

# CHARGE YOUR CHILDREN

By Rabbi Moshe ben Asher, Ph.D. & Magidah Khulda bat Sarah

At the end of the Torah, in one of the last of the weekly readings, Ha'azinu (lit., “listen”), Moses says to the people: “Set your heart to all these words that I testify against you today, that you charge your children to observe to do all the words of this law.” (Deuteronomy 32:46)

Moses passed on to them his role as teacher of Torah for the next generation. As he had taught it to them, so they would teach it to their children.

Yet it's no secret that many Jews are indifferent to whether their children and grandchildren remain Jewish—they don't believe that the burden is worth bearing. And, not surprisingly, those of us who are not indifferent face myriad challenges.

Much more is required to sustain Judaism and the Jewish people than affording our children a few hours a week of religious school after they've invested virtually all their spirit and energy in other, non-Jewish activities that are more important to them, because they see that they're more important to us.

It's not enough to teach our children about Judaism or how to live as religious Jews; what's required is that we model religious conviction and commitment with a modicum of passion. Because if the coming generations are to be Jewish, our children must have sufficient motivation to be a generation of *teachers* of the Jewish people, not simply students.

One of the most debilitating and demoralizing aspects of parenthood for any Jew is to be personally without the wherewithal to teach one's own child how to inherit and bequeath the tradition that has sustained us as individuals and kept us alive as a people.

So we must be committed to modeling Jewish *parenthood*—the how-to of raising Jewish children who will, in turn, raise Jewish children; committed to demonstrating Jewish *peoplehood*—the how-to of giving to and benefiting from a congregational community that educates and nourishes Jewish families and their communal life and commonweal; and committed to exercising Jewish *citizenship*—the how-to of proudly serving our communities and country as *Jewish Americans*, contributing from our unique heritage to the public life that protects and enhances our common familial, communal and national interests.

How is it possible to “set your heart” to these challenging tasks?

The tradition teaches that it requires one to “concentrate with all one's eyes, heart, and ears” to fathom the words of Torah. (Sifre) That is, we must concentrate on the words of Torah. If we don't wholeheartedly take upon ourselves learning Torah and patterning our lives on its vision and path, we are not likely to successfully bequeath it to another generation or, more importantly, to give them the tools to pass it on to their children.

The glitch in this picture appears from our wholehearted commitment to everything in our life but Torah. We seek throughout our days, especially in our youth, to sustain the fragile hope that, finally, we will find meaning, fulfillment, even contentment, from pursuing our careers and the position, possessions, prestige, and power they afford us. And, as we mature, establishing families of our own, we seek to avoid estrangement from our children over their choices for instant material gratification, while not completely abandoning our efforts to divert them from the siren song of popular culture—which too often has been our own *raison d'être*.

What is it about this materialistic quest that so mesmerizes us, that keeps us enthralled and entrapped despite the disappointment and despair of our souls year after year?

We believe it is the allure of the arrogant fiction that we alone are the masters of our destiny, that our happiness is entirely in our own hands. Many of us abhor the possibility that our fate may be directed by another person, a community of people, or a spiritual force beyond our comprehension—which is a form of soul-terror, a fear in our bones if you will, for which we have not been prepared.

Wherein, then, lies the preparation?

Moses tells the people to set their hearts on “*all these words*.” The point is that, notwithstanding popular prejudice, there is nothing empty or useless in the Torah. That which appears so, according to one of our great modern commentators, Nehama Leibowitz, is “due to our lack of understanding, our failure to labor to discover its meaning.”

But that notion—that we should *labor* to discover the meaning of Torah—is almost shocking in its discordance with modern sensibilities. Of all the things we are willing to labor for—professional education, a luxury car, a grander house, a more elaborate vacation, financial security in retirement—the meaning of Torah is not even a remote consideration for most of us.

Yet hardly one of us would not protest that, in truth, we labor relentlessly only because we want the best for our children or their children. So, in effect, we are caught up in a vicious cycle that undermines the satisfaction of our spirit from generation to generation. We are enmeshed in pursuits that, for the most part, are neither uplifting nor satisfying beyond their momentary ability to distract us from our spiritual suffering, and we rationalize our obsessive single-mindedness in these pursuits as necessary for our children. Needless to say, their religious and spiritual inheritance under the circumstances is often meager at best.

In what sense are we to understand that when Moses said, “set your heart to all these words,” he was testifying against *us* and the life we are living *now*?

We are, in a manner of speaking, victims of a commercialized culture that marshals extraordinary media resources to promote the worship of the self and its immediate material gratification. Under the circumstances—living in a society dominated by corporate media that at best ignore and at worst denigrate the value of spirituality, religiosity, family, community, democracy, and productivity—nothing less than investing our life’s labor in learning and living Torah can extricate us from this morass.

Moses was, in effect, publicly putting us on notice, giving us “fair warning.” We were warned of the consequences of honoring or abandoning the teaching when its vision and path are threatened by profane culture and its spiritually degrading practices.

None of us, presumably, would have any difficulty understanding that if we abandoned the civil law, chaos would result in our civic relationships. But we want to shut our eyes to the obvious consequences of having abandoned whole-hearted commitment to Torah’s systemic integration of ritual, moral, and ethical instruction as the foundation for

familial, communal, and national life. As one of our great traditional commentators taught: If as a people we honor Torah, then we gain “sustenance without suffering,” because we have the strength and power of a unified community. (Sforno) If, however, as a people we abandon Torah, then we become susceptible to persistent but almost imperceptible forces that first destroy us individually and then, ultimately, as a community and a people.

What does Moses mean when he says, “that you charge your children. . . .”?

He was grateful that Torah was *observed* after he taught it, because “had others not accepted the Torah through him, it would have been worthless” (Sforno)—and, of course, *we* wouldn’t have inherited it.

The lesson Moses teaches us is that it devolves upon us to prepare our children, from the beginning and throughout the years of their childhood and youth, to learning and living the vision and path that Torah offers for our life.

In the words of the Torah: We must charge our children “to observe to do all the words of this law”—which requires three things of us:

- First, our recognition that the survival of our children as Jews in their succeeding generations depends fundamentally upon our teaching them to become teachers of their children;
- Second, that we enable our children to acquire and bequeath their inheritance by providing the ongoing moral support and material resources to ensure that Judaism and participation in congregational life are the focal points of their life; and
- Third, *not* that we model moral perfection in our own life, but instead demonstrate a day-to-day willingness to struggle with the challenges of living up to the vision and path that Torah offers to us.

Click [here](#) for more congregational development and organizing tools.

***Help support the work of Gather the People with a tax-deductible donation by clicking [here!](#)***