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THE JEWISH PARENT
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In This Issue

How Parents Can "Take the
Reins Back"

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Mother

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Right Life—a Personal
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Continue Their Studies

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Choosing a Summer Camp
For Your Child

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*Expanded
Passover
Issue*

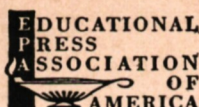


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this month's cover The family sits down to the **Seder**—one of the greatest educational and religious experiences for the family.



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"Taking The Reins Back"

How to restore effective parental responsibility in the upbringing of children

• RABBI NORMAN LAMM

Discussions about children, no matter how well-intentioned, often leave me depressed. We frequently regard our youngsters as segmented functions rather than as full, valid human beings who happen to be younger than the rest of the race. Considered as our peculiar responsibilities, they are usually thought of as *our* problems; but viewed as human beings possessing their own integrity, it is just as legitimate to view ourselves as *their* problems.

That we are as much a burden to our young children as they are to us is evident from the fact that just as they identify with us, we identify with them, and in this manner we limit them. We often consider them as an extension of ourselves, and feel exposed through them. How nervous we are when they first go visiting friends for dinner or overnight! Inwardly we are apprehensive, wondering whether our private failings, our innermost secrets, our hidden weaknesses, the questionable quality of our domestic relationships, will not somehow be disclosed not only by what they will say but by how they will react and behave. Similarly, we feel injured when our children are criticized—much more so than when we are directly assaulted. It is astounding how frequently intelligent parents prove blind to their children's faults. I have often thought, in lighter moments, of proposing "anonymous group therapy" for parents, whereby congenial friends would gather and write down unsigned evaluations of each other's children. We might leave such sessions dejected and angry—but with the consolation that our children will benefit from the revelations!

My premise, then, in discussing the particular questions assigned to me, is that children are not a special class apart from the human race, but simply younger human beings with their own rights, values, and validity as humans, and subject to the same cultural pressures that we are. Their problems are human problems, frequently our very own problems expressed in forms peculiar to the conditions of their age and circumstances.

Everyone Is Harnessed

In considering how we should go about "Taking the Reins Back," we already imply an unspoken premise: that everyone is harnessed, that no civilized human being is utterly without reins of some kind. The great and crucial question is: what discipline

Rabbi Norman Lamm is Associate Rabbi of The Jewish Center in New York City. This article is based upon his address at the New York PTA Regional Educational Conference held in mid-January.

shall we submit to—the "yoke of Torah," or the dictates of our natural appetites; the *ole ha-galuyot* or the *ole malkhut shamayim*? With youngsters, the same question is formulated as: will they be responsive only to friends and the influence of their peers (so often deleterious), or the faith of their fathers?

That last alternative needs explanation. The religious question of what kind of yoke we will submit to is, to a large extent, influenced by our early family environment, mostly by our relations with father. In an article for *The Jewish Parent* several years ago, I pointed out that there was a measure of truth in the Freudian idea that our individual conception of G-d is a projection of our father-image. Freud's error was that he reduced all of religion to this psychological projection. But certainly we cannot deny the kernel of truth in the carry-over from one's attitudes towards his earthly father to his Father in Heaven. The extremes of overpermissiveness and harsh authoritarianism result not only in sexually and socially deviant behavior, but also in religious aberrations. (See the informative article by Fred Sherrow, "Apostasy on the Campus," in the Spring 1966 issue of *The Yavneh Review*.)

To take one example: what kind of reverence for G-d and for Torah can we expect of adults who, as children, were permitted to hurl verbal abuse at their parents with impunity, never having been taught to distinguish between free speech and cheap talk? Or, to take the reverse case, how often has it been our experience that adults will not give Judaism a fair hearing because they are still rebelling against oppressive and unloving parents who forced Judaism upon them?

An Old Problem

A generation or two ago, the major problem was that of parents who were overstrict. Today our concern is with a society which preaches over-permissiveness as an act of democracy and psychological sophistication.

Nevertheless, despite the contemporary proclivity for parental leniency, it should not be imagined that this problem did not exist heretofore. The following is fascinating testimony to the universality of excessive forbearance:

There is yet one other evil disease regarding raising children that is not practiced by other peoples. A child sits at the table with his father and mother, and he is the first to stretch forth

his hand to partake of the food. He thus grows up arrogant, without fear or culture or refinement, acting as if his father and mother were his friends or siblings. By the time he is eight or nine years old and his parents wish to correct their earlier mistakes, they no longer are able to, for childish habit has already become second nature. . . .

Another bad and bitter practice: parents take a child to school and, in front of the child, warn the teacher not to punish him. When the child hears this, he no longer pays attention to his school work and his disobedience grows worse. This was not the practice of our ancestors. In their days, if a child came crying to his father and mother and told of being punished by a teacher, they would send with him a gift to the teacher, and congratulate the teacher. . . .

This report comes to us from R. Moshe Hagiz (*Tzeror haChayyim*), over 220 years ago! The specifically Jewish penchant for over-indulging children is not so modern, after all.

Several months ago The N. Y. Times featured a perceptive article which asserted that success in inculcating a sense of self-esteem in children is directly proportional to the strictness of his upbringing—it being understood that this does not by any means imply approval of extravagant parental tyranny. Parents who exude confidence in their children, depending on the children's individual capacities, and maintain the ability to command a child without having to offer reasons convincing to the child—"just because I say so"—manage to attain the greatest satisfaction of raising healthy, confident, and fulfilled children.

That discipline, administered with good common sense, is the most desirable method of raising children, we read in the following report by a German Jew:

A man should begin to train his children in the service of God and in good character when they are yet very young. He must be careful not to permit his love for them to lead him to indulge them and permit them to do whatever they wish. . . . However, he must be very careful not to frighten them unnecessarily, lest a child be driven to harm himself. . . . Every parent must judge his child's individual personality and treat him accordingly. Also, if a parent is always of angry mien, the child will come to despise him and pay no more attention to his reproach than to a barking dog.

This intelligent advice was uttered about 350 years ago (*Yosef Ometz*). It is worth listening to it closely; it represents the cumulative wisdom of 3,000 years of Jewish experience in bringing up children.

Yet, as much parental leniency was abused in the past, necessitating such exhortations as we have mentioned, it is today not an exception but the standard mode, and therefore tells us something about ourselves, our values, and perhaps our myths.

Discipline cannot be discussed nowadays without some consideration of the child's psychological condition. There is little doubt that many parents are extravagantly lenient because of an irrational fear that discipline will in some mysterious way damage the delicate psyche of the youngsters. This is a popular myth of many enlightened parents, especially younger ones. Such nonsense is the price we pay for sophistication. As someone recently pointed out, from a silly point of view there is no real escape for any human being; we are all doomed. It is bad to be an orphan, terrible to be an only child, damaging to be the youngest, crushing to be in the middle, and taxing to be the oldest. Apparently there is no way out except to be born an adult—and Adam, who managed to do just that, was not the happiest of men.

Yet this abuse of arm-chair psychology should by no means be taken as an excuse for a Neanderthal attitude which looks upon all psychology as just meaningless hokus-pokus, and recognizes only bad children and not sick ones. Where psychological help is indicated, it is nothing less than criminal to deny it to the child because of some extravagant prejudices that parents may hold against all psychologists or psychiatrists. Common sense in this matter, as in everything else, is absolutely vital.

Discipline & Despair

But our contemporary problem is broader than ever before. Permissive parents often know that they are failing in their responsibilities, but complain of helplessness. They simply cannot resist the pressure of their children's peers. This is no doubt true. But we must consider that the permissiveness is not always the *cause* of this helplessness, but the *effect* as well. The problem is not the child but the parent.

The mass mood of modern man is one of loss of individual identity, of alienation and absurdity. The individual in our urban culture feels the burden of his own impotence. And if we are nobodies, then it does not really matter what we do. Our own problem then becomes philosophical: what meaning can life hold for us if we do not count and can do nothing to change our fate which drives us inexorably into obscurity? The denial of spiritual authority—and there is no religion, certainly no Judaism, without the spiritual authority of a "Father in Heaven"—which came to the fore in the Emancipation has been transformed today into a permissiveness born of despair. I do not know how valid is the picture

(next page, please)

of man, a century or two ago, throwing off the shackles of tradition as an expression of freedom and of having found himself and exercised his moral autonomy. I feel instinctively that contemporary rejection of spiritual authority is an expression of hopelessness, of man having lost himself, of being valueless and therefore not worthy of concern.

Parental permissiveness is thus a part of a general climate of opinion, and is today more a philosophical than a pedagogical problem. At bottom, the question of whether we parents or the peer group will hold the reins to our children's personalities and lives depends upon our own view of man: is he a free agent under G-d, endowed with value and significance, and hence worthy of divine concern and discipline; or is man nothing more than a blob of protoplasm, pushed and pulled by circumstances beyond his control and hence of no concern whatever to anyone— or One?

For us, the way is clear: a return to the teachings of our sacred tradition, renewed confidence in the Biblical doctrine of man's creation in the Divine Image, and hence his intrinsic value as a valid being instead of merely a collection of useful functions. It is this Image which endows him with meaning, with freedom, and hence with responsibility to His Maker. It was Saadia Gaon who predicated the whole concept of *Tzivuy v'Azharah*, of man standing under the Divine command, on the innate value of man and his transcendent significance. Our first concern, therefore, must be with ourselves and our own outlook. Having reintegrated ourselves in the Jewish context of values, we will have learned for ourselves the meaning of responsibility, and we will then be ready to reflect our own insights and ultimate judgments in the manner in which we guide our families.

Indulgence & Hedonism

This formulation of permissiveness as ultimately a question of spiritual outlook embraces also a related phenomenon—that of the over-indulgence of our children. Here, too, what superficially is stated as just an attitude towards the young, is soon understood as a broad outlook upon life affecting primarily our own selves and only derivatively our offspring.

We often maintain that we “give in” to children, and accept the dictates of their peer group, because we live in a youth-centered culture. It is quite true that we are currently experiencing a Cult of Youth, which is not surprising in light of the fact that half our population in this country is under the age of 25. Still, there always were young people available. We must look for an explanation in something more profound than numbers alone.

It seems to me that our worship of youth is an outgrowth of our thorough-going hedonism, our ideal of pleasure as a self-evident goal of humanity. “The pursuit of happiness” is defined by us as the quest for pleasure, and to “enjoy” is to achieve fulfillment. Youth is quite naturally accepted as the symbol and as the apex of the experience of pleasure.

I used to be astonished when, early in my career as a Rabbi, I would preach a fiery sermon which ought to have made my congregation uneasy, and then be told, at the conclusion of the services, “Rabbi, I really enjoyed it.” The reaction was not the result of masochism but of a fundamental hedonism which conceives of pleasure and enjoyment as the highest good and therefore the most flattering encomium. By now I am no longer unnerved when, after a eulogy, the mourners tell me, in all sincerity, “we enjoyed it.”

So widely accepted is this theory of pleasure as the highest good, that we are shocked to learn that things were not always so, and that until quite recently this was not a universally accepted dogma. Yet the fact is that this unreflective hedonism was not always a self-evident theme in the American Way of Life. A distinguished American lady writes the following in her autobiography:

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I still lived under the compulsion of my early training. Duty was perhaps the motivating force in my life, often excluding what might have been joy or pleasure. I looked at everything from the point of view of what I ought to do, rarely from the standpoint of what I wanted to do. So I took an interest in politics, but I don't know whether I enjoyed it. It was a wife's duty to be interested in whatever interested her husband, whether it was politics, books, or a particular dish for dinner.

Thus spoke Mrs. Franklin Delano Roosevelt, telling of her experiences as the wife of the Governor of New York in the years after 1910. To the mid-century American this sounds quaint and archaic and even a bit amusing.

For the Jew, however, this ought to strike a resonant note. The ideal of Torah is duty, not fun. Chief Justice Silberg of the Israel Supreme Court, in an article in the *Harvard Law Review* several years ago, showed that a major difference between Jewish law and other systems of law, such as the Anglo-Saxon, is that the latter is rights-centered, whereas the former is duty-centered. The central concern of the Jew is "what ought I do?" rather than "what is my right?"

The Talmud (*Ber. 32a*), reports that when Moses pleaded on behalf of Israel, after the disastrous worship of the golden calf, he said: "Master of the world, it is the gold and the silver which You gave to them in such abundance (upon leaving Egypt) that led them astray and caused them to worship the calf." The Almighty, of course, had good reason to indulge His Jews—it was in fulfillment of His promise to Abraham that after their enslavement they would leave with great wealth (see *Ber. 9b*). Yet what the Rabbis mean to tell us is, to put it quite boldly, that the Almighty teaches us *ka-veyakhol* by His own mistakes. He spoiled us by overindulging us, and it did us no good at all. Jewish parents have a powerful, eternal lesson which they ought never forget. There are all kinds of good reasons for giving our children material means to excess—but none of them is good enough an excuse for leading them to the idolatry of pleasure.

Does this mean that we do not want to be happy? Of course not. There is a world of difference between *simchah* and pleasure. Hedonism, the principle of pleasure-seeking, is self-defeating. The more one satisfies his craving for pleasure, the more his appetite grows, and the greater the ultimate frustration. But taking one's pleasure not as an end in itself but as part of a whole attitude, as part of an orientation which sees the greatest happiness as the joy of moral attainment (*simchah shel mitzvah*), leads to fulfillment, than which there is no greater happiness.

It is this which we must bear in mind when we ponder the problem of how much to give to our children. Seeing them as we unconsciously do, as extensions of our selves, we are liable to reveal in our indulgence of their material desires our own hedonistic, un-Jewish ideals. A conscious return to Jewish values, steering a clear course between the extremes of, on the one hand, asceticism and self-abnegation, and, on the other, pleasure-seeking and self-indulgence, we shall understand that our children, as the creatures of the Almighty, must be treated no differently from the way we are expected to treat ourselves.

In this sense, all adults are children—"ye are children of the Lord your G-d"—and, by the same token, children are just young human beings. When the very first baby was born in the world, his mother, Eve, proclaimed, "I have gotten a man (*ish*) with the help of the Lord" (*Gen. 4:1*).

The problems of children should, from the Jewish point of view, not be studied from a narrow perspective as something that concerns only the young, but on the broader canvass of the profound philosophical, cultural, and spiritual dilemmas which confront the whole of the modern world. By reasserting the values of Torah for ourselves, we will find them reflected beneficially in the lives of our children.

"Beloved is Israel, for they are called *banim la-Makom*, the children of G-d."

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all; it is merely the masterly framework of an influence designed to pervade all aspects of the home. The Jewish Mother is the loyal supporter and aide of her husband, whatever life may bring, and it is this rock-like solidarity nurtured by deep-set spiritual foundations that gives emotional and moral security to the members of the family.

The Matrix of the Home

Jewish parenthood is comparable to a sturdy tree. The father is represented by the sky-reaching branches and foliage; but the sustaining nourishing roots—they are the mother who disseminates those irreplaceable influences that have distinguished the Jewish home throughout the ages. Without strong roots the tree cannot survive and without the Mother's positive influence the Jewish family weakens and with it, in the long run, the entire Jewish people.

The Jewish woman's influence is deeply educational and social. She spends the greatest number of hours daily in the company of her children during their most impressionable years. The nine prenatal months are suspected of being also not without some degree of effect. By contact with her neighbors, her voluntary activities and contributions to the causes of her community, the impact of her personal qualities exercise their subtle but unmistakable mark on that aggregate of families we call society. It is, however, to be realized that it is not so much by what she says, and teaches, as by what she is, feels, thinks and does that she plays a determining part in molding the moral caliber of her future family. The child, the guarantee of Israel's tomorrow, is most of all a reflection of the mother and the type of home atmosphere she engenders. It is her gentle but firm moral strength that provides the enduring characteristics of the Jewish family and weaves its spiritual fiber for years to come.

Protector and Promoter of Values

The woman in Jewish life is considered to be the arch protector and promoter of Jewish values, unlike in so many secular cultures where she is delineated as the Delilah or arch temptress. The Jewish woman traditionally combines qualities of love, charity, and kindness with efficient and scrupulous management of daily affairs. Far from being the devil's accomplice, she is the impersonation of faithful and skillful advocacy for all that is Divine on earth. It is probably no mere accident that all that is holiest to us is conceptualized in Hebrew in the feminine sex, as Torah, Zion, and Mitzvah. The woman is also the beginning of all that is creative and as she carries the new-born generation within her body, she acquires sanctity just as the Holy Ark that shelters within its walls the words of the living G-d. The Jewish Mother's delicate sense of compassion and developed

capacity for empathy disqualify her in Jewish Law from the harsher roles of life, those of judge, witness and communal office. Yet she is entrusted with the most enduring aspects of communal life: the care, education and nurturance of the future generation.

The Jewish mother's greatest qualities are considered to be those of moral vigor; intellectual prowess and outward grace are always auxiliary but never paramount. She is accounted as an equal partner in the spiritual and physical maintenance of her family. She is the ballast of the family vessel; she is its helmsman if not its captain. She converts into actuality those lofty ideals set out by the Torah and warms the heart with the reflected light of her personality. She is superbly fitted, by her continual presence in the home and her close emotional contact with the young, to be the surest guardian of Israel's spiritual capital.

Among the prime qualities tradition ascribes to Jewish womanhood are modesty, gentleness, reticence and a superb sense of tact and diplomacy rooted in a keen social conscience. Experts have analyzed the growing gangrene of modern youth and society; some have pinpointed the phenomenon of the working mother as the root cause, others again the often absent abdicating and pre-occupied father. Yet others have blamed the ever-increasing pre-ponderance of suburban life with its dwindling of close kinship ties and increase of isolated living. None of these factors, it would seem, is alone to blame.

It is certain however that the wife and mother in each family constitutes one of the pillars on which the social edifice rests and this is as true today as ever. Yet many wrongly assume that preparation for this role commences with motherhood, marriage or even courtship. By then, it is usually far too late in the day. Education for successful Jewish womanhood must begin with the child's first steps and words—in short it begins where all beginnings are made—with the influence of the mother!

The woman in the Jewish home must remain the most positive factor, most resistant to moral corrosion and yet most adaptable and receptive to new ideas. Her daily stint of tiresome chores and her constant preoccupations with the essential little things of life must not dull her to the appreciation of subtle nuances of spiritual progress, nor must it rob her of the vigor necessary for moral rejuvenation. The Jewish mother remains the most creative, responsible, educative, and integrative single force in social life. This major truth is reflected in the wise words of King Solomon: "*Chochmas nashim bonsah bayis*—the intuitive wisdom of women has consolidated the family."

The child inherits his Jewishness from his Mother irrespective of his father's position. This fact of Jewish law is alone sufficient to testify to the Torah's view of the cardinal importance of Woman and Mother in Israel.