

“He Believed in Us”
A thought about Harav Schiller, zatzal

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Several years ago, my wife and I were finishing a meeting with a certain rabbi in Yerushalayim. The meeting was about a business-related matter, but I took the opportunity to ask him how he had managed to bring up such upstanding and outstanding children, many of whom are known for their Torah teaching and leadership.

“You must have some kind of secret to share with us. No one’s children turn out like that without real thought, method and application”.

I was essentially asking him what it takes to be a good, effective father. That’s an appropriate topic to consider as we at Ohr Somayach mourn the loss of the founding father of our yeshiva, Rav Nota Schiller zatzal.

The response to my question that day lives firmly in my memory: “I don’t have any secrets or formulas,” the rabbi answered, “but I can tell you one story. You see, one of my boys, who today is a *rosh kollel*, well he was quite rebellious as a teenager. He didn’t want to conform to the lifestyle of our family. This was reflected in his dress – he wasn’t dressing like the typical yeshiva boy in the neighborhood – in fact, far from it!

“One day, a friend of mine related to me that he had bumped into my son in the local grocery store. He noticed my son’s ‘different’ style of clothing and said to him, ‘how can you dress like that? Isn’t your father embarrassed for you to be seen like that in public?’ Now I don’t really understand what my friend thought he would possibly achieve by confronting my son in this way, but that’s not the point of my story.

“My friend reported what my son responded: ‘My father? My father would never be embarrassed of me. *My father believes in me.*’

“So I can’t tell you any complicated educational strategies and formulas. But I think my children understood that I believed in them. I guess that helped”.

Perhaps that’s the real essence of being a father. Believing in your children, unreservedly. I think I can say on behalf of those of us who merited being part of the Rosh Yeshiva’s staff at Ohr Somayach that he really believed in us.

That belief would not need to be stated directly. It was related with subtlety and authenticity. In my personal experience, the Rosh Yeshiva would often ask other people to task me with certain roles, thus making clear that he felt me worthy of those responsibilities, without having to relate that in a crass way. It was subtle but obvious. Unstated but felt. Refined but clear.

He was loyal to his staff and very proud of them. Listen to archived recordings of how he portrays the group of *rebbeim* he had assembled. Or read his description of them when interviewed by Mishpacha magazine in 2015: "...bringing together the most eclectic and brilliant teachers. It works, *baruch Hashem*."

This idea has even deeper roots. When the twelve tribal leaders (*nesi'im*) brought their dedication offerings to the Mishkan (Tabernacle) in the wilderness, they all brought the identical number of animals, precious metals, and utensils. Yet the Midrash describes how, amazingly, every single tribe had their own specific thoughts in mind when bringing each item, related to the unique experience and goals of their particular tribe.

Centuries previously, Menashe and his younger brother Ephraim were awaiting the blessing of their grandfather Yaakov. As the boys approached, their father Yosef placed Menashe to the right of Yaakov and Ephraim to his left. And yet to Yosef's shock and objection, Yaakov switched his hands, placing his stronger right hand on the head of Ephraim, as he was destined for a more illustrious future. His weaker left hand was placed on the head of Menashe. Yosef tried to correct his father and move his right hand back on to Menashe's head, but to no avail.

And yet the Midrash relates that, centuries later, when the leader of the tribe of Menashe brought his animal offerings, in his mind, he related each one to a different way that Menashe's father Yosef had tried to make sure that he got the blessings first. But this Midrash seems difficult to understand - wasn't that a tragic, failed, unsuccessful part of Menashe's tribal history?

Perhaps the answer - I heard this from Rav Avigdor Brazil - is that whilst Yosef's plans for Menashe didn't come to fruition, Menashe still saw from Yosef's efforts that his father believed in him; and there's nothing more precious for a son. And so the tribe of Menashe held on to those moments for eternity.

As I left the *shiva* house, I told the Rosh Yeshiva's sons, Rav Nachshon and Rav Shlomo, that the Rosh Yeshiva had indeed been like a father to so many of the Ohr Somayach faculty and student body. They nodded in knowing agreement – they knew that quality in Rav Schiller better than anyone else. In the words of their sister, Rebbetzin Brachi Sprung: "Such a big loss for Ohr Somayach, for Klal Yisrael and for the family - my father never left the family behind; he was the most loving and caring father".

But the legacy of that paternal care and belief - the tens of thousands of *talmidim*, and the ongoing vibrancy and productivity of the yeshiva - lives on for eternity.

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