Learn Your Children Well

Jeffrey Saks

In Judaism, odd as it may seem, there is no obligation to teach. In both the halakhic tradition and in pedagogical practice, teaching never exists in isolation from learning. In fact, Maimonides counts them as two components of a single, symbiotically unified mitzvah — lillmod u-lelamed.

Upon entering yeshivot, or other settings of traditional Torah study, one immediately senses that the teachers don’t teach and students don’t study — rather, everyone learns. Of course, educators must also teach, and much can be said about the relationship between the two. It is no surprise that one’s students — and the need to teach them — serve as the greatest impetus to a teacher’s ongoing acquisition of wisdom. The teacher’s own learning reaches its full potential when it is transmitted to students. Proper fulfillment of the mitzvah to teach/learn does not create dependencies; rather, it liberates the student. The teacher’s need to educate makes him or her dependent on the student. As Rabbi Akiva taught, “more than the calf wants to suck, the cow wants to give suck” (Pesachim 112a).

This is particularly true as played out in the most sublime teaching relationship: parent. Raising children in Israel offers the added value of teaching them Torah within the Hebrew language. As a toddler, my son would sing the words to Adon Olam, “Hu nisi u-manos li” while pointing to himself, knowing the word “li” means “me” or mine.

Teaching from “within the language” allows the child to create Hebrewisms: speaking English while thinking Hebrew. Thus, when asked what I do for a living, my son would reply, “Abba learns people” (meaning that I’m a teacher). In Hebrew the sentence makes perfect sense, since teaching and learning are merely two inflections of the same root, l-m-d.

And so my son has unknowingly pointed out the challenge of this most beloved mitzvah. We cannot teach our children (or we cannot only teach them); we must learn them. As the teacher, a parent needs the child. The nursing mother (remember R. Akiva’s metaphor) has a need to nourish her young far more than the physical desire to relieve engorgement. But in order to teach my son (or any of my students), I must first know and understand him, and be guided by his needs to foster his development, curiosity, independence, and love of God.

Kavanah for a Mitzvah

Lori Lefkovitz

Rabbi Jeffrey Saks is founding Director of ATID—the Academy for Torah Initiatives and Directions in Jewish Education, in Jerusalem. He recently edited Wisdom from All My Teachers: Challenges and Initiatives in Contemporary Torah Education (Urim).