

Teaching Ahavas Hashem

Introduction

Several years ago, before giving a lecture at a Torah Umesorah convention, Rav Aharon Brustowsky¹ went to speak with his rebbi, Reb Eliyah Svei zt"l, regarding what the lecture should be about. Reb Eliyah told him:

"I want it to be known, once and for all, that teaching Torah is not about methodology. It's all about taking the neshama of a heilige, Yiddishe child, and drawing it closer to the Ribono Shel Olam. That's what it is."

This is the goal, mission, and job description of a Torah teacher: to draw his or her students closer to the Ribono Shel Olam. But this is not something that happens automatically; we must have a plan for how we will accomplish this goal.

Withstanding The Deluge

The children of our generation are faced with an unprecedented onslaught of external influences and stimuli which try to tempt them away from Torah and mitzvos. How can we help protect them? What tools can we give them to help them withstand the temptations that are found on every street, and sometimes, unfortunately, even in their own homes? How can we ensure they choose to live a life of Torah and Yiddishkeit?

The answer to these questions has two parts. The first part is to help them develop a love for Hashem, and a personal relationship with Him. No matter what they face, if a child truly loves Hashem, feels that Hashem watches over him and loves him, they will want to stay close to Him and keep His mitzvos. Conversely, if a person doesn't love Hashem, the moment he encounters difficulties, his emunah wavers and can crack. This is an explicit Rashi on the posuk of וְאֶהְיֶה אֵלֶיךָ (Devarim 6/5):

*Ve'ahavta: Perform His commandments out of love. The one who acts out of love cannot be compared to the one who acts out of fear. The one who serves his master out of fear, when the master sets a burden upon him, he (the servant) leaves him and goes away.*²

There are many different challenges and traumas which can cause people to go off the derech, r"l. But Ahavas Hashem, in contrast to serving out of fear, can be the glue that keeps one with Yiddishkeit. Besides its importance as one of the

fundamentals of Yiddishkeit, Ahavas Hashem may very well be what will keep many children **on** the derech.

So how do we help a child develop Ahavas Hashem, as well as a personal relationship with Hashem? The main way to do so is by constantly talking about Hashem, about His love for us, and about His Hashgacha Pratis.

Hashem's Love For Us

The very first thing we need to do is to define for our students what our relationship to Hashem is, and to show them how tremendous His love for us is. The Torah states (Devarim 14/1):

בְּנִים אַתֶּם לַה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם

You are children of Hashem, your God.

We all have tremendous love for our children. As imperfect human beings, however, that love can likewise sometimes be imperfect. Of course we try our best, but sometimes our negios (biases) get in the way, and we can inadvertently end up doing things that aren't in the absolute best interest of our children. Hashem, however, is perfect. Therefore, His love for us is also perfect. The Zohar tells us:

*Rabbi Yehuda says: if people would know the extent of Hashem's love to Yisrael, they would roar like lions to run after Him.*³

Our students (and children) need to know this! They need to hear from us, again and again, that Hashem's love for us is tremendous, perfect, and infinite! And His love for us is not something distant and abstract. He is with us every second of the day, He always watches over us, and He steers every moment of our lives. Everything that happens to us, is a direct gift from אֱלֹהֵינוּ שְׂבִשְׁמִים. And these are facts which we must communicate to our students on a daily basis.

Rav Moshe Feinstein tells us (אגרות משה חלק יו"ד ג סימן עו):
*And the main priority in chinuch is to educate him in emunah in Hashem Yisborach and His Torah, and that each thing he is given is a gift from Hashem Yisborach, as he will then acquire love for Hashem...*⁴

We should stress to our students that everything we have is from Hashem. But besides telling them in a general way that everything is from Hashem, we should also take every

opportunity of students being happy about something specific, to stress to them that it is Hashem who gave it to them because of His great love for them.

Rav Mattisyahu Solomon in his book “With Hearts Full of Love” (pages 152-153) writes about the importance of constantly talking to children about Hashem:

“It appears to me that the most crucial ingredient missing from our chinuch is that we do not teach our children to know the Ribono Shel Olam. When the children are young, they are told that there is a Ribono Shel Olam. But as the child grows older, he still doesn’t know what the Ribono Shel Olam is and how exactly the Ribono Shel Olam fits into his life.

...We have to go back to Avraham’s kind of chinuch. He taught his family and his disciples all about the middos of the Ribono Shel Olam. He declared to the world that there was a Ribono Shel Olam, but he didn’t stop there. He followed through. He opened people’s eyes to the endless chessed of the Ribono Shel Olam. He educated them about the various divine middos, and he taught people to integrate them into their own lives. He made the Ribono Shel Olam a vital part of their existence.

We don’t find many people who speak among themselves about the Ribono Shel Olam. Sure, they say “baruch Hashem” and “im yirtzeh Hashem” as a matter of rote, a figure of speech, but how often do we hear people say it with feeling? How often do we hear people say it with the same passion and intensity they exhibit when they speak about other people who’ve helped them through difficult situations?

You often hear someone tell stories about how such and such a person did wonderful favors for them. People gush when they tell these stories, and their faces glow with gratitude. But when was the last time we saw someone gush about what the Ribono Shel Olam did for him? And if the parents didn’t talk like this among themselves, how is a child supposed to grow up with an appreciation for the role that the Ribono Shel Olam plays in his life?

It is not surprising, then, that some children abandon the Torah. After all, why shouldn’t they do forbidden things? Do they really know anything about the Ribono Shel Olam? All they know is that their parents do not want them to do certain things, but that is not going to deter them from satisfying their urges. And so one barrier after another falls. Boundaries dissolve. And all the predictions of Chazal in that Mishnah come to pass. What is the answer? Introduce the children to their Father in Heaven. Show them that He is the central point of their existence...”

Constantly Talking About Hashem

One important point to stress is that speaking to students about Hashem’s love for us and His hashgacha, must be a constant endeavor. Rav Michel Yehuda Lefkowitz said:

*It is our duty to strengthen ourselves and toil on chinuch that it should be straight and good, and to implant in the hearts of our students Yiras Shomayim and good middos... Therefore every mechanech **has to instill many words of Yiras Shomayim**⁵, love of mitzvos and the holiness of Shabbos in the hearts of the students. **And I mean that also in the middle of learning...**⁶*

Similarly, Rabbi Shaya Cohen in his sefer “Impassioned Chinuch” writes:

...teachers should continuously point out to their talmidim the ability for each of them to develop a relationship with Hashem in this world. As this relationship develops, they will begin to realize all the amazing acts of hashgacha pratis that occur during their daily lives. Continuously stress the chessed of Hashem and how it impacts our lives. Every week, ask your talmidim to relate events from their lives for which they are grateful to Hashem. We all want to experience happiness in this world, and if you want your talmidim to be passionate about Yiddishkeit, you must inculcate them with the sense that Hashem loves them and is actively and positively involved in their lives.

The Midrash compares Torah to wheat and gives important guidance how to safeguard that wheat:

It is the way of the world, that [when] a person says to his friend, “I am wealthy and I have much wheat, and much oil and wine,” his friends said to him, “You have everything in your hand, [but] do you have a storehouse where to put it all? If you don’t have a storehouse, you have nothing.”⁷

This Midrash compares Yiras Shomayim to a storehouse or silo where wheat is stored. It is not enough for the wheat to be mixed together with the preservative, it must also be enveloped and surrounded by protective walls.

The same is true for the Torah which we teach our students. It is the duty of a mechanech to surround and envelop his students with an atmosphere of constant discussion of Hashem, mitzvos, and Yiddishkeit. Not only during learning, but also before learning, after learning, and at recess, and so on. We must constantly identify opportunities to talk to our students about Hashem, His hashgacha, middos, and the beauty of Torah and mitzvos.

Ahavas Hashem Through Mitzvos

One powerful aspect of Hashem's love for us is connected to the fact that He gave us mitzvos in order to give us reward. See what we write about this topic in the article "Teaching Ahavas

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² ואהבת: עשה דבריו מאהבה אינו דומה עושה מאהבה לעושה מיראה. העושה אצל רבו מיראה כשהוא מטריח עליו מניחו והולך לו:

³ אמר רבי יהודה, אלמלי הוו ידעין בני נשא רחמנותא דרחים קב"ה לישראל, הוו שאגין ככפיריא למרדף אבתריה (זוהר ח"ב, דף ה' ע"ב)

⁴ ועיקר החינוך צריכים לחנכו באמונה בהשם יתברך ובתורתו ושכל דבר שנותנים לו הוא מתנה מהשי"ת שאז יקנה אהבה להשי"ת וכו'

Hamitzvos" as well as in "The Master Mechanech", as it is an additional, very powerful way of strengthening our students' love for Hashem.

⁵ See the article "Teaching Yiras Shomayim vs Yiras Ha'onesh"

⁶ החובה עלינו להתחזק ולעמול על החינוך שיהיה חינוך ישר וטוב, ולהשריש בלב התלמידים יראת שמים ומידות טובות... לכן כל מחנך צריך להכניס הרבה דיבורים של יראת שמים ויופי המצוות וקדושת שבת בלב התלמידים. וכוונתי שגם באמצע הלימוד...

⁷ בנוהג שבעולם אדם אומר לחברו עשיר אני ויש לי חיטים הרבה ושמן ויין הרבה, אמרו לו חבריו הרי הכל יש בידך, יש לך אוצר היכן ליתנם, אם אין לך אוצר אין בידך כלום - אגדת בראשית פרק לג