

Parenting With Perseverance - Part 3
 Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick on June 1, 2013

This Shabbos we are continuing our Shabbat Sermon Series called "Parenting with Perseverance". It doesn't matter whether your kids are grown or still at home, whether you have kids or not, the fact of the matter is we need the kids in our life to be better people and we can make that happen. You and I are influencing kids all the time and we have to be aware of the impact we have on children, and, through them, on the future of our families, our congregation, our community, and our society. As Jews we have a moral responsibility to raise up the next generation right because as Jews we have a moral responsibility to help make the world a better place. And even if you don't want to see your task as that "global and altruistic", look at it this way: Raising good kids is also self-serving because when it is done right it truly helps to bring out the best in you. Most of us would agree that we are better people for having raised kids.

And so I want to pick up where I left off... I had been talking about one of the most important needs our children have, and that is the need for affirmation. Very few, if any, have ever said to his or her parents: "Stop encouraging me so much! It's not important to me that you are proud." But, as the same time, we need to think through what we compliment because that's going to send a clear indication to our kids of what matters most to us.

So let's look at this a little closer. What are we actually talking about here? We need to affirm character and behavior. Kids today are validated, in general, on four things: On appearance, athletics, academics and the arts. That's where they pick up their compliments – that's what they see as the arena in which they compete with their peers, that's how they think the world judges them. Fair enough, a lot of us this the same thing... But you and I also know that you can have a brilliant, good looking athlete who plays the clarinet who is a terrible human being. So while it's good and important to say to our kids, "You look great", or "You played a great game", or "That's great, you got an 'A'" – that's what they are expecting. Don't get me wrong, you shouldn't hold back on this, but our jobs as parents is to help them to see the less obvious priorities that we know are important; priorities that they won't learn from everyone else. So you need to affirm character qualities. We need to be telling kids, "I was really proud of the way you handled that situation without getting flustered..." "I was proud of the way you gave that person the benefit of the doubt – I'm not sure many people would have done that..." "I loved the patience you showed then to your little brothers..." You look for character traits and behaviors that reflect the ideals that you hold dear. These aren't auto-pilot responses; you have to think through in advance what really matters most.

That's why bar and bat mitzvah is so important. Yeah, it's "nice suit" and "you did a good job." That's OK, but anyone can say that. The DJ is going to tell the child she did a good job! We can be more thoughtful... "I am proud that you are taking seriously something that is so important to me." "I learned so much about being a good person from Judaism, and I can see you are doing the same." "I am trying to figure out what our Judaism is all about and I can see you are doing the same thing." "I can see you are on a

path – and I am glad we are on it together.” A DJ’s not going to say that, a casual guest is not going to say that, but when someone a kid loves, respects and admires speaks that way it’s huge!

Your words are life giving to kids. They are more memorable and more powerful than you think. But still I really have heard parents say, “What do you mean? I have to watch what I say around my kids? I’m the grown up, they’re the kids.” No, your words have power and if you want to draw them closer to you really do have to consider how your words shape their worlds. Not only are you shaping their self-concept, you are modeling communication skills that they are going to need to make it in the world.

And that brings us to the second need that kids today have: they need to be able to communicate – they need good communication skills. When kids don’t have good communication skills they find themselves ill equipped to function in life. And this is especially true today when so little of their communication is done face to face. It’s all on their phones or computer screens... They have to learn people skills to be responsible adults in this world. Kids learn to communicate by talking with adults. But, they often learn, at a very young age, that when adults want to talk to you, it’s usually not a good thing. When adults want to talk to you, you are usually in trouble. Remember what it felt like when your name came over the loud speaker in school – “Will Aaron Krupnick please come to the principal’s office,” the rest of the class is not thinking, “Oh, the principal must be lonely...” And when you get back to class you have to explain yourself to the other kids... Think about it, even in your own home, when you yell up the stairs for your kids, what are they thinking? They are thinking, “What did I do wrong...?”

So some kids just learn early on, “The less I say, the less I share, the smaller the target for adults I am.” You know how it is: “What are you doing?” “Nothing.” “What did you learn in school today?” “Nothing.” And a lot of the time I find that kids clam up because they are afraid of what you, the authority in their life, are going to say. But you know what? You don’t have to comment on everything they say. You don’t. So much of the time when kids are talking they aren’t really trying to prove a point or make an argument, they are just trying to see if it is safe. You want to create an environment where you allow kids to talk, where they are not fearful that you are going to jump on them. So I think we need to make it a goal in our families to have more dialogue, more conversation. It’s especially important in their day and age when we are so quick to rush away from the table and hide behind our computers or check our cell phones. If they can’t talk to you, you know where they’ll go.

It is Gd’s design that we talk to our kids. It’s in the Shema – the cornerstone of our faith: V’Shenamtam L’vanecha Vi Deebarta Bom...” One of the key, maybe the most important prayers in Judaism says “And these words which I command you today you shall take to heart. Teach them diligently to your children and recite them at home and on the way, day and night.” What is the commandment here? It’s to build relationships with our kids.

And that goal, that character trait, that's what we are supposed to pass on to our kids. That's spiritual parenting. We've got to be talking to our kids. And as much as it feels like our kids don't want to talk to us, we've got to figure out ways to do it because they really do want to talk. And I'm not here to say that it's really easy to talk to your kids. It's not. That's why we are calling this series, "Parenting with Perseverance." During certain seasons in a child's life it is going to be more difficult than in others. Sometimes it will seem to just depend on the day of the week, but we have to keep trying and be thoughtful in our approach, in our words.

It's building a bridge of communication with your kids that will last the rest of your lives. And it may seem that you have waited too long to build that bridge of communication, that the river is too high, but it's never too late. We need to build bridges that they can cross to come closer to us. They need it. We need it. The world we live in needs it. And it is hard work. In the busy world we all live in, who has time? You do because that's what we do here in synagogue. So take this time on Shabbos morning, listen to the Hazzan's voice as it lifts your soul and spirit, and then when we continue in private prayer, reflect on these words I have just shared, and more importantly, the words you can share with the people who need to hear them the most. (And for those of you who are reading this at home – come to shul and you'll have this unique time for personal prayer as well...!)

See You in Shul!
Shabbat Shalom!
Rabbi