l'talmidecha*, “and you shall teach them to your disciples,” why even use the term “children,” at all?

Because everywhere, in every place in the Torah, students are called “children.” “*V'shinantam*,” sharp teaching is only possible when it is a parent-child responsibility, not only a teacher-pupil “hired gun.”

If teaching were only a job, then it would suffice to impart the basics, but not the extent of *v'shinantam*, of actual vehicles and tools – methodologies. The only way a teacher will feel compelled to impart the vehicles and tools, not just information and knowledge, is if the teacher recognizes that he is an extension of the parent, fulfilling the parent’s obligation to *v'shinantam l'vanecha* – teach your children, sharpen your disciples!

¹⁸ Ethics of our Fathers 5:25

¹⁹ See Rashi to Genesis 3:8.

²⁰ See Likkutei Sichot *ibid*.

9. Generation Gap (Optional)

Another gem from the *Reader's Digest* competition:

Performing Mozart should have been the highlight of my middle school chorus class. But after a few uninspired attempts, an exasperated student raised her hand and said, “Mrs. Willis, we want to sing music from our generation, not yours.”

Too often we find a generation gap between teacher and student, between parent and child. The child is listening to hip-hop or rock or rap and the parent is listening to classical music.

Comes the Torah and gives us the commandment to educate your child, *v'shinantam l'vanecha*, in effect saying that your child's education has to be particular to the child's needs. It has to sharpen and hone the child (this is the *v'shinantam* part) so that the child will not flinch or hesitate when faced by the dichotomous nature of the world. And it must be achieved through *l'vanecha*, which means that the teacher must love and care for the student the same way a parent loves and cares for his or her child.

If teaching is only a job, the teacher will suffice with the minimum required of him and will not impart the *rechev*, the vehicle necessary to address this difficult world.

10. Our Children, Our Consolation (Conclusion)

This Shabbat directly follows the saddest day of the year, Tisha B'Av, and is called Shabbat Nachamu, the Shabbat of Consolation.

The most consoling of all things is our children, our students, our future. No matter how difficult life gets or how fragmented and duplicitous the world seems to be, our investing in our future generations gives us the confidence and knowledge that our children will teach what they have been taught and perpetuate the light that they have been given.

Teaching is the greatest thing we can accomplish in this world. It is the power of “giving birth” to our students who are called our “children.”

Our children are indeed G-d's gift. It is our job, as parents, teachers, and role models to cherish that

gift, hone it, sharpen it, provide it with the tools, chariots, wagons, and vehicles so that they may ride through life – riding every wave, riding every challenge, and ushering in the ultimate and final redemption, when, the barrier between student and teacher, pupil and mentor shall crumble, as in the words of the prophet:

And no longer shall one teach his neighbor or one his brother, saying, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know Me from their smallest to their greatest, says the Lord...²¹

Shabbat Shalom!

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²¹ Jeremiah 31:33.