

Parenting in the Parsha

פרשת דברים

How Many Times Do I have to Tell You...?

בְּעֵבֶר הַיַּרְדֵּן בְּאֶרֶץ מוֹאָב הוֹאִיל מֹשֶׁה בְּאֶרֶץ אֶת־הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת

On the other side of the Jordan, in the land of Moab, Moses undertook to expound this Teaching.

הספר הזה ענינו ידוע שהוא משנה תורה יבאר בו משה רבנו לדור הנכנס בארץ רוב מצות התורה הצריכות לישראל ... יחזיר המצות הנהוגות בהם פעם להוסיף בהם ביאור ופעם שלא יחזיר אותם רק להזהיר את ישראל ברוב אזהרות כמו שיבאו בספר הזה בעניני עבודת גלולים אזהרות מרובות זו אחר זו בתוכחות וקול פחדים אשר יפחיד אותם בכל ענשי העבירות.

The topic of this book is known in that it is the repetition of the Torah. In it, Moshe *rabbeinu* explains to the generation entering The Land the majority of the *mitzvos* of the Torah that are necessary for Israel...He repeats the *mitzvos* that apply to them, at times to add explanation, and at times he only repeats them to warn the people many times as will be brought in this book regarding idolatry, multiple warnings one after another in the *tochacha* and the sound of fear that he instills in them with all the punishments for sins.

- Ramba"n

You can learn many things from children. How much patience you have, for instance.

- Franklin P. Jones

It has been a long career for Moshe *rabbeinu* as the leader of the Jewish people. He has led them for greater than forty years now, from the bonds of oppression to the expanse of freedom, and from the depths of despair to the pinnacle of revelry. Moshe had, almost singlehandedly, transformed a rag-tag band of slaves into a Kingdom of Priests and a Holy Nation. And, it was never easy.

From the very beginning, people questioned his mission and his audacity to challenge Pharaoh. Even after having led the people through the split sea, they complained, questioned and often refused to follow the most basic of instructions. And, in direct response to the people's complaints over water, Moshe is condemned to die in the desert, never to realize his life-long dream. Now, as the *Bnei Yisroel* begin their final preparations to enter the land, Moshe prepares to take leave of this world and of the people. He has one last chance to speak to his nation. What is his final message? A patient, measured repetition of the very instructions he has given them countless times before.

The book of Devarim, or *Mishne Torah* as it titled by *chaza"l* is largely a repetition of laws, statutes and rules that have already been laid out and explained quite clearly. Sometimes that repetition comes with further elaboration and explanation. Often, as the Ramba"n notes, the *mitzvos* are simply repeated as is. In the Torah, where every word is precious, where not one letter is extraneous, an entire *sefer* is dedicated to the reiteration of laws that are already clearly spelled out! Why?

Perhaps Moshe and the Torah here are recording for us a lesson about leadership and about parenting. One of the most painful tropes you may hear from frustrated parents is "How many times do I have to tell you...?" That could be "How many times do I have to tell you to clear your spot? To brush your teeth? To clean up after yourself? To stop hitting your sister?" Moshe is teaching us the patience to tell them as many times as they need to hear.

Why do children often not listen the first time we tell them? There are many reasons. Children do not share the same priorities that we do. The fact that something is important to us parents doesn't mean it is important to our children. Kids, like adults, will first address that which important to them before moving on to other's interests. Children are by nature

ego-centric, thinking about their own needs and, even then, only their short run needs. Children are naturally prone to prioritize their instant gratification over all else.

Children are also impulsive. They are prone to act without thought and reason. Their brains are not yet fully developed, and the pre-frontal cortex that serves as the rational check on impulsiveness in adults is simply not finished yet in children. In other words, it is perfectly normal and natural for children not to listen to your direction or request the first time. Making the child think that there is something wrong with him by asking “How many times do I have to tell you?” will not help matters.

What can you do? There are some important steps you can take to increase the chance of your child listening to your request. First and foremost, make sure to get your child’s full and undivided attention when you make your request and make sure that he has your full attention as well. A comment or command made in passing without either one of you looking up from your screens is doomed to fail.

Give your child advance warning about a task that you will want him to do. Instead of saying “turn off the computer, and come set the table for supper,” five minutes before say “in five minutes, I’m going to be asking you to turn off the computer, and come set the table.” Again, make sure he hears you, and follow through after five minutes.

Give your child choices, either in what tasks to do or at the very least, in what order to do them. All human beings cherish their autonomy, and little children value it even more because it is a rare commodity for them. Offering the child, the opportunity to decide for himself what to do or in what order to do it can be of great value in getting a child to cooperate. Give him a list of the things that need to get done and the due date for when they must be done and empower him to decide the order.

Set a timer. This is especially helpful for boys. For many kids, the challenge of beating the clock spurs them to complete tasks they might not otherwise complete.

Follow through on your requests and consequences. The most effective way to get a child to ignore you is by letting him know that there is no consequence to ignoring you. You shouldn’t be mean or nasty in imposing consequences, just clear, fair and consistent.

Let your child understand the reasoning behind what needs to be done. Invite him to help you solve the problem that the needed task will solve. You would be surprised at the creativity, resilience and reliability of a child who is carrying out a task of his own making.

Don’t assume that your child has the skills to effectively plan, manage, and carry out a task. Executive functioning skills do not come naturally to all children. What may look to you like obstinance or defiance may simply be inability. Use the tasks you assign your child as a laboratory for training in the executive function skills he will need for life.

Most important, be patient. How many times will you have to tell him? As many times as it takes for you to condition and educate your child to only need to be told once.

Good Shabbos,

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