

From the desk of Rabbi Baumann



ALREADY GREAT

Erev Shabbos Parashas Ki-Savo 5781

Dear Parents,

Watching a veritable multitude of Jewish children taking the first step in the next leg of their journey to become passionate, upstanding members of our people, as they returned to Yeshiva this week, one was filled with great pride and gratitude to *Hashem*. Our students, each imbued with greatness in their own unique area, are a world of hope and power.

This week's *parsha* begins with a discussion of the farmers performing the mitzvah of bringing *Bikkurim*, their first fruits, to *Yerusholayim* as a gift to *Hashem*. The *Mishnah* in *Bikkurim* (3:3-4) describes how the craftsmen of *Yerusholayim* would stand up as the farmers passed by and greet them warmly, amidst great excitement and fanfare. The *Gemora* in *Kiddushin* (33a) points out in contrast, that craftsmen are not allowed to stand up for Torah Scholars who pass by, the reason being that since they are employed by others, they must be working without interruption, and may not stop the work they are doing.

Rabi Yosi bar Avin learns from the fact that craftsmen could and should stand up for the farmers, that a mitzvah while it is being performed is even more beloved than *Talmidei Chachomim*. What is the reason? So as not to cause one (the mitzvah performer) to stumble in the future. *Rashi* explains (*Chullin 54b*) – if not for the craftsmen showing such a warm and welcoming and encouraging greeting to the bringers of *Bikkurim*, those same farmers may hesitate and not bring *Bikkurim* in the future because it is difficult.

Our *Rosh Hayeshiva*, *HaGaon HaRav Henach Leibowitz zt'l*, points out that the halacha is obligating the craftsmen to stop work and show honor to the bringers of *Bikkurim*, because they would be taken to task if their lack of positive reaction and encouragement causes the farmers to not bring *Bikkurim* in the future. How strange! If the farmers fail to bring *Bikkurim* in the future they are the ones acting improperly. Yet, it seems that if the craftsmen fail to give them honor and encouragement, they will be taken to task for the farmers' bad performance.

If this is true with complete strangers, that one who is able to provide encouragement can spell the difference between future success or failure of the other, how much more so does this apply to parents, teachers and our children. We blame children when they mess up, but it may be our lack of encouragement that is at least partially accountable.

At our meetings with teachers this past week, I shared a thought I was privileged to hear in the name of a prominent, contemporary *Mechanech* (Torah educator). It was important for teachers to hear, and it's important for parents to hear. We frequently speak of the enormous potential that lies within each child, and how we strive to nurture and build that potential. It is a lofty ideal that looks not at the child where he or she is now, but rather at what they could be.

However, right now, I don't see much that is so special about you. You are only `potential.

Focusing on potential gives a message of hope to the adult, that no matter how problematic and challenging the child may appear today, do not give up hope, because things could change and maybe the child will develop into someone we can be proud of. This master *Mechanech* points out that while it may be a nice message for the parent or teacher, it can have a very devastating impact on the child.

How so? Implicit in a focus on a future potential is the not so subtle message to the child that right now – there's not much that's so great about you. Maybe if you shape up, my child, you'll be worthwhile someday. However, right now, I don't see much that is so special about you. You are only `potential.'

We unwittingly deliver this hurtful message time and time again. Children are quietly pained and humiliated, and in far too many situations, the reaction comes out years later in rebellion and rejection of their parents' and teachers' values. We need to stop ourselves and put ourselves in the child's shoes – how does it feel to be told you have potential? We adults may see the big picture and be comforted by the future, however, the child hears – you don't have much value today. The craftsmen needed to encourage the farmers in the moment, and the farmers needed that encouragement while struggling with the difficult task of bringing *Bikkurim*.

Truly connecting with the children requires us to recognize, identify and focus on the greatness each child possesses today. It is the parent's and educator's obligation to identify the specific areas of greatness that every child, bar none, has right now. As creations of *Hashem*, there is no person who is not imbued with something that is great. We need to look past the superficial immaturity and self-centeredness of a young child and find that greatness.

Someone can have a magnificent mansion built for him, but if the final coat of paint is messy, that is what the new homeowner will focus on and be aggravated by. Similarly, our children, magnificent edifices with so much beauty and quality are not appreciated for their greatness, because the current final external `coat of paint' is sometimes irritating and bothersome

We need to keep in mind that the craftsmen are charged to encourage and honor the farmers, and they are held accountable for the farmers' poor performance. Honor and encourage! That is the least we can do for our children.

Best wishes for a Shabbos of honor and encouragement,

Rabbi Kalman Baumann

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