

Jewish Values and Parenting

by William Berkson

Most Jewish parents aspire to raise their children to be a *mentsh*—a kind and responsible person. The two prevalent parenting models in America, however, are too extreme to teach *mentshlichkeit*. How, then, can we find a more balanced approach to child rearing that reflects contemporary Jewish values?

Mainstream Models

We can begin by understanding the two mainstream parenting models. The first, based on the Christian idea of original sin, casts the ideal parent as a harsh authority figure who must suppress the child's naturally predominating bad tendencies. Methodism founder John Wesley articulates this model in his "Sermon on the Education of Children": "Teach your children...that they are fallen spirits...A wise parent...should begin to break [a child's] will as soon as it appears...Studiously teach them to submit to [your parental will] while they are children, that they may be ready to submit to [God's] will when they are men."

The second child-rearing model, which developed in reaction against the authoritarian approach, presents the parent and child as equals. Father and mother are not authority figures but kind friends who educate their children into mature behavior through dialogue. For example, Thomas Gordon, a proponent of the equality model, explains how he would respond to an uncooperative child in *Parent Effectiveness Training*: "When your behavior interferes with my meeting my own needs, thus causing me to feel unaccepting of you, I will share my problem with you and tell you as openly and honestly as I can exactly how I am feeling, trusting that you respect my needs enough to listen and then to modify your behavior."

To most Jewish parents today, Wesley's authoritarian model of breaking a child's will seems overly harsh, even cruel. Gordon's alternative, on the other hand, seems to grant children more power than is appropriate for their level of maturity. Nevertheless, each of these models appeals to different sides of the Jewish ethical ideal of raising our child as a *mentsh*. The parent as a moral authority who teaches a child to be honest and upright is consistent with Jewish tradition, and Gordon's emphasis on *chesed* (kind-

ness) is a core Jewish value. We are, therefore, faced with the challenge of finding the right balance of kindness and moral authority.

Sociologist Diana Baumrind has termed this middle way between authoritarian and permissive parenting "authoritative" parenting. Authoritative parents, she says, are those willing to set reasonable limits and enforce them consistently. Their willingness to enforce limits distinguishes them from permissive parents, and their reasonableness and consistency distinguishes them from authoritarian parents. In her extensive studies of families, Baumrind has found that children in homes with authoritative parents perform better both in social skills and in academic achievement.

This important work in social science still leaves us parents with the question: What exactly is "reasonable" in setting and enforcing limits? Unfortunately the "how to" has never been clearly spelled out. It is in this arena—determining "reasonable" standards—that our Jewish ethical tradition can provide invaluable guidance.

To apply Jewish values effectively to parenting, it is important to understand that three different kinds of issues generally arise between parent and child—developmental, moral, and relationship; each calls for a different lead value and a different technique to put the value into practice.

Developmental Issues

From her office, Sarah calls her fourteen-year-old son David at home and tells him to put a roast in the oven for dinner. As he has never used the oven, she instructs him on how to turn it on and set the temperature. He puts the roast in the oven at the right time, but directly on the rack, without a pan. When she returns from work, the house is filled with smoke from the burning drippings. David is listening to loud music in his room, with the door closed.

Sarah is astonished that her bright son could act so stupidly and is tempted to vent her annoyance: "You have messed this up unbelievably. How could you do such a thing? Haven't you seen me put the roast on the pan a hundred times? And don't you know you have to check the oven to see how the roast is doing?"

When the issue is developmental—something a

child needs to learn—wise parents do not act on their immediate and natural reactions of disbelief and anger. Had Sarah vented her anger, David would, at best, have reacted defensively and, at worst, felt humiliated and angry for having been expected to complete a new task without full instructions. Instead, for developmental issues the lead value should be kindness (*chesed*), and the appropriate technique is gentle coaching. Parents should assiduously avoid personal criticism, and instead play the role of patient coach, asking questions to guide the child to a better understanding of the situation and offering positive pointers that will help him to respond to the task more successfully in the future.

Moral Issues

On Sunday morning, Judy, 15, tells her parents she is going to the library to study with her friend. She returns on time for dinner. Later in the week, another parent comments to her mother that she saw Judy with her friends at the mall on Sunday.

How should Judy's parents respond? If, out of anger, they immediately brand Judy a liar and impose penalties and threats of escalating punishment if she repeats her willful disobedience and dishonesty, they risk engendering bitter resentment and weakening the parent-child bond. In the end, her parents might have even less influence, and Judy might become even more secretive and devious.

In contrast, a parent following the egalitarian approach might say: "When I heard something different from what you had told me you did, I got very upset because, if this report is correct, your behavior is unacceptable." At this point the teen might put off the parent with other lies: "Well, we finished early at the library. I just forgot to tell you." Here the egalitarian approach runs into trouble, because a parent playing the role of friend would be loathe to press an inquiry. The lesson here is that parents who do not exercise authority will find it difficult to teach their children moral responsibility. What response, therefore, is appropriate in disciplining a child who violates a moral principle by lying?

When a child has violated a moral principle, the lead value is rebuke, and the key technique is compassionate correction. If parents discover that their child has lied and fail to label that action as wrong, then they are encouraging immoral behavior—or, at the very least, signaling that moral standards are not to be taken seriously. The Torah commands us: "Re-

buke, yes, rebuke your fellow, that you not bear sin because of him" (Lev. 19:17). And Rabbi Yose bar Haninah adds: "All love that has no reproof with it is not true love" (Gen. Rabbah 54:3).

Delivering a rebuke is fraught with difficulty. In a generation of great rabbinic sages, Eliezar ben Azariah said, "I wonder whether there is anyone in this generation who knows how to rebuke" (Ar. 16b). Our sages emphasized that, in general, rebuke should be handled privately and gently, in a soft voice, so as not to humiliate the person being rebuked. Psychologist Steven Stosny, developer of *Compassionate Parenting*, points out the important distinction between rebuke as a compassionate correction and rebuke as an attack designed to humiliate the child. Partly because parents may interpret their child's behavior as a sign of personal failure, they may be tempted to verbally "attack" in the face of a moral violation—but the result of such an attack will likely be an escalation of anger between parent and child. Parents would be wise to follow these guidelines for a compassionate response:

1. *Establish the facts.* To respond fairly and appropriately, a parent must first establish the facts without a loss of temper or a rush to judgment. As *Pirkei Avot* (Ethics of the Fathers) tells us: "Be deliberate in judging" (1:1). For example, Judy's father or mother might begin, "Mrs. Goldberg told me she saw you at the mall last Sunday when you said you were going to the library. I'm upset because it looks like you weren't straight with me. I love you, but we do need to be straight with each other. Was Mrs. Goldberg right?"

2. *Use moral language to explain the principle violated.* Once the facts are clear, label the action as wrong and mention the principle violated. Use the moral perspective to clarify that this is not a power issue of "you against her"; rather, at stake is a principle by which both of you are bound, and which will promote love and trust between you. It is also important for her to understand the harm done to others by her actions, so that she develops the compassion that will motivate better actions. Judy's mother could, for example, say: "This kind of deception is just wrong. Our Jewish tradition says that deceit is wrong, and it hurts people and destroys trust. It also makes us feel badly about ourselves. I love you, and it is from love that I say you need to take some action to repair our relationship, and to learn better ways to get what you want in life. If you can

do these things you will gradually restore trust between us, and we both will feel a lot better.”

3. *Clarify the role of apology and restitution in repairing the relationship.* We learn from Jewish tradition that the way to heal a morally damaged relationship is through *t'shuvah* (repentance). This involves apology and, if possible, restitution—and, in return, forgiveness by the injured party. Stosny warns that we should not try to force an apology from the errant child. If we do this we are in “attack” mode, and the child will experience the apology as a humiliation. Instead, we should make clear that it is the child’s free decision to apologize—not as an act of submission, but as an act of kindness to reach out and heal the relationship, with her parents and with God. In Judy’s case, her mother can explain how she can restore trust, first with an apology and then by fulfilling her responsibilities honestly in similar situations—in the beginning with greater supervision.

4. *Set consequences for possible future violations.* It is important for parents to discuss what additional consequences they will impose if their child lies again. As psychologist Rudolph Dreikurs has pointed out, parents should set consequences that have a logical relationship to the violation. For example, a logical consequence of lying, which destroys trust, would be to restrict Judy’s activities to those that require less trust. Over time, her parents could give her opportunities to show trustworthiness, and rebuild trust. Setting logical consequences for potential future violations will help a child understand that these restrictions are not designed to humiliate, but rather to teach honesty and heal the parent-child relationship.

5. *Set a good parental example.* As parents, we always need to be mindful that our moral example will speak louder than any words we say. If we practice what we preach, our words will powerfully motivate our children. If we preach but do not practice, teens particularly will contemptuously reject our words.

The child’s age is an important factor in rebuke. Pre-school children do not fully understand the moral dimensions of their behavior. They can learn basic moral behavior by watching their parents respond to their MISBEHAVIOR in a firm but fair way. For example, if a pre-school child hits a parent out of anger because he is not getting what he wants, the child should be told firmly that hitting is bad and given a “time-out.” When a school-age child hits a brother or sister, Stosny suggests that, after a time

out to calm down, he be asked to say how he imagines the sibling he hit felt—thus building compassion. In the case of teenagers, dishonesty IS USUALLY a sign of other serious problems; it is important to identify these and deal with them.

Relationship Issues

Susie’s mother allows her to drive the family car to a party on the condition that she returns before midnight. Susie, 16, returns at 1:00 AM, without having phoned. In her anger, her mother is tempted to say: “Young lady, you are in deep trouble. How many times have I told you....”

In a relationship issue such as this, an immediate angry rebuke will almost certainly result in Susie’s defiance and an impasse—the antithesis of resolving the problem. The lead value for relationship issues is justice (*tzedek*) in the sense of fairness, and the key technique is problem-solving discussion.

In modern life, problem-solving discussion has become a vital skill both for survival and fulfillment. Parents and teens need to go through a “separation waltz” in which parents gradually give teens more freedom of action, and teens gradually assume more responsibility and control over decisions affecting their lives. Teenagers’ future success in life will depend greatly on their ability to carry through problem-solving discussions in work, love, and family. Seeing how their parents model problem-solving discussions—both between parent and child and husband and wife—therefore becomes an invaluable training and maturing process.

When problem-solving in the context of an unequal relationship like parent-child, the principle of justice still applies. The rule is that inequalities in authority should be justified by the purpose and function of the relationship. In other words, parental authority is justified by the responsibility to care for, keep safe, and raise children properly. It would be grossly unfair to grant such a major responsibility without the authority to carry it out. At the same time, the person with more power should not take advantage of it in a self-serving or cruel way, beyond what is justified by the purpose. Such advantage-taking is known in rabbinic parlance as *honaat reah*—a serious moral violation and one of the sins in the Yom Kippur confession.

Discussions to resolve family conflicts can be very difficult because of the emotional vulnerability of everyone involved. Being a kind and just parent during their early years, when children naturally tend

to submit to their parents' authority, helps build a foundation of respect that will endure through the difficult teen years. Agreeing to abide by a "covenant of respect" can help keep parent-teenager discussions on track. The covenant of respect means that teens follow the biblical commandment to honor their parents—which, as the Talmud (Kid. 29-32) makes clear, includes accepting parental authority and parental rights to set appropriate limits. Parents, in turn, follow the rabbinic injunction to honor all people (Avot 4:1), which involves listening to their child's point of view with an open mind.

Following three principles of good problem-solving discussion will greatly increase the chances of achieving *shalom bayit*, peace in the home:

1. **Start Softly.** A discussion that begins with accusation or criticism of the other person—child or adult—triggers the natural inclination to fight back, drastically reducing the chances of resolution. A soft start, by contrast, invites constructive conversation.

The importance of a soft start and soft reply is established in Jewish tradition. In Proverbs 15:1, we read: "A soft answer turns away wrath"; in *Pirkei Avot* 1:15: "Receive everyone with a cheerful expression"; and in Ecclesiastes 10:12: "The mouth of the wise charms." Beginning softly does not mean abandoning a parent's responsibility to set limits or to discipline the child; it means only that we do not begin with blame.

One of the most well-known techniques for stating a problem while avoiding an accusation is Thomas Gordon's "I message," in which we state our feelings rather than make a claim about facts. For example, Susie's mom could have started, "I really get worried and upset when you come home late." This technique can work, if not overdone, but an even better approach is to put the issue in the context of a common goal or common problem that both parent and child have an interest in achieving or solving, an approach which places both parties on the same side. Susie's mom might have said, "Susie, again you are later than we agreed on, and I have been sitting here in a ball of worry. We need to figure out a way that we don't have to go through this again, for both our sakes." Alternatively, she could have begun by emphasizing the legitimate goals that each person has in the situation: "You want to enjoy your friends, and I want to be assured that you are safe. We need to find a better way for you to share the car, because this is not working."

Most importantly, use words and a tone of voice that invites cooperation, not conflict.

2. **Seek Understanding.** Seeking understanding means to ask for and to listen with an open mind to your child's thoughts and feelings, and also to explain your own. In this way, you gain new information about the situation, show respect and compassion (*kavod v'rachamim*) for your child, and learn her viewpoint and desires—thereby opening new pathways to resolving the problem. Sometimes understanding what your child wants can help you gauge what kind of compromise she would be willing to accept. Moreover, as Bernard Guerney, author of *Relationship Enhancement*, points out, the listening process tends to dissolve hostility, increasing the likelihood of your child listening respectfully when you explain your own viewpoints and values.

3. **Explore Options.** The final principle, exploring the options, involves three steps:

A. **Brainstorm new options, including compromises.** Research shows that the process of searching for new ways to solve a problem is the most effective step in resolving disputes. By cooperative brainstorming, parents and children can surprise themselves by thinking of solutions they had never considered before.

B. **Renew responsibilities.** This step entails designating individual responsibility to carry through each of the proposed options. If a child has failed repeatedly to honor a commitment, then it may be appropriate for the parent to specify in advance what psychologist Rudolph Dreikurs calls a "logical consequence" if it happens again. For example, not using the car for a specified time might be a "logical consequence" for failing to meet another curfew.

C. **Evaluate which option is best.** It is wise to put off the evaluation phase until you have reached mutual understanding and have generated a number of options, because at this stage the discussion can easily deteriorate into crossfire of personal recriminations. In most situations, consensus can be reached before this final stage.

There are two caveats to this problem-solving process. First, if the child is not mature enough to agree to a reasonable compromise, then the parent still has the responsibility to set limits. Second, if, as often occurs, the offending incident does not fall cleanly into one of the three categories of developmental, moral, and relationship issues, then parents should begin with what they perceive as the main issue first, using the appropriate value and technique, and then

follow up with the others as need be.

Parenting well is one of life's greatest challenges—and one of life's most fulfilling experiences. If we model our parenting on the classic Jewish values of compassion and justice, our children will respect our decisions and our differences will be resolved more amicably and effectively. Hillel had it right: "*Marbeh tzedakah, marbeh shalom*: More righteousness, more peace."

Dr. William Berkson, director of the Jewish Institute for Youth and Family, is currently training Jewish educators and social workers around the country to lead the *Becoming a Mentsh* series of teen-parent workshops applying Jewish values to modern relationships. Next year, Behrman House will publish his *Book of Principles*, a new discussion edition of *Pirkei Avot*.

Spare the Rod?

Does Judaism advise spanking a disobedient child?

The Bible says yes. The "rebellious son" is to be put to death by stoning (Deut. 21:18-21), and Proverbs (13:24) teaches: "He who spares the rod hates his son."

But by the talmudic period, these harsh doctrines of parental discipline were replaced with an emphasis on kindness and compassion. The Talmud defines the "rebellious son" out of existence (San. 71a), rules that a teacher could punish a student at most with a leather shoelace (*Bava Batra* 21a), outlaws hitting grown children (*Mo'ed Katan* 17a), and declares: "With a child, push away with the left hand, and draw near with the right" (*Sotah* 47a)—the right hand normally being the stronger. As a result of these rabbinic teachings, traditional Jewish homes were noted for treating their children with love and warmth. Still, corporal punishment was not eliminated in the traditional religious school for boys—the *cheder*—in Eastern Europe, where teachers often hit their students for even minor infractions.

Modern social science is still divided on the question "to spank or not to spank." In 1996, Dr. Murray A. Straus, a professor at the University of New Hampshire, and Dr. Robert Larzelere of Boys

Town began a continuing debate in the journal *Pediatrics* on the effectiveness of spanking. Dr. Straus argued that many studies, including his own, show that spanked children become more antisocial and do worse in school. Dr. Larzelere challenged Straus's conclusion, claiming that the damaging effects of spanking are true only in cases of frequent spanking and of corporal punishment of older children. For two- to six-year-olds, he wrote, occasional non-abusive spanking ("two open-handed swats to the buttocks leaving no bruise") is beneficial as a back-up to time-outs and reasoning; when the children turn seven, time-outs and reasoning alone—with spanking in reserve—have become so effective that spanking is no longer necessary.

Both sides of the debate agree that spanking school-age children is undesirable. As for toddlers, nearly half of American parents oppose spanking, but, according to Straus, nearly all resort to corporal punishment on occasion. With the debate on disciplining toddlers still unsettled, a good Reform Jewish approach would be to err on the side of compassion and follow Straus's advice never to spank.

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