

Souls and Scrolls

LESSONS FROM THE TORAH IN TREATING OUR CHILDREN

Mushka Gopin



Mushka Gopin, M.Ed teaches mothers of ages 0-6 to parent intentionally and enjoy motherhood. Her foundational parenting course, "A Motherhood Manual" (like kallah classes, but for parenting!) re-opens this summer. Follow her on Instagram @MotheringMindset, download free resources at www.MyMotheringMindset.com and subscribe to her new podcast!



"Look, Mommy, I colored all the letters. What does it say?"

I must be getting soft in my old age, because one look at my four year old son's art project had me tearing up. He was wearing a Sefer Torah costume and an impish little smile, standing in front of a gated Har Sinai. His colored letters read: "Our children are our guarantors." It was the kind of wholesome, classic craft I might have come home with, 20+ years ago.

It reminded me instantly of a famous post-Holocaust story I've always liked. Little Avraham had been hidden away by his nanny and raised to be a good Catholic, named Henryk. By the time his father picked him up, he had no memories of being Jewish. The day of their reunion was Simchas Torah 1945. His father, Joseph Foxman, took his son straight to the Great Synagogue of Vilna. There were no Torahs left in the shul, but a handful of Auschwitz

survivors had returned to celebrate. A Jewish man, still wearing his Soviet Army uniform, stared at Henryk as he came in. Trembling, he approached and asked the father if the little boy was Jewish. "I have traveled thousands of miles over the last four years, and this is the first living Jewish child I have seen in all this time," the soldier said. Turning to Henryk he asked "Can I hold you?" With the child on his shoulders, the soldier joined the dancing, crying, "This child is my Torah scroll!"

The boy was Abe Foxman, who went on to become the national director of the Anti-Defamation League. He remembers this story as his first conscious feeling of connection with Yiddishkeit and of being a Jew. The child danced with, instead of a Sefer Torah. The child as the guarantor of our Torah. It's such a beautiful sentiment. We read it. We teach it. We preach it! But do we live it? If our children are as precious, or



even more so, than a Torah scroll... is that actually reflected in how we view and treat them? Let's look at how we care for the Torah and compare that with how we view our children.

Let's start with: souls BEFORE scrolls. Before inscribing anything onto the Torah, the Sofer has to work with a strong foundation. The parchment must be smooth and unblemished. Before we try to imprint our values upon our children, we must first strive to ensure they



bodies & souls

Art by Keren Gordon who is a stay at home mom who loves to produce art. She runs anashchinuch.com which is an educational platform geared towards Chabad parents and educators.

are emotionally whole and healthy. A frum Jew is first a healthy Jew.

Do we stress out and enforce things that our children may not be developmentally capable of? Do we put "the cart before the horse" and rush our children into practices or minhagim for which they are not yet old enough or ready for? I recently saw a list by Rabbi Michael Gourarie, detailing the ages of when to introduce Chassidische minhagim. For example, sitting in shul: not before age 6-7 for some time, before playing outside. Our goal should be a child who loves to come to shul, not a count of minutes on the clock or pages in the siddur.

The writing of a new Torah is cause for community celebration, both at its inception and its conclusion. A Hachnosas Sefer Torah is the culmination of much time, effort and money; it doesn't happen every day, so it's a pretty big deal when it does. The Torah is paraded along the streets and serenaded with music and dancing. The kids get candy or a carnival. We don't even say Tachanun!

The birth of a new baby - also a culmination of a lot of time and effort! - should receive the same fanfare. Is the new mother supported unconditionally? Does she indeed feel that there is a "village" taking care of her postpartum emotional and even physical needs? (There are wonderful local organizations and Miriam's Motherhood Center that work to fill these needs.) Is the new baby welcomed unconditionally... no matter what number baby it is, how close apart it is to its siblings, how the mother is going to handle it, or any other such judgments we can make?

I received a beautiful note from somebody who isn't frum. It must have come with a gift or a check in honor of the birth of my third baby, but all I remember is the note. She wrote, "Another Jew is born to our nation." So

simple. So profound. So easy for us to forget because so many babies are k"ah born, all the time, that we can lose sight of how important and special it is.

When the Torah is in use, it is treated with the utmost reverence. We dress it gently and lovingly. We store it carefully. If a Torah falls to the floor, chas v'shalom, we customarily fast. To desecrate a Torah scroll is the greatest offense and the most shocking felony, and the sight of it wounds our collective soul.

And our children? Sometimes, in the very name of "education", we shame, belittle, threaten, yell at and disrespect them... Sometimes we inadvertently or even purposely violate their honor, self-respect and dignity. Sometimes we forget to "handle with care".

We are the "People of the Book," but we are people first. There is no Torah without a nation. There is no future without our children. So, how can we actually live these messages from the Torah?

Consider: Is there something I am currently doing or not doing, a value I am imparting or a lesson I am enforcing that emphasizes the scroll over the soul? Is following the letter of the law ruining its spirit? (Not halachically, but as the example of a young child forced to sit in shul.) What do I gossip about to my neighbor or in my Whatsapp groups? Can I look with an "ayin tov" at the many strollers taking up our sidewalks and smile at the harried mother hurrying through the grocery store with whiny little kids? (Trust me, she doesn't want to be there either!)

How do I treat the neshama before me: my child, my student, that annoying little kid (we all know one!) If I picture him as a Torah scroll, would I treat him more gently? Our children are our future and our legacy. The work we put into each one is an investment into our nation.