

Discipline

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

We live at a time when discipline is regarded as a bad word and a destructive educational policy. Such an idea is allied to the ideology that competition is unhealthy, and meritocracy is bad. Is there a Jewish response to this?

Judaism's primary sources all stress that every human being, no matter what race or color, however intelligent or gifted, however modest or weak, must be treated with respect since we are all "The Children of One God." As the Mishna says (Sanhedrin 4.5) "Since every person has been created differently, therefore everyone must say "this world was created for me." No one person's blood is any redder than anyone else's (TB Sanhedrin 74a and seven other times). Both theologically and legally this has always been taken to mean that even if we may not be born the same, or had the same advantages, we are all equal before God.

Of course, this does not mean that each child is the same. We are distinguished by our temperaments, our bodies, and by other factors, such as genes, background, wealth, education, and circumstances. Two crucial elements in a child's upbringing, in addition to love, are education and discipline. Human beings can benefit or suffer from different kinds of education and different forms of upbringing. And disagreements over discipline and education are amongst the most common causes of discord in families where parents pull in opposite directions.

Finding a balance between love and discipline is a crucial Biblical theme. "And you should consider in your heart that, in the way that a man disciplines his child, so your God disciplines you (*Deuteronomy 8:5*)." The command to love and respect God and parents is predicated on a two-way commitment. Which is why the Israelites were punished so often. Love and respect are characteristics applied in the Torah both to human love for God and parents. In both cases, a relationship requires discipline as well as love.

The Midrash finds fault with several Biblical personalities for not parenting effectively. Abraham failed with Ishmael. Isaac spoiled Esau. Jacob favored Joseph and let him get away with his fantasies. Eli, Samuel, David, and Solomon all failed to discipline their sons with tragic consequences.

The Book of Proverbs repeatedly addresses the subject of disciplining children. "For whom the Lord loves, he rebukes, as a father does a favored child (*Proverbs 3:12*)." The well-known saying "Spare the rod, spoil the child" comes from (*Proverbs 13:24*)." Similarly, "If folly settles in the heart of a lad, the rod of discipline will remove it (*Proverbs 22:15*)." And "a lad out of control is a disgrace to his mother (*Proverbs 29:15*)."

The Hebrew words for education and discipline are synonymous and Proverbs recognizes that there are very different ways of disciplining and educating.

And not all children are the same. "A verbal rebuke works on a wise man more than one hundred blows on a fool (*Proverbs 17:10*). "Discipline your son while there is hope, but do not set your heart on his destruction (*Proverbs 19:18*). "Educate each child according to its needs (*Proverbs 22.6*) ."

A similar theme runs through the Talmud. Rabbi Simeon ben Elazar said that one should push away a child with the left (weaker) hand and bring him near with the right (stronger) hand (*TB Sotah 47a*). One of my favorite Talmudic sources deals with methodology in education.

"Rav once met a man who when he prayed for rain, was always answered immediately. He wanted to know what the man had done to deserve such a heavenly response. He replied 'I am a teacher and I teach the children of the poor the same way as I teach the children of the rich. And if someone cannot pay, I do not take anything. And I have fishponds and if a child is reluctant to study, I bribe him with some fish. And I explain everything simply and I win him over until he comes and reads.' Rabba said 'If you see a student who finds his studying as hard as iron, it is because his teacher did not explain things well to him (*TB Taanit 24a*).

Of course, I am not suggesting that God only answers the prayers of good people. But his story illustrates what the Talmud thought was praiseworthy in education at that time.

Once beating children was widespread in every culture. Only recently in the West has it become illegal. Having in my naughty youth been caned more often than I care to remember I can attest to the fact that it makes little difference whatsoever. If anything, it encourages one to misbehave even more, because seeking attention is a major factor in poor behavior. Just as poor diagnoses of educational problems are responsible for more failure than beating. And discipline is now so much out of fashion that teachers are often helpless in the face of disruptive behavior. Which is one reason why good teachers in State systems are so hard to find.

The issue of competition and excellence is allied. With hindsight, I am grateful for structured and disciplined education, and I remember fondly the competitive spirit whether in academic studies or sport. It may be true that it helps those who are bright to feel good about themselves. But a good school and a caring parent give children opportunities to excel in other areas from sport to music. Encouragement is essential. And setting goals and challenges is part of that.

A society like much of the current American one, in which the State system of education is increasingly letting its pupils down, dumbs down education, discourages excellence and competition. Such policies are just one reason why USA pupils rate so poorly compared to most industrial societies in literacy and numeracy (we know there are other factors ranging from environment, family, and obstructive teachers unions).

Raising well-behaved children is no simple task. The tools of discipline at our disposal seem to be fewer than ever before, while the challenges are greater. As knowledge and the variety of internet options for more

personalized education increase exponentially, we ought not to accept lowering standards especially for the most disadvantaged. And if schools will not set standards, parents must. Just as God was able to chasten the Israelites in the wilderness, so must contemporary parents find the right mix of words to steer their progeny toward living lives of righteousness.

There are many educational options available for those who look. In the end, it depends on priorities. One of the positive messages of religious education, especially the religious kind, is to try to excel in learning, to raise the level of its pupils, morally and intellectually. This is the great gift of traditional Jewish education. But even it succeeds only when parents are active supporters of its goals and encourage their children with love as well as discipline.

There are no guarantees of success, whether materially, emotionally, or spiritually. There are only tools. Our job is to make use of them.