

Ekev

“And you shall teach them (the words of Torah) to your children.”

One of the great tragedies in the history of *Chinuch*, the education of the Jewish people, took place in America between 1890 and 1945. More than two million Jews had come to this country during that time. They had left a formidable educational system in Europe and found themselves in a “*Goldene Medina*” that was practically barren of skilled *Mechanchim*—educators who could relate to a child brought up in the U.S.A. Instead of a sensitive Rebbe who could be *Mekarev* a student to a love of Torah, many times an embittered old man who could find no other work was inflicted upon unsuspecting first-generation American Jewish youth. The kids rebelled en masse. The hum of students studying *Chumash* and *Rashi* was replaced with the thwack of the “teacher’s” ruler against the knuckles of a ten-year-old. Parents, and very often even Synagogue leaders, were ignorant of the fact that according to *Halacha*, how something was taught was just as important as the subject matter itself. The *Gemara* (Baba Basra 21a) discusses this week’s Sedrah’s words of “*Veleemadetem Osom*”—You shall teach them (the words of the Torah) to your children.

The *Gemara* lists definite regulations concerning the teaching of Torah. We are told that Yehoshua ben Gamla, a *Kohayn Godol* in the time of the second Temple, established that teachers of young children should be appointed in each district and each town, and that children should enter school at the age of six or seven. Some believe that this marked the establishment of the first local Yeshiva system. Other rules laid down by the Sages in this *Gemara* are that:

1. Students are not to be accepted into school before the age of six.
2. Corporal punishment should be meted out only with a shoelace (meaning that it should not be severe).
3. An inattentive student should be put next to a diligent one (in the hope that the good characteristics would rub off).

4. There should be no more than twenty-five students in a class.

The *Gemara* also discusses rules about the teachers themselves. Here is also argued the relative merits of a teacher who covers a lot of ground but is not exacting in some of his explanations versus a teacher who covers less ground but is more precise. Hiring and firing practices are mentioned, as well as "staff psychology."

That is why it is so sad to remember the days when the people in the American Jewish community charged with setting up educational institutions and practices were so ignorant of the seriousness and particulars of their work. I do not think that it is unfair to say that many of them were guilty of being "*Machreev a Dor*"—destroying an entire generation in the spiritual sense. You see the "students" of that generation at Simchas and sorrowful occasions, not knowing how to hold a *Siddur*, looking around lost—and sometimes even hostile. It is all too easy for we Orthodox to forget that the aforementioned state of affairs is unfortunately representative of the majority of today's Jewry. And it is really not their fault. They are "*Teenokos Sheneeshboo*"—like captured babes. It is the previous generation who is at fault. It is they who, while building temples on the boulevards of the city, neglected to build temples in the hearts of their children. It is they who ignored the full message of "*Veleemadetem Osom Es Benaychem*." It is from their *Churban* that we have had to rebuild.

A *Shochet* once came to the Chofetz Chaim and said that he wished to leave his present profession and instead become a *Melamed*, a teacher of children. When asked why, he stated that he could no longer cope with the heavy responsibility of making sure that no one ate *Trayf*. He wished, he said, an easy, light job, like teaching kids. It is reported that the Chofetz Chaim laughed bitterly and replied, "The responsibility for what someone ingests into his body frightens you, but you are strangely enough not in awe of teaching that which is taken in by the soul!"

In the days of the second Temple, Yehoshua ben Gamla established community responsibility for Torah education. And when we are told in this Sedrah "*Veleemadetem*" we realize that the sharing of Torah is the most precious gift that we can give our children.

