

If you will follow My decrees. (26:3)

Horav Gamliel Rabinowitz, Shlita, renders this *pasuk* homiletically by translating the word *im* (if) innovatively. *Im* contains the same Hebrew letters as *eim*, mother, which leads the *Rosh Yeshivah* (*Shaar HaShomayim*) to transform the message of the *pasuk* to assert that the mother, the *akeres ha'bayis*, mainstay of the Jewish home, is the one who catalyzes the spiritual growth of her children. She is the one who initiates the process, who ensures their proper entrance to Torah study and *mitzvah* observance. Furthermore, he explains, the Torah alludes to the manner of conveyance that will achieve the greatest results: *B'chukosai teileichu*; if the mother herself will walk in the *mitzvos*, if she will set the example by personally representing how a Jew should live, then her children will follow suit.

A mother sets the standard when she demonstrates her personal love and respect for Torah values, Torah study and observance. It is difficult to impart values when one personally does not adhere to them. Children repeat what they hear at home. They communicate their own values by the demeanor they choose to adopt. A mother projects the image she expects her children to reflect. (Veritably, this applies to both parents, but it is the mother who usually initiates the road map and sets the direction which her children will follow). This establishes the tone in the home and ultimately serves as the lodestar for her children to follow in their journeys through life. What is acceptable for her in the area of dress will, likewise, be acceptable to her daughter. When her son notes how she fills her time, the demands that she places on her husband to learn, attend a *shiur*, have a *chavrusa*, study partner, it will send a powerful message to him: This is how I want you to live. The role of a mother in shaping the Torah *weltanschauung* of her children cannot be overemphasized.

The Torah characterizes womanhood as predicated upon two defining principles: *eizer k'negdo*, "A helpmate corresponding to him." i.e., providing the environment for a good marriage and demonstrating the ability to address various issues as they surface; and *eim kol chai*, "Mother of all living" i.e., raising children in accordance with the hallowed *mesorah*, tradition, of our ancestors for whom the Torah was the nerve center, their beacon of light which served as their source of inspiration. These two foci, wife and mother, are the two primary responsibilities of the Jewish woman. Whatever else she may do, be it for self-fulfilling reasons (as if wife and mother is insufficient fulfillment) or fringe benefits, the successful woman is one who has navigated and excelled at the first two critical principles of womanhood.

The character and atmosphere of a Jewish home are largely determined by the mother. She is referred to as *akeres ha'bayis*, the mainstay of the home. A Jewish home should maintain its Jewish character 24/7. Jewish atmosphere is not reserved only for *Shabbos*. A Jewish household is conducted solely upon the directives of the Torah. Thus, it becomes a place in which Hashem is inclined to rest among the members of the household. In such a home, one can feel G-d's Presence throughout.

Primary among the Jewish mother's role is the education of her children. She does this best by serving as a perfect example of one whose faith and trust is solely in Hashem. One can study about *emunah*, faith, in Hashem, but no *sefer*, Torah volume, will be as effective as observing a mother's *emunah* from the earliest stages of his life. A child that grows up on a mother's faith, observing his mother's tearful prayers every day, listening to her plead with Hashem as she lights the *Shabbos* candles, beseeching Him for (spiritually and physically) healthy children, imbues a child with faith in the Almighty and serves as his anchor through life's many challenges and vicissitudes.

A child's earliest memories often continue to inspire him throughout life. There is a well-known story, a vignette that took place shortly following the cornerstone laying of *Yeshivas Ponovezh* in 1944, as General Rommel's troops were practically standing at the gates of *Eretz Yisrael*. It was an emotional scene, with the *Ponovezher Rav* weeping bitterly, his tears mixing with the cement that laid the foundation stone of the *yeshivah*. Indeed, *Ponovezh* was built with tears. It was that night, at the *seudah*, feast, prepared for the few students that were enrolled in the *yeshivah*, that the *Rav* spoke and related the following story.

"You think the laying of the cornerstone took place today? Well, let me inform you that this is not so. The cornerstone laying took place 57 years ago on my mother's back."

When the boys heard this, they were astounded. What did their revered *Rebbe* mean by this ambiguous statement? The *Ponovezher Rav* saw the look in their eyes and (emotionally) proceeded to relate the following narrative which I have summarized in my own words.

It was a bitterly cold night, and the frozen ground was covered with five feet of snow. The Kahaneman family (*Ponovezher Rav's* last name) – father, mother and five sons – sat around the "dinner" table animatedly discussing their day. They had little food to consume, due to the overwhelming poverty in which they lived; enthusiasm, however, always ran high, fueled by their intense love for one another and their extraordinary joy in being alive to learn Torah. Each boy related what he had learned in *cheder* that day. This was despite the deep pall of sadness that permeated the house once their mother had declared that she would not permit her sons to go to *cheder* without a coat and boots. The children were acutely aware that their family was the "proud" owner of only one winter jacket and one pair of boots. Each child begged to be the lucky recipient of the precious winter gear, so that he could attend school the following day.

They each had a reason. The oldest boy, who was twelve years old, insisted that he should go, since his class was starting a new *sugya*, chapter, in the *Gemorah*. The eleven-year-old insisted that he, too, needed to be in class. The next two brothers clamored to be heard; they, too, had reasons to be in school (how things have changed!) The youngest child, Yossk'ke (*Ponovezher Rav*), cried out, "What will be with my *Mishnayos*?"

They decided to drawing lots. Let Heaven decide who was to be the fortunate child that would

trudge through five feet of snow to school. The next moments were like *Yom Kippur*. The boys *bentched* with extreme intensity, each praying that he would emerge the winner. They recited their bedtime *Shema* with great fervor. They all retired to bed, not knowing which one would wake up in the morning as the winner who would attend school.

At 5:30 a.m. the next morning, the mother, knowing that the *shamash*, sexton, of the *shul* had already lit the coal stove in the *shul* and it was now warm there, woke her oldest son, "Shah! Do not disturb your brothers."

"Mother. Did I win the raffle?"

"No," she replied. "I won."

The mother gave her son food for two meals and wrapped him up in a blanket. She then donned the coat and boots, lifted him up into her arms and carried him to *shul* (which also served as the community *cheder*). The cold was unbearable; the usual five minute walk took twenty minutes (each way). She left him at the *shul* and said, "I will pick you up at 5:00 this afternoon."

"The mother returned home, blanket in hand, woke her second son, and brought him to *shul* in the same manner that she had done earlier for his older brother. She repeated this procedure with sons number three and four. At 7:00 a.m., after she had been on the "road" for an hour and a half, she returned home and woke Yoss'ke, "Do you want to go to *cheder*?" she asked. He jumped up excitedly, "Yes, of course!"

The mother wrapped him up in the blanket, and they started off for *shul/cheder*. He remarked, "Mother did not walk. She danced! She called out joyfully, '*Ribono Shel Olam*, I thank You for allowing my four sons to reach *cheder* today. I am now bringing You the fifth son. Thank You! May they always want to learn Your Torah. May Torah always be sweet to them!"

\Young Yoss'ke was so deeply moved by his mother's words that he called out to her, "*Mameh!* You carried us in the ice and snow in order to learn Torah. You will see that I will bring my boys to learn Torah – for you, *Mameh*, for you."

The *Ponovezher Rav* concluded his story with those parting words: "I have lost so much. Nonetheless, after all that I have lost and suffered, if I still have the strength to start again, to build a *yeshivah*, it is due to my mother."

Fifty seven years had passed, but he still remembered how his mother had valued Torah. When a mother demonstrates such extraordinary sacrifice due to her love of Torah, her children see and are inspired. Is it any wonder that her Yoss'ke became the architect of *Torah chinuch* in post-World War II *Eretz Yisrael*?