

“Count the sons of Levi...every male from one month of age and up...” (3:15)

Rashi explains that the little infants of Bnei Levi were counted from the tender age of one month and up. Already at this young age, they were called by the title of honor and distinction that they would achieve as adults. Why grant such an esteemed title to a baby? Are we so sure they will live up to the title? Apparently, Shevet Levi had this “track record.” Those thirty-day-old infants were sure to grow up to become Shomrei Mishmeres HaKodesh, Guardians of the Holy Watch. Yet, how could we be so certain of their outcome? We see regrettably, how all too often children from the finest and most observant homes, whose parents are dedicated and devoted to everything Jewish, seem to drift away. What traits do members of the tribe of Levi manifest that makes them different, that ensures that their children will grow up b’derech Yisrael sabbah, following the path of our ancestors?

Horav Shimon Schwab, z.l., explains that the Leviim of old knew the secret of successful Torah chinuch, education. They knew and understood the primary ingredient that would guarantee that there would not be a break between father and son, that each ensuing generation would commit to the legacy transmitted to them by their forebears. In the end of Sefer Devarim, when Moshe blessed Shevet Levi, he detailed their praise saying, “He who could say regarding his father and mother he did not see them and, as to his children, he did not know them, for they [the tribe of Levi] kept Your word, and Your Covenant did they guard” (Devarim 33:9). Rashi explains that this refers to the sin of the Golden-Calf, when Klal Yisrael faltered and rebelled against Hashem. Moshe Rabbeinu exclaimed, “Mi l’Hashem elai”, “Who is for Hashem, should come to Me!” Shevet Levi were those who took the stand for Hashem. They were commanded to slay those who had worshipped the Golden-Calf – regardless of their filial relationship to them. The Leviim’s love for, and commitment to, the Almighty transcended family relationships. Their maternal grandfather, their daughter’s son, their brother from the same mother who was not a Levi – all these relatives had no distinction in their eyes. Their love for Hashem took priority. The love for a grandchild, for a brother, for a grandfather, was deferred to their love for Hashem.

A child growing up in such a home was conveyed a profound message: “I love you more than anyone in the world except – Hashem.” When a child grows up knowing that his father loves him dearly, yet, if the situation should arise in which he must choose between his love for Hashem and his love for his son, he will choose Hashem, the son will understand and respect both his father and Hashem. The son will realize that Hashem is paramount in his father’s eyes, that He is above all else. This will inspire the son to respect and ultimately serve Hashem in the correct and proper manner. This is the key to successful Jewish parenting. Parents must transmit a clear message to their child – not the mixed messages so many of our youth receive today. When children see their parents’ blatant hypocrisy, when they see them acting one way in public and another way at home, it does very little to encourage their esteem for the Almighty.

Horav Schwab further illustrates this point with the following powerful incident. He remembers himself as a child of eight-years-old, the eldest of five brothers, sitting at the Pesach Seder table. When they came to the section of the Hagaddah which relates the questions of the four sons, his father asked each one of his brothers, "Which one of the four sons do you want to become?" Of course, each one responded that he hoped to be the ben chacham, wise son.

Suddenly, his father became very serious and said in a very loud voice, "If one of my children ever became a rasha, evil, even disregarding one mitzvah, I would tell him, li v'lo lo, for me and not for him. You no longer will have a place at my Seder table, because I love Hashem more than I love you." He immediately returned to the recitation of the Haggadah in his normal gentle manner. Ostensibly, this episode left an indelible imprint on each of the sons. They had no doubt as to Hashem's position of priority in their father's mind.

This is, undoubtedly, a powerful story, one which will invoke the wrath and, at least, consternation of the liberal-minded contemporary parent. How could a father talk like that to his children? How does a parent make such an implacable statement to a young child? How could a parent be so unyielding, so uncompromising? This is the American society within us that is talking. This is the questioning of a society dominated by hypocrisy, where the artificial is venerated and the charlatan lauded. This question emanates from the parent who refuses to take responsibility, who would rather lay blame than seek a cure; who expects parenting to be instant, who dresses up his children for the public view, disregarding their inner problems and hurt.

In another lecture, Horav Schwab shares with us a glimpse of what parents of old, people who truly loved Hashem – more than their own flesh and blood – were like, and how they reared children in such a manner as to guarantee spiritual success. The chinuch of a child began in the crib. As soon as a child was able to understand, he was told about the Creator Who created each of us; Who knows us; Who watches over us; and Who gave us mitzvos to observe. As soon as the child was able to talk, the parents taught him the fundamentals of our faith, of emunah in Hashem, and the pre-eminence of the Torah. The first stories a child heard were the life stories of the Avos, Patriarchs, the exodus from Egypt and the Giving of the Torah. The parents sang to their children at night, songs of faith, of Torah and of love for Hashem. In short, they personally related to their children the primacy of Hashem and His Torah to the Jewish People. A child recognizes and senses sincerity. Parents who are earnest in their relationship with their children, who are frank and honest, who give, but expect a return, who demand out of genuine love and concern, whose own actions are consistent with what they demand of their children, can hope to see the fruits of their labor.