

Reb Simcha Speaks

A collection of Rabbi Simcha Wasserman's insights and teachings on vital principles of life and faith, by Rabbi Dr. Akiva Tatz and Yaakov Branfman.

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Excerpts from
Chapter 3
Child-Raising And Education

(Editor's note: In reading this chapter, it should be remembered that Rabbi Wasserman and his Rebbetzin never had children. One of us once asked him how it was that he became such a particularly outstanding authority on the subject of child-raising; after all, an expert usually develops in a field in which he has personal experience. Rabbi Wasserman's unforgettable reply was: "I do have personal experience. I have the experience of how my parents raised me.")

A child is like an immigrant who comes to a new country. He makes observations and adopts the customs of that country. If the parents are happy and they smile and help and cooperate with each other, the child learns that in that country that's the way people are. So he also becomes like this.

I have lived in the Mattersdorf section of Jerusalem for a number of years. There are many large families there and the streets are full of children playing. I have never seen a fight. The parents are happy, so the children are happy, smiling, and friendly. You often see a number of children from one family going along together. Two are pushing a little carriage, and there's a little brother or sister inside, with some bags of food squeezed in also. The older ones may be carrying full shopping bags, and they are all watching out for each other and helping each other. It shows me that the parents don't fight, because if the parents would fight, the children would learn the skill!

By the time a child is three years old, he already has a little brother or sister. By that age he's old enough to take some responsibility, so we train him to help the younger one. He becomes a *giver* at a very young age. When you have a child who wants to help, that is the greatest blessing. Raising children is a great occupation and it has the greatest rewards. The first *mitzva* (commandment) in the Torah is the *mitzva* to reproduce. The Torah tells us that our fulfillment of that obligation does not end at all with bringing children into this world. It continues with bringing them up and making decent human beings out of them. The obligation to *raise* our children is not a separate *mitzva*. It is an extension of the obligation to reproduce.

The successful fulfillment of that obligation brings *nachas* — happiness — and keeps parents and children together without a generation gap. In life, we have our functions, and when we live up to them, it brings us happiness. One of the greatest of our functions is that of raising children, of raising

generations. The most important thing to remember is that we have in our hands something which Hashem gave us to develop, to make into a worthy human being. The Torah does not want us to raise institutions. It wants us to raise *people*. The secret of raising people instead of institutions is unselfishness.

The efforts involved are compensated with a lot of joy, but the joy is not the goal. Many people think that everything in the world is to be enjoyed, even their children. So they bribe the child to do what they want, so that *they* will be happy. They want to get a smile from the child, so they bring him another toy. What they want is to *take* from the child, and thus the child also learns to take. He looks for what he can get from the parents. If he is not satisfied with what they give him, then he looks elsewhere to get what he wants, and he often rebels. But when the parent is a giver, the child is a giver.

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A healthy relationship between people — whether friends or parents and children — consists primarily of one thing: how do I relate to the person next to me? Do I see him as someone that I want to *get* something from? Or is my concern with what I can do *for* him? When two people are together and each one is concerned with what he can do for the other person, it's wonderful. But if each one wants only to *take* from the other it creates problems and it's the biggest tragedy.

To the parent who knows and understands his obligations to his child, everything he is doing as he is raising that child is for the benefit of the child, and not for his own self-interest. Many people have ambitions for their children which are selfish, and not for the good of the child.

There is a formula which is very simple: raise the children for the children's sake. It's true that we are only human, and we cannot separate ourselves completely from our own self-interest. But the larger the degree of concern for the child, the more successful we are in raising him.

Learning Torah is very important for the raising of children. A father who learns has an easier time with child-raising. For us, learning is our life and the flavor of our life. The children see that the father is learning and that's an inspiration.

It's very important that the husband and wife help each other in preserving the home. They need to work together.

It doesn't hurt to have little meetings in the family from time to time, to discuss, objectively, some of the problems. "Here is a problem. What can we do about it?" In almost every problem, there is some little opening which allows you to do something. Then you can all try together to work and solve the problems. It's very important.

We should try to talk to children as adults, and not in baby talk. Often, we underestimate the capacity of children. We *can* make them think like adults. They *can* learn consideration for others, which is a definite sign of maturity.

If the child did something that was not right, you can call him in a day or two later and say "Remember this and this happened," in a very friendly way, like talking to an adult and explaining that something was not right. "This is something that is better for you to stay away from." This is a nice way of training someone.

It is preferable to say things to a child in a positive way rather than insult him; one is much more likely to be heard when one appeals to the positive side of a person. For example, one should not say "You are a bad boy." It is much better to say "For a good boy like you, that act was not appropriate." A little "*schmaltz*" helps!

It's very important always to have a smile for the child. Always be friendly. Take him in your hands. Even when you say "No", it should be friendly. The Rambam says that sometimes you have to *act* as if you are angry. But that's when you are not actually angry.

The child needs to feel that he has acceptance and somebody to lean on. This helps the child to accept the all-important *mitzva* of *kibud av v'em* — respecting the parents. This *mitzva* should be impressed on the child as much as possible, because without *kibud av*, the Divine Presence does not rest in the home.

Teachers also need to develop the same attitudes to their students. If the students develop a pleasant relationship with their teachers, it is obviously much easier for them to accept their teachings. The Rebbeim (teachers) in the yeshivos often have this kind of relationship with their *talmidim* (students). Secular teachers seldom do.

A man who had been head of the history department in a large American university for fifty years came into a *yeshiva* one day to say *kaddish* (the memorial prayer). He was talking to the Rosh Yeshiva and he said "Rabbi, I am a lonely man at this point in my life."

The Rosh Yeshiva was surprised. He asked him "How many students did you teach in your life?"

They made a general accounting and came up with the figure of 30,000. So the Rosh Yeshiva asked him "Out of 30,000 students, did any of them ever invite you to their wedding?"

The professor said "No. Not one."

That's very interesting. Probably not one student in a *yeshiva* would ever think of having a wedding without inviting his Rebbe. This is because Torah is given *b'ahava* — with love — and it creates a close relationship between student and teacher. A general principle in teaching Torah subjects is that students are thought of as the children of the teacher. Only Torah creates this kind of relationship, and it does it in a natural way.

It says in *Tanach* (Scripture) that at the end of time, Eliyahu (Elijah) will come and his job will be to bring back parents to children and children to parents. This indicates that there will be a time when the gap between parents and children will be one of the most serious tragedies. It could be talking about our time.

The more correctly we live, the happier we are. Everyone would agree that those delinquents who are coming up like mushrooms today are the unhappiest kids in the world because they are definitely on an incorrect path.

The most important thing to remember is that from the minute we have the child, we have to know that our job is to help him and make a *mentsch* out of him, and Hashem will help and we will find our way.

Akiva Tatz is also the author of *Living Inspired* — a deeper look at Jewish Philosophy (Targum/Feldheim 1994).
