

The Second Generation

Category: Bamidbar, Naso

Children of Holocaust survivors suffer from a condition: they can't bear to disappoint their parents.

The Nervous Bar Mitzvah

The "Second Generation" is a name that stuck to children of Holocaust survivors. These are individuals who didn't experience the Holocaust themselves but were profoundly affected by it, through their parents' trauma and so on.

One of the 'conditions' which they 'suffer' from is the difficulty in disappointing their parents. Normally, teenagers have a tendency to rebel against their parents to some extent, but children of Holocaust survivors find it much more difficult to disappoint their parents, "after all they've been through."

I want to share with you a story about a child of Holocaust survivors who grew up in Brooklyn in the 1950s. Both his parents were survivors of the concentration camps in Poland, where they had lost their entire families. They met in the DP Camps in Austria, where they married and gave birth to their first child named Chaim. Right after he was born, they moved to New York and settled in Brooklyn.

The young Chaim was enrolled in the local Talmud Torah. He excelled in secular studies, but for some reason, he didn't connect with the Judaic studies. He would fool around during the hours of Torah study, taking advantage of the fact that his parents loved him and could not bear to discipline him. That is how he spent all his childhood years.

By the time he reached 8th grade, he was at the very bottom of his class. The children in his grade weren't all on the same level; some children knew full tractates of the Mishna by heart, while others knew only several chapters. But our Chaim knew only one single Mishna. It was the Mishna his teacher forced him to study as a punishment for some misbehavior or another. That was the only Mishna he actually knew well.

During the winter of 1960, he became bar mitzvah. For his parents, it was a very

special time. Just 15 years earlier they didn't dare dream about survival, and now, after everything they had been through, they had the good fortune to rebuild and celebrate their oldest child's bar mitzvah.

Several weeks before the special day, Chaim's father told him that they would be visiting a righteous man to receive his blessing. He had made an appointment to meet with the Rebbe.

A day before the audience, Chaim proudly told a Chabad friend of his that he would be having an audience with the Rebbe. This child, who knew Chaim well, informed him that the Rebbe often questioned children on the material they learned in school. Hearing that, Chaim almost had a panic attack. He knew very well that he was unprepared for a test on his Torah studies; if the Rebbe would ask him about his learning, he would have nothing to offer.

Beyond his own personal embarrassment, he realized that there was a bigger problem. This audience was supposed to be a moment of profound joy and pride for his father, but instead it would be a moment of embarrassment and shame. It was too late to prepare something to say.

He tossed and turned that night, envisioning his father's pained face as he watched his oldest son fail the test. The image haunted him all night long. The following day felt like an eternity; he was extremely nervous.

His father came home early from work, washed and dressed in his finest clothes, and they traveled to 770. It was a short trip, but it felt endless. When they finally entered the Rebbe's room, he only grew more nervous. As he stood next to the Rebbe's desk, his knees were shaking audibly.

The Rebbe spoke to his father and blessed him, and then turned to him and asked him what language he preferred to speak. He answered: Yiddish.

What happened next shocked him. The Rebbe did not ask which tractate he was studying. The Rebbe proceeded to ask him a number of direct questions, and they all pertained to the one specific Mishna which he knew well. He was overjoyed; he responded to all the questions beautifully, passing the 'test' with 'flying colors.'

When they left the Rebbe's room, his father couldn't contain his joy. He picked him up and hugged him tight for a very long time. For many long minutes, he

remained silent; Chaim realized that he was overwhelmed by his emotions. (Yechiduyot vol. 5 pg. 163)

Don't Be a Disappointment

My friends, the Jewish people are G-d's child. The very first time G-d revealed himself to Moses, he declared that the Jewish people are his firstborn son (Exodus 4:22). We are like the oldest child, for which the parents have immense expectations. When young parents have their first child, they decide that they are going to be the best parents in the world. They will give their child the best education, they will give him only healthy food, and they will never let him put a single candy in his mouth, G-d forbid.

They could personally eat unhealthy foods, because they are lost cases anyway, but this new baby is going to be raised as the healthiest, smartest child that ever existed. The expectations are tremendous.

The same is true about G-d. The Baal Shem Tov taught that G-d loves every Jew like elderly parents love an only child born to them in their old age. We are that child; we must not disappoint our parents.

Some people like to focus on punishments. "If you don't do G-d's will, he will punish you with such and such..." But Chassidism teaches that our connection to G-d needs to be built on fear of G-d, not on fear of punishment.

What is the difference? Fear of G-d is when you are afraid to disappoint Him. It's the fear of losing the relationship. G-d put so much into you. You are everything to Him, so you cannot simply go against Him. You just can't bear causing Him pain. G-d is so precious to you that you want to bring him only joy and pleasure.

We find a similar concept in this week's Torah portion. Parshat Naso is the longest portion in the Torah. In the Parsha, we read about the twelve-day dedication of the Tabernacle. Each tribe received one day when its leader brought special offerings in their name to the Tabernacle.

The Midrash says, "When G-d told Moses to give each tribe one day, he turned to the leaders and said, 'G-d said that everyone should bring sacrifices, but he didn't say who should go first.' Hearing that, they all pointed to Nachshon. 'He

sanctified G-d's name at the sea; he should be first to bring the offerings.'" (Bamidbar Rabba 12:21).

One year earlier, when they had all stood helplessly at the banks of the Red Sea with the Egyptians gaining ground behind them, it was Nachshon who jumped into the sea with simple faith, causing the water to split.

Why did Nachshon do it? It wasn't because he loved adventure. The Talmud says that G-d told Moses to take the Jews and go. As Rashi explains, G-d was saying that the sea would not be an obstacle. But nobody wanted to be first to jump into the water.

Despite all the miracles they had witnessed in Egypt, nobody wanted to be first to test the waters. At the end, it was someone who loved G-d dearly. It was someone who did not want to disappoint G-d; he said, "if Moses commanded us to go, that's enough for me."

In his merit, G-d split the sea for the Jewish people. And he was the one who merited to inaugurate the Tabernacle and bring G-d's presence into it.

The message here is that every Jew is G-d's only child. We need to live with the attitude that we can't possibly disappoint G-d; we want to bring him only joy and nachas.