

Sermon/Drasha Parshas Naso "Monkey See, Monkey Do" 5/20/2013

In honor of the special birthday of June Cohen

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Fifty years ago humans altered the temperature of some volcanic hot springs in Japan to make the water more comfortable for bathers. Then, something remarkable took place: a smart young female snow monkey took advantage of the beneficial environmental change and lowered herself into those hot springs. Soon, other young monkeys copied her. From that moment on the joys of 'hot tubbing' have been passed on for 3 generations and have become part of the culture of the famous Jigokudan snow monkey troupe.

It's questionable whether the behavior of these monkeys is, as some suggest, "evolution unfolding right before our eyes." Nevertheless, the hot tub behavior of the snow monkeys is certainly cultural learning passed on by imitation. And there's a technical term for this type of learning that I'm certain you're familiar with: Monkey see, monkey do.

"Monkey see, monkey do" is a saying that originated in Jamaica in the early 18th century and popped up in American culture in the early 1920s. The saying refers to learning something without an understanding why it works. Another definition implies mimicking, usually with limited knowledge of or limited concern for the consequences. "Monkey see, monkey do" is a process that applies not only to monkeys, but also to people. The profound impact of mimicking and imitation can be seen from a fascinating lesson in this week's Haftorah.

The Book of Judges tells the story of the *malach*/angel who visited the wife of Manoach. Manoach and his wife had been childless for many years. The angel informed *eishes Manoach* -- Mrs. Manoach -- that she would soon be blessed with a son. But the angel attached a condition: Your son would be unique; from the moment of conception he was consecrated as a *nazir*.

Being a *nazir* (discussed in this week's parsha) meant that her son would be required to abstain from drinking any beverage or eating any food derived from grapes. Since he'd be a *nazir* from conception, the mother would be required to abstain from these foods and beverages while she carried him. In addition, the son's hair could never be cut. The son was to be taught to follow these commandments throughout his entire life. This special son, the angel prophesied, would eventually initiate the salvation of the Jewish people from the oppressive yoke of the Philistines.

And you all know the name of Mrs. Manoach's famous son; Shimshon HaGibbor, or Samson the Mighty

The Book of Judges then goes on to say that Mrs. Manoach ran quickly to tell her husband the remarkable news of their son and his unique status. Upon hearing all this, Manoach's immediate reaction was to daven, begging Hashem to bring back the messenger that had spoken to his wife, so that he could teach Manoach how to raise this special child. Hashem listened to Manoach's pleas and the angel appeared again that very day. Manoach asked him, "How will I raise this special child?"

What was so troubling to Manoach, that he needed special child raising instruction from the angel? After all, the angel had just previously given explicit child-rearing instructions to Manoach's wife.

Have you ever heard the expression, 'Little Pitchers have Big Ears'? Kids have uncanny powers of observation -- particularly when it comes to watching and listening to their parents.

They tell the story of the family that was seated at the dinner table. And invited for dinner was a very important man who was a business acquaintance of the father. At some point during the meal, the family's 6 year-old son blurted out, "Isn't this roast beef?"

"Yes, darling," said the mother, ignoring his surprised look. "Why do you ask?"

"Well, Mommy, Daddy said this morning that he was going to bring a big fish home for dinner."

Another similar story is told of the time that a little boy welcomed his visiting grandmother. Oh, I'm sure happy to see you," the little boy said to his grandmother on his mother's side. "Now maybe Daddy will do the trick he's been promising us."

The grandmother was curious, "What trick is that?" she asked.

"I heard Daddy tell Mommy," the little boy answered, "that he would climb the walls if you came to visit."

Children not only hear everything we say -- but they imitate us to a 'T', as well. Our children learn to push buttons and turn knobs and scold the dog just like their parents. One of the first complete sentences our daughter Yelli learned was "Bad dog!" -- though our dog, for the most part, has been a very good dog. Long before they are capable of speaking their first word, children are learning to talk. They hear the various sounds of language, as well as its lilt and accent from their parents and others. They begin babbling to imitate.

From the beginning, children learn and imitate both the positive and the negative. Funny stories (or maybe not so funny) are sometimes told about children who repeat an impolite word they have innocently heard someone say! Because they learn by imitating, our children may learn to be respectful, caring and honest—but they may also learn to be disrespectful, uncaring and dishonest. Many other good and bad traits may be imitated.

So to return to the question: what educational advice was Manoach seeking from the angel?

Manoach's dilemma was: How can I teach my son to refrain from drinking wine or grape juice if he sees me drinking Kiddush? How can I drink four cups of wine at the Seder, yet tell my son that he is prohibited from doing so?

To this important matter of *chinuch*/education the angel replied, "All the instructions (regarding the food from which to abstain) I told the woman (your wife) **you should keep**. All that I commanded her **you should keep**. (*Shoftim* 13:12-14).

"In other words," the angel said to Manoach, "it just won't cut it if you tell your son what he has to do. To teach your son to be a *nazir*, you, also, have to refrain from drinking wine, grape juice, and other grape products. You can't just 'talk the talk.' You have to walk the walk."

To say this a bit differently, the angel taught Manoach the "Simple Simon" principle. Remember 'Simple Simon'? When the game leader says "Touch your head" but instead touches his shoulders, the player's first impulse is to follow his actions and touch their shoulders. When what we see conflicts with what we hear, we instinctively proceed according to what we see.

There is no hope for success in an educational environment based on "Do as I say, not as I do." The example children see and the environment in which they are immersed teaches them the lessons that penetrate their hearts with a far greater impact than the lessons they hear in words alone. If you want to have success with your children and grandchildren ...if you want to have terrific children and grandchildren who grow up to be mensches, and good Jews -- you have to walk the walk, not just talk the talk.

Today we're celebrating a special birthday with one of our dear members who has made an indelible impression on us her friends -- and who has raised a fantastic, warm, loving family. I refer, of course, to June Cohen.

June is described by her children as always having been a loving, giving mother with the warmest of personalities. Rosemary, Marshall and Paula remember that when they were kids, their friends were always welcome. At times they would come over in droves to sleep over. Dad (your dear husband and father, Julius, z"l) was often busy at work: But Mom was always ready to take the kids over to friends homes, dance recitals, and sports events. June and Julius didn't just talk about the importance of putting family first. They always put the kids first, enabling them to grow up in a warm family atmosphere. Most meals were eaten together, with both June and Julius doing the cooking.

June is described as the most organized person on the planet. She always wakes up happy, ready to embrace the day at 5:30 A.M. And if on occasion she gets up at 7 she'll feel that the day is wasted and ruined. June often spoke to her children about the importance of being physically active, and quite literally, 'walked the walk.' She was always active in some manner; walking, playing volleyball, working out at the J. Her positive, can-do attitude was infectious. Even when times were difficult, the Cohen children would hear their mother say such things as, "Just do your best" and "Don't worry, things will work out." How can such a wonderful approach to life not rub off on children?

Things weren't 'fancy' in the Cohen house, but the role models of tzedaka, synagogue involvement and charitable work for such organizations as the American Cancer Society were part of the Cohen children upbringing. June, according to her children, has 'a heart of gold', and has always shown a marvelous way of making people feel good. The orchard and garden in the backyard of the Cohen house became a regular destination for school 1st grade field trips where children would pick apples. And it's evident that the apples that are the Cohen children haven't fallen 'far from the tree'; June's three children and eight grandchildren are each so special in their own way. We hope to be able to share many of their simchas together, in the years to come, with you, June, and your entire family.

In conclusion, then, "Monkey see, monkey do" is an educational process that applies not only to monkeys but also to children. The most profound lessons learned are those our kids pick up from watching us. Mazel tov to June Cohen on her special birthday -- and may you continue for many years to come, in good health, to be an inspiring role model to us and to your wonderful family.