

Young Prophets

The Bibas tragedy & the power of Jewish children.

Untainted breath

This week, Jews everywhere mourned the tragedy of the Bibas children and their mother, may G-d avenge their blood. It was remarkable: we've been living through over 500 days of war, with tragedy after tragedy, but somehow, when we heard about these two little boys, it hit differently. It shook every Jew, no matter where they were or how much they'd been following the news.

It says something powerful about us as a people. Every Jewish life is precious, but when it comes to children, they are *the most precious of all*.

But why does Judaism put such an emphasis on children?

This week's Torah portion, *Terumah*, introduces one of the biggest ideas in Judaism: *"They shall make for Me a Sanctuary, and I will dwell among them."* G-d asks us to create a space where He can live with us. And here's something fascinating—Jewish law says that when it comes to building the Holy Temple, every Jew is obligated to participate. It's a home for the Divine! And yet, despite how important this mission is, Jewish law makes one thing very clear: *We do not interrupt the Torah learning of young children, even for the building of the Beis HaMikdash*. Even if the entire project will be delayed, the learning of Jewish kids comes first.

Why? What's so special about a child's learning?

The Talmud says that the Torah of Jewish children has a unique purity, something even the greatest sages didn't possess. Their words are described as *"pure breath, untainted by sin."* Here's why: before a child reaches Bar or Bat Mitzvah, they aren't yet responsible for mitzvos. And because sin is only possible when someone is obligated to do something and doesn't, a child—who has no obligations yet—is completely untouched by wrongdoing.

Think about it—our mistakes and regrets can sometimes feel like barriers between us and our spirituality, between us and G-d. The Torah even says: *"Your sins have separated between you and G-d."* So even when an adult studies Torah with the best of intentions, their words still come from someone who's experienced failure, struggle, and imperfection. But a child? Their learning is pure, unfiltered, and completely innocent.

The Rebbe takes it one step further. He says that if we want G-d to truly rest in the home we build for Him, we need a special blessing to make that happen. And where does that blessing come from? The Torah study of Jewish children. Their learning has the power to ensure that G-d's presence will actually dwell among us.

In the building of the Mishkan—after all the hard work and construction was completed, Moshe still gave a blessing: *"May it be G-d's will that His Presence dwell in the work of your hands."* The Torah learning of children is the key that ensures G-d's presence will rest in the Beis HaMikdash.

Mordechai's Story

But there's something more to the uniqueness of Jewish children. In just two weeks, we'll be celebrating Purim, and within the Purim story lies a powerful message about the strength of Jewish children.

The Midrash shares a special moment about Mordechai. When he first heard about Haman's decree—that on one single day, the 13th of Adar, every Jew in the Persian Empire could be attacked, killed, G-d forbid, and plundered—he went out into the streets and saw a group of Jewish children walking home from *cheder* (school). He stopped one child and asked, *"Tell me, what verse did you learn today?"*

The child answered with a verse from *Mishlei* (Proverbs): *"Do not fear sudden terror, nor the destruction of the wicked when it comes."* In other words, even when danger seems to strike out of nowhere—like Haman's decree did—don't panic. Don't be afraid.

Mordechai turned to a second child and asked, *"What did you learn today?"*

This child quoted a verse from *Yeshayahu* (Isaiah): *"Devise a plan, but it will fail; speak a word, but it will not succeed, for G-d is with us."* The message was clear: No matter what evil plans are made against the Jewish people, like the bus bombings that were planned in Israel this past week, they will not succeed—because G-d is on our side.

Still, Mordechai asked another child, *"And what did you learn?"*

The third child shared yet another verse from *Yeshayahu*: *“Even to old age, I am He, and to gray hair, I will sustain you. I have made you, and I will carry you; I will sustain you, and I will save you.”*

This verse speaks about G-d’s unwavering commitment to the Jewish people—not just when we were young as a nation, when we first left Egypt and saw open miracles, but even now, after centuries in exile. Even when it feels like we’ve aged, like we’ve been through too much, G-d promises: *“I will carry you. I will sustain you. I will save you.”*

Even when it seems like the Jewish people are weary, like history has taken its toll, G-d reassures us: *“I made you, and I will carry you.”* He won’t let us down. He won’t leave us behind.

When Mordechai heard three different children recite three different verses—all carrying the same optimistic message, that there was nothing to fear and that G-d would save them—he *rejoiced with great joy*.

Minor Prophecy

What was behind this method of *“Pesok li pesukecha”*—asking a child what they had learned that day?

From the moment the Jewish people became a nation, all the way through the era of the Second Beis HaMikdash, they always had prophets. Whenever disaster loomed, people would turn to the prophet to understand G-d’s message—*Why is this happening? What does G-d want from us? How can we prevent this decree?* Often, prophets would even warn the people in

advance, urging them to change their ways before it was too late.

But in the Purim story, there was a crisis—there were no prophets. The Jewish people had no direct way of knowing what G-d wanted from them. So Mordechai turned to the children. Why? Because the words that come from a child's mouth are like a form of prophecy. Children are our *little prophets*. When we need guidance, when we want to know if we should be afraid or how to respond to a challenge, we turn to a child. Their innocence and purity—their “*breath untainted by sin*”—connects them to G-d in a way that adults can't fully replicate. And just as a child's love for G-d is unconditional, it awakens an unconditional love from G-d in return.

This idea isn't just found in the Purim story—it appears in many places throughout the Talmud. And it wasn't only Jews who used this method, but even non-Jews.

Take, for example, the Roman emperor Nero. In secular history, he's known as the one who supposedly played his violin while Rome burned—though historians doubt that ever really happened. But the Jewish story of Nero is completely different.

The Talmud tells us that when Rome decided to destroy the Second Beis HaMikdash, they sent Nero at the head of a massive army to lead the destruction. When he arrived at the outskirts of Jerusalem, he wanted to know if this was truly what G-d wanted. So he devised a test—he shot arrows in every direction, and no matter which way he aimed, they all miraculously landed pointing toward Jerusalem. That was his

first sign that the city was destined for destruction.

But that wasn't enough for him. He wanted another confirmation. So what did he do? He found a Jewish child and asked him, "*Pesok li pesukecha*"—*tell me the verse you learned today*. He was using the same method Mordechai had used centuries earlier in Shushan.

The child answered with a verse from *Yechezkel* (Ezekiel): "*I will take My revenge on Edom through My people, Israel.*"

In other words, yes, the Romans (descendants of Edom) would destroy Jerusalem and the Beis HaMikdash—but G-d would eventually take revenge on them.

At that moment, Nero realized the truth—he was being set up. He would destroy the Beis HaMikdash, but in the end, G-d would turn against him and his empire. He said, "*G-d wants to destroy His house, but He wants to clean His hands with me? No way!*"

So what did he do? He deserted the Roman army, fled, and ultimately converted to Judaism. And from his descendants came none other than Rabbi Meir—one of the greatest sages of all time, whose teachings illuminate Jewish law to this day.

Rav Sheshet

A few hundred years later, the Talmud tells us about a time when the servants of the *Reish Galuta* (the Exilarch) tried to harm one of the great sages of Babylon, Rav Sheshet.

In those days, the Jewish community in Babylonia had a leader known as the *Reish Galuta*, or "Head of the Exile," who was

given certain powers by the government, including the authority to enforce Jewish law. Unfortunately, some of his servants were known to be violent.

One day, for some reason, they decided to target Rav Sheshet, a great *Amora* (Talmudic sage) who happened to be blind. They devised a cruel trap: they dug a pit, covered it with a mat, and then called for him, hoping he would walk straight into it and fall.

Standing nearby was another sage, Rav Chisda. He saw what was happening but was too afraid to directly warn Rav Sheshet, so instead, he made a subtle noise to alert him. Rav Sheshet, sensing something was wrong, turned to a young child who was standing there and asked him, *“Pesok li pesukecha”*—*Tell me, what verse did you learn today?*

The child answered with a verse from *Shmuel*: *“Turn to your right or to your left.”*

That was all Rav Sheshet needed to hear. He immediately understood the hidden message—he should not continue walking straight ahead. He turned aside and avoided the trap.

In Conclusion

This idea is just as relevant today. If we want to ensure the future of the Jewish people, if we want to counter the challenges and threats that face us, the most powerful thing we can do is strengthen Jewish education.

The best way to honor the memory of the Bibas children is to make sure that every Jewish child we know has access to a

Jewish education. Encouraging parents to enroll their children in a Jewish school, Hebrew school, or youth program isn't just a nice thing to do—it's what secures our survival. Events and memorials are meaningful, but what truly makes a difference is one more Jewish child knowing how to say *Shema Yisrael*. That's what keeps us strong, that's what protects us, and that's what ensures the Jewish people will continue to thrive.