

Compassionate Children

Dear Parents,

We all know that a person is judged by his words and actions. **What is less known and understood is the power and impact of feelings, of emotions, even when they don't lead to action.** How one feels about something can be hidden from everyone. Everyone except *Hashem*, who sees into every person's heart. And those feelings can have a tremendous impact.

In this week's *Parsha*, there are two places (*Shemos* 11:5 and 12:29) where the Torah relates the impact of the final *Makka* - *Makkas Bechoros*, in *Moshe's* warning and in the Torah's description of what actually took place. It says all firstborn sons will die, *from the first born of Paroh ... until the firstborn of the maidservant/ firstborn of the captive.* In both places, *Rashi* addresses the question of why the maidservants' and captives' sons were included in the communal punishment. Their parents were certainly not in a position to enslave any Jews.

In one of *Rashi's* answers, based on a *Medrash Tanchuma (Bo, 7)* he says simply they were punished because they rejoiced over the Jews' servitude and suffering. They may not have said or done anything to harm Jews, but by virtue of their inner feeling of satisfaction and happiness over the Jews' misfortune, they deserved a similar punishment to the actual perpetrators of crimes against the Jewish People.

We see the tremendous power of a feeling, an attitude, even where it may not lead to actual (mis)behavior. We can further deduce, that if this is the magnitude of responsibility one bears for having a negative attitude towards *Hashem's* chosen people, the reward for empathizing and identifying with the Jewish People's suffering must be exponentially greater. **When we shed a tear over the pain or loss of a Jew or are moved to rejoice when we hear of a Simcha, we harness a very powerful force of Brocha and Heavenly protection.**

As our fellow Jews in *Eretz Yisrael* continue to suffer indescribable and painful losses, disruption, dislocation and trauma, our feelings of empathy must remain strong. We are expected to be *משתתף בצערן של ישראל* - to join in the suffering of our people. Our feelings and anguish should give rise to a desire to express our empathy, even in a symbolic way. Stories abound of *Gedolim* who did not sleep in their beds for months, to identify with victims who lost their homes

in a fire or with soldiers who were sleeping on the cold ground in wartime.

How does this translate to our children? We've mentioned in the past that sharing too much with children could be traumatizing. We emphasized the need to make life as normal and *simchadik* as possible for the sake of their healthy development. Nevertheless, that does not negate feelings of sympathy and care the children should feel for our brothers and sisters, children or adults, who are currently suffering in *Eretz Yisrael*.

How do we work on this during midwinter break? **Vacation time actually provides a beautiful opportunity to sensitize our children to the obligation to share in others' suffering.** While they are enjoying extra leisure time, trips, fun activities and treats and goodies, they can be gently prodded to "do" something on behalf of *Klal Yisrael*. Have a discussion beforehand and let them come up with some ideas of what they can do. It could be something small. A few suggestions: Leave ten minutes late on a day trip to say extra *Tehillim*. Take along one less snack on a trip. Forego one ride in an amusement park. Make sure to allow a sibling or friend to have the first turn at a ride or activity. Eliminate *Lashon Hara* during the car ride; don't talk during *davening*. Older children can accept upon themselves to learn a certain *Perek* in *Chumash* or *Mishnayos*, or to recite a certain amount of *Tehillim*.

Our children are aware there is a war going on and they have seen parents, relatives, teachers and neighbors role-modeling additional *chesed*, learning and *Tefila*. With parents guiding the children's efforts to be appropriately balanced and in moderation, they will be motivated and take great pride in doing something for *Klal Yisrael*. It is a great *chinuch* opportunity and the power of children's *mitzvos* and *davening* are extremely potent.

Let this upcoming week recharge not only our children's physical batteries, but let it also serve as an opportunity for stretching their spiritual and emotional muscles in an outpouring of *Ahavas Yisroel*.

Best wishes for a wonderful, peaceful *Shabbos*,



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