

Seven Pillars of the Jewish Home

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Pillar 1: Children

Before I was married I had nine theories how to raise kids, but no children. Now, thirty years later, I have nine children and no theories! But seriously, while raising children can be difficult, children are also our greatest pleasure. And when we look to the Torah, we see guidance to help us do the best job possible with the precious souls entrusted into our care. Let's examine four Jewish child-rearing principles.

1) Raising a child is like holding a bird in your hand. Open your hand too loose, the bird flies away. Close your hand too tight, you'll crush the bird. What's needed in raising a child, then, is a combination of love (the open hand) and discipline (the closed hand).

a) Love is the way you give your child a sense of self. This is accomplished by:

- Time. Time is our greatest resource. Share it with your child.
- Listen to them. Really listen.
- *Noseh b'OI* / Empathize. When they cry, their hurt is real.
- Share in their joy. Their happiness means as much to them, as ours does to us.
- Praise. Identify their successes, and praise them for good character.

To show your child love, operate with the principle of, 'What's important to you is important to me.'

b) Discipline isn't what you do to your kids when you're angry at them. That's child abuse.

-- King Solomon said, "*Choser shevet soneh bno* -- Spare the rod, spoil the child." This means that if you don't discipline your children, they'll grow up to be people you'll hate -- selfish Yetzer Haras (evil inclinations).

-- 'Sparing the rod' doesn't mean corporal punishment; rather, it refers to discipline. And what is discipline? How you communicate to your children the consequences of their actions.

-- In disciplining your child, use 'the Three Fs': Be fair, friendly and firm.

2) Know your customer.

King Solomon said, *Chanuch l'na'ar al pi darko* -- Educate the young according to his or her way. It's essential to provide each child with the direction best suited for their unique talents, skills, needs, challenges and personality. And to do that, we must become experts in knowing our children.

Every child is different. Whether dependent upon the birth order in a family, circumstances that occurred earlier in a child's life, and evolving styles of parenting, the differences between children within the same family can be dramatic. The Almighty wants us to recognize and embrace the uniqueness of each of our children. The Red Sea split into twelve paths, one for each tribe; the special character, skill and talent of each tribe is to be treasured.

3) A Happy Home

The single most important thing one can do for one's children is to insure they grow up in a happy home.

We have so many problems with children today. They're unhappy, defensive, and argue with their parents. Why?

One answer is because children are growing up in an unhappy world. There is tension and stress everywhere, and more often than not, it manifests itself in the home. The center of a child's world is the home. He's acutely focused on how his parents communicate, and how they treat each other. This observation forms the basis of his interpersonal skills. Have you ever noticed how a child repeats his parents' words in exactly the same tone?

The lesson is simple and profound; By building a better relationship with your spouse, you can make the world a happier place for your children. The love and *shalom bayis* you create in your home affects the physical, emotional and spiritual health of your children

4) Education and Upbringing of Children

Jewish education is termed *chinuch*; not only formal schooling, but 'consecration'. Chinuch means we train our children for a living, not only for a livelihood. The primary aims in the education of a Jewish child are:

- a) Instill moral and ethical values of Judaism
- b) Encourage active observance of the Torah's 613 commandments (mitzvos) -- by modeling the behavior you hope to see in your child
- c) Transmit knowledge of the Torah and major Jewish sources -- create a literate Jew
- d) Create a strong sense of identification with and concern for all Jewish people, Israel, and the world.

Pillar 2: Resolving Conflict and Disagreement

In any household it's not a question of if disagreements will arise, but when. How differences of opinion are addressed and resolved is the difference between a happy home and a battle zone. Unless dealing with 'small stuff' that can be easily ignored, don't sweep problems under the carpet; otherwise, you're left with a lumpy carpet hiding grudges, resentment, and fractured relationships. Many families have people who haven't talked to each other for years, and don't remember why.

Hochayach Tocheyach es Amisecha: You shall surely rebuke your people (Leviticus 19:17)

The Torah teaches us to oriented to address disagreements, difficulties and problems. If done properly and effectively, *tochacha* ('effective criticism') is a great mitzvah.

By raising disagreements, three things can happen.

- 1) The other person will apologize
- 2) You'll hear the other side of the story
- 3) If there's no apology or other side presented, at least you'll clearly know where you stand

Below find some of the Dos and Don'ts of how to bring up sensitive subjects of disagreement.

Dos:

Always start and end the conversation by affirming that you care about the other person.

In the midst of a disagreement, you can never underestimate the power and importance of reminding the other person that you care about them and believe in them.

In Private

Make sure no one else is near to hear or see the interchange.

Be open to the idea that you made a mistake even if you are sure you did not.

There is a good chance that there is at least a kernel of truth to what they are saying, or their point of view.

Don'ts

Don't speak in generalities of another person's behavior; speak only to direct examples and instances of action.

It's hard for anyone to own up to a generalization and so you'll likely just see his or her defensiveness activate. By isolating an instance of fact, everyone can quickly see where he or she was *right* and *wrong*.

Do not cuss.

Exaggerated language is often proof of an exaggerated understanding of what actually happened. If you swear, the other party is likely to only hear the expletives and will stop listening for any validity in what you're saying.

No name-calling.

Belittling a person always shifts the focus off of resolving the actual problem. Verbal abuse is never welcome to a conflict resolution party

No Anger

Discussing 'hot topics' when angry is pouring gasoline on a fire.

As long as they are in place, then no disagreement or conflict will ever shake the critical bedrock of knowing that the other person cares about you. As long as we know the other person cares about us, it will give us a common ground to work from as we try to unite two seemingly conflicted views

A final thought:

I try to watch the words I say
And keep them soft and sweet;

For I don't know from day to day
Which ones I'll have to eat (anonymous)

Pillar 3: Relationship of Husband and Wife

1) Goal: To Become one

In the Creation story, woman was separated from man rather than being created separately like the animals. Why? The Talmud says that 40 days before conception a heavenly voice proclaims, 'So and so is bshert for so and so.' A man and woman are two halves of a whole. In seeking a mate, a man is looking for his 'lost object'. This teaches us that marriage is a union, not a partnership, with the goal, to become one.

-- Marriage is a tov -- the greatest good. ('not good for man to be alone' -- implying it is good to be together).

2) Judaism is unromantic

-- In a secular or non-Jewish wedding, immediately following the exchange of rings the officiant will say, "You may now kiss the bride." In a Jewish religious wedding, following the placement of the ring upon the bride's hand, the Ketubah is read. Written in Aramaic, the Ketubah provides for a monetary payment to the bride in the event of death or divorce, and states the husbandly obligations such as to feed, clothe and otherwise provide for his wife.

This unromantic procedure teaches husband and wife a profound lesson: A Jewish marriage is based upon fulfillment of responsibilities, not love. True love comes after marriage, not before. Rather than a focus on 'rights' or ephemeral transitory emotions of love, the foundation of a lasting marriage, Judaism teaches, is a commitment to meeting one's obligations to your life partner.

3) Shalom Bayis

Harmony and good will between husband and wife must reign. Men should understand that women cry easily. The Talmud says that a man must love his wife at least as much as himself, but honor her more than himself. A husband should be prepared to eat ample portions of 'honeydo'!

Marriage allows a person to forget about himself or herself and to become selfless, rather than selfish. Giving and selflessness creates love -- and J

ewish tradition understands that love creates a home. In Hebrew, the word for "home" is "bayit," which is closely related to the letter "bet." This letter is shaped in the form of two parallel lines, joined by a third perpendicular line. Symbolically, this teaches that a home is formed by two people, each with their own individuality, who join together on mutual terrain. Their goal is to spend the rest of their lives together, creating a warm, happy, safe environment filled with *Shalom Bayis*.

4) Three-A's of marital harmony: Attention, Affection, and Appreciation.

- Attention means respect and listening: "I care about what you think and feel. It's very important to me."

- Affection is caring with unconditional love. After all, marrying someone is basically trusting them with your life.

- Appreciation is noticing what's good, what's right -- and verbalizing it.

Practice the Three-A's daily, and you are guaranteed a closer marriage, a more stable home, and happier, healthier children.

Pillar 4: Gratitude

Do you show your gratitude to people who you live with? If not, you're missing out on multiple opportunities to getting along better with people, and to create a wonderful Jewish home.. The dictionary describes gratitude as: "A feeling of being thankful to somebody for doing something." Synonyms are thankfulness and appreciation. Do you consistently show the people in your life that you appreciate the things they do that impact on your life in the smallest or greatest of ways?

There are few tools as effective as gratitude to creating a warm, loving, nurturing environment.

1) Realize: For many of us it's difficult to show gratitude

a) We hate being grateful. Man's first sin -- the source of our bad character traits -- originated from a refusal to recognize the good with which G-d had blessed him. Adam said, when caught, "The woman who You gave me fed me from the tree and I ate." (Gen. 3:12)

Adam was in effect saying, "I didn't ask for her; she was Your idea. If she persuaded me to sin, it was Your fault." Although the Torah explicitly tells us that Hashem created woman for man's good (because it was 'not good for man to be alone'), Adam failed to recognize this good. This ingratitude is the underlying cause of his sin. The inclination to deny the good bestowed upon us is in our nature.

b) We get so used to taking, we see the other person as obligated.

-- The story is told of a child who, when given a new bicycle from his parents, began sobbing uncontrollably. When asked why he was crying, between sobs he said, "I wanted a red one!"

-- The closer we get to people, the harder gratitude is. We get used to taking, so we begin to see the other person as obligated.

-- Husbands, who often live in fantasyland, commonly imagine that it's the natural duty of a wife to bring unending bliss to her husband by satisfying his every whim and desire. He sees it as her duty to supply him with all his needs, and to do anything to advance his ambitions, even to support him financially. It's her duty, he believes, to do anything anytime to make him happy. And if this is her duty, she deserves no more thanks for any favor she confers upon him, than does a debtor who repays a loan.

c) Gratitude is also difficult because we don't like to feel obligated to anyone else because that makes us feel dependent -- and no one wants to admit he can't do everything himself.

One time favors can be more easily dealt with. But profound good and favors, done on a consistent basis, threatens our independence. Children who always say 'no' are expressing a healthy desire to become independent. However, we should grow and mature to be able, at least on occasion, to say 'yes'!

2) A foundation of Judaism is developing a sense of gratitude.

A primary goal is not to take anything for granted from G-d or from others. The root of the mitzvah of 'Honor Your Parents' is to express the unpayable debt of gratitude for the gift of life. Many other mitzvos, such as *Bikurim* (First Fruits) and the obligation to remember the Exodus center around helping us to develop the spiritual muscle of gratitude.

3) Gratitude is the grease that allows the wheels of family relationships to turn smoothly.

And after all, no one are more important to us, or are greater benefactors to our lives, than our family.

a) Set aside a little time daily -- even 5 minutes -- to consider the benefits you received during the day from your wife, husband, parents, children, and others in your family. Gratitude will eventually become a natural reaction.

b) At Shabbos dinner or another regular family meal, make it a point of sharing a specific example of something that someone did for you.

c) Send a thank-you note. A few years ago I received the following note:

Dear Rabbi & Chani

Another year has rolled around so quickly and we just want to send you this note to tell you 'thanks' again for beautiful Holidays. You really outdid yourself with wonderful sermons, singing, and special stories which we enjoy so much. Of course, as you have said Rabbi, behind every successful man there is a fine woman, which you are, Chani, so our 'thanks' to you, too Chani.. Best wishes to both of you and all of your family for good health and happiness in your new home and beautiful new shul in the New Year and many, many years to come.

This note made me feel like a million dollars; I hope to keep it for a long time.

Develop an 'Attitude of Gratitude'. It's a pillar of the Jewish home.

5) Honoring Parents

Not long ago, I came across an ad in Los Angeles Jewish Journal:

Mature Angry Daughters

A weekly group for women who want to deal with their anger towards their mothers and others. Limited seating. Call today. Encino

With some perspective from the 'Famous Fifth' -- the 5th Commandment of 'Honor your parents' -- many would have a clearer view of how to relate to one's parents.

"Honor your parents" is one of the great mitzvos of the Torah. Our rabbis explain that the root of the Famous Fifth is the unpayable debt of gratitude due our parents for that most precious of gifts -- the gift of life. Gratitude is a spiritual muscle needing frequent and vigorous exercise. Judaism says that failure to acknowledge kindness isn't a lack of politeness, but a serious character defect. It indicates the beginning of personality deterioration. When it comes to taking revenge, bearing a grudge and harboring insults, we should have a very short memory. But if someone does a *chesed* for us -- even once -- we should have a memory like an elephant and never forget.

There are two primary aspects to the mitzvah that instructs us how to relate to and treat our parents.

1) Kibud

'Kibud' is best translated as 'honor'. As the Torah says in Deuteronomy 5:16:

Honor your father and mother as G-d your L-rd commanded you. You will then live long and have it well on the land that G-d your L-rd is giving you.

We should honor our parents in action, speech. Some of the many Torah guidelines how to treat our parents are:

- Stand in respect when they enter the room
- Serve and assist them whenever possible. Feed, dress them, help with transportation
- The expense of honoring parents is to be borne by father and mother if they have the means
- If one's parents have become physically or mentally infirm, a child should try to deal with them as long as possible. If, however, one is no longer able to do so because they have deteriorated too far, then one may leave them to the secure care of others
- Respect their words. speak positively about them
- Things done for one's parents should be undertaken with a pleasant expression on one's face

Going even further, honoring our parents means that they should appear in our eyes as important and prestigious people.

2) Yireh

'Yireh is reverence and awe. As the Torah says in Leviticus 19:3

You shall each revere his mother and his father, and keep My Sabbaths.

Some of the parameters of reverence and awe are:

- Don't sit in your parent's place at the table, or elsewhere.
- Don't contradict their words.
- Don't call them by their first name
- Don't say, 'He (or she) is right!' -- as if your parents needs your affirmation to validate their words
- Don't say, 'You're wrong'. One can disagree with one's parents, but must do so in an agreeable, respectful way.

In general, *yireh* means not to say or do things demonstrating a lack of respect

It must also be pointed out that one can and should honor one's parent's even after their death

- Say *kaddish* in the 11 months following their passing and on their Yartzheit (yearly anniversary)
- Give *tzedaka* in their name and memory
- Live your life in a way they'd be proud of -- and in Heaven, they 'get credit'. We are the ripple effects our parents put into motion from having brought us into this world, and the values with which they raised us.

6) Communication

In a 2010 survey conducted through the University of Minnesota, 886 divorcing Minneapolis-area parents of kids under 18 were asked to identify 'all the reasons' for their divorce. Whereas 'religious differences' (8.6%) and 'sexual problems' (24%) were among the least-identified problems, two items stood out as most frequently identified: 'growing apart' (55%) and 'unable to talk together' (52.7%). Of all the skills

necessary to make a marriage work, and to help family life run smoothly, communication is at or near the top of the list.

One invaluable communication skill is listening. Our rabbis identify listening as a tool with multiple benefits. "...*there is nothing as good for the body as silence.*"(Ethics of the Fathers 1:7) Perhaps it is not coincidental that in the English language, *silence* and *listen* contain the same letters!

Take a look at the 'Jewish Mission Statement': the Shema. The word 'shema' means to listen, or to give heed and understand. Careful, attentive listening is the key to G-d's message to the Jewish people, and to the world. It's not enough to merely hear words. You must grasp their meaning. And you should listen with your heart, also, for the shades and nuances that lie in the words of Torah or of others, though not expressed explicitly, are crucial. Just as some people 'read between the lines', we have to learn to 'hear between the lines.'

We should realize that begin a good listener is a skill that needs to be consciously worked on. Very few people are naturally good listeners. Over the years we develop bad listening habits, and unless addressed they remain with us and affect our relationships. We tend to listen to others with half an ear while being preoccupied with our own problems and affairs. We usually have to force ourselves out of our own problems and affairs.

Among bad listening habits are:

- Finishing the sentences of others
- interrupting
- Getting carried away with insignificant details,

A particularly common bad listening habit is not giving our undivided attention to the person speaking.

Here are examples of some distractions; see if they are familiar occurrences in your family.

- Taking or making phone calls
- Checking or surfing one's iPhone
- Looking at what is going on behind or around the speaker

These types of actions send out a clear message to the speaker. The message is, "I am rejecting what you have to say or what I feel that what you have to say is important." And ultimately, their distraction sends the message of, "I think you are unimportant."

In addition to good listening skills here are many aspects to the creation of good communication; reflective listening, asking questions appropriately, being able to say 'I don't know', giving credit where credit is due, etc. A word to the wise; good communication is a sturdy pillar of the Jewish home.

7) Tzedaka

Many years ago an attorney told me a story that helped me to understand the unique Jewish definition and commitment to tzedaka. Josh (not his real name) was a young, successful attorney in a large law firm. Josh was one of few Jews in his firm, though his Jewishness was never an issue. Shortly after Josh signed on, his firm began a collection for the well-known charity, United Way. Josh, like other attorneys at the firm, was asked to contribute.

Josh politely told the 'soliciting attorney, 'John', that he preferred not to contribute, given that he directed all of his charitable contributions to Jewish causes -- his synagogue, Jewish Federation etc. John told Josh in a pointed manner that he thought such behavior was 'small-minded' and 'provincial', and bordered on being racist. Flustered, Josh said, 'Well John, how much do you give to United Way?' Josh expected that John, a successful attorney earning well in the 6 figures, contributed at least \$1000.

John said he had pledged \$50 to the United Way. Josh said, "When I heard he pledged \$50, I realized that he probably didn't give more than a few hundred dollars a year to charity. I grew up in a non-religious, Jewishly conscious home that imbedded in me the value of tzedaka, so that giving 10% of my income was something expected of me. If I had known John had given such a small amount of money, I would have given \$50 just to have him leave me alone!"

The word *tzedaka* means something considerably different than the word *charity*. Tzedaka means justice. Giving tzedaka is an act of justice -- and justice isn't optional. Charity implies a generous deed, beyond the call of duty. Websters 3rd International Dictionary defines charity as "exhibiting the virtue of Christian love". Quite a difference, isn't there?

It's not a charitable act to give to those in need. It's an obligation

Rambam (Maimonides) writes:

It is a minhag Yisrael (a long standing Jewish custom) to be particular about the mitzvah of tzedaka

A further indication of the centrality of tzedaka is the well-known Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur prayer in *Unesana Tokef*, is that tshuva, tefilah and tzedaka destroy the evil decree. Other insights into tzedaka:

- One is obligated to give between 10 to 20% of one's income. The average American gives about 2%. It is well known that we, as Jews, give way out of proportion to our numbers
- There are various ways of appropriately giving: Anonymously, compassionately, etc.
- One shouldn't give just to sweet little old ladies, and those we like. On the contrary, it's highly desirable to also give to those we don't like.
- Tzedaka is about more than giving money. One should give of one's time and effort to individuals, and worthy causes.

Many are familiar with the term *Tikun Olam* -- but misunderstand it to mean 'social justice.' *Tikun Olam* means changing the world for the better by bringing it to a recognition of G-d. A powerful tool with which we can achieve this, acting in accordance with our mission to be an *ohr l'goyim* -- a light unto the nations -- is through tzedaka.

A commitment to tzedaka should be a mainstay of every Jewish family.