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ARE WE WRONGING OUR CHILDREN?

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There is a phrase in the Torah that commands us, *v'lo tonu ish et amito* (ולא תונו איש את-עמירתו)—“Do not wrong one another. . .” (Leviticus 25:17)

The word *tonu* (תונו), frequently translated as “wronging,” means to suppress, oppress, or maltreat, and refers especially to vexing with words, including causing perplexity and puzzlement by what we say. The word *amito* (עמירתו), often translated as “one another,” is from the Hebrew root ט-נ-ע, which refers to those with whom we are united or associated, especially our family members.

Sefer haHinnuch, the thirteenth century *Book of Education* on *mitzvot* (commandments), teaches us that we should not speak words to anyone in a way that causes distress when the person “. . . has no power to help himself against them.”

While ordinarily this negative commandment is understood by our commentators to serve the purpose of promoting peace in social relations, particularly to prevent shame and embarrassment, we want to raise a related but somewhat different issue.

Are we wronging our children when, verbally and otherwise, we reinforce in them the conviction that their future fulfillment in life depends almost entirely on their secular knowledge and accomplishments? When as children they are relatively powerless to resist our training and socialization in this direction, are we thereby increasing their vulnerability to shame and embarrassment in their adult years—putting a stumbling block before the blind? (Leviticus 19:14) And are we, moreover, thereby indirectly sowing the seeds of disinvestment and decline in our congregational communities by undermining the committed participation of coming generations?

Many of us continue well into our late thirties to be enamored by the enervating fiction of achieving happiness through secular success, but we usually begin to have serious doubts by our forties. By then we begin to acknowledge, at least to ourselves, that such mastery is not the route to fulfillment or happiness in life. Instead, we discover that the most potentially rewarding challenge in life is to find meaning.

This is not an argument that we should send our children into the world unprepared to do useful work and earn a livelihood adequate to sustain them and their families. But it is to point out that their ability to make sound choices, including what kind of work and family life will be meaningful to them, depends on their capacity to acquire a vision and path that lead them to serve religious and spiritual purposes that are higher than their privatized material interests.

This poses an extraordinary challenge to parents who are struggling to find meaning beyond the advancement of their own careers which, while successful, may have failed to fill the numinous void in their lives, leaving their religious and spiritual needs unsatisfied. Such parents face the possibility of wronging not only their own children but themselves as well, because when we wrong our children we wrong ourselves.

The tendency of many parents to replicate their own lack of religious and spiritual knowledge and practice in their children reflects a misconception of the path defined by Torah—“Six days you shall serve and do all your work” (Exodus 20:9)—for our vocations and careers. The commonplace contemporary misunderstanding of this verse is that religiosity and spirituality have no place in the workaday world.

Such thinking ignores the Jewish view of the powers that enable us to do our day-to-day work, implicitly assuming that we are to exercise them primarily or even exclusively as means of self-promotion and self-glorification. Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch (1808-1888) reminds us that, in regard to our six days of work, “It was לעבדה ולשמרה . . . [God’s creation] and to keep it that He placed you in it; to raise it, by appropriating its materials, changing and transforming them out of the sphere of blind physical existence into the realm of human purposes, to serve and further God’s aim for the world.” It is in carrying out this Jewish mission that our lives take on deeper meaning and the possibility of achieving happiness and fulfillment with our partners, our families, our congregations, our people, and our communities.

This understanding is crucial, because parents are the transmission line for the generation-to-generation communication of the foundational history of Jewish life. Surrogates, such as religious-school teachers and rabbis, can bolster the parental role but not replace it. The compelling communication of the facts, knowledge, and wisdom of our history and purpose as a people occurs in the parent-child relationship in which there is a uniquely intimate bond of trust. As Rabbi Hirsch teaches regarding the commandment to “Honor your father and your mother. . .” (Exodus 20:12), “. . . the knowledge and acknowledgment of historical facts depends solely on *tradition, and tradition depends solely on the faithful transmission by parents to children and on the willing acceptance by children from the hands of their parents.*” (Original emphasized.) It is the virtue of this generation to generation transmission, literally its moral excellence and righteousness, that “. . . joins the child[ren] to the Jewish past . . . to hand over to them the Jewish mission in knowledge, morals, and education.” (Hirsch on Exodus 20:12)

Parents are to be honored not because they are the biological progenitors or physical caretakers of their children, but because they live out and transmit the vision and path of Torah to them. “It is this mission of parents,” says Rabbi Hirsch, “and not the greater or lesser amount of self-sacrifice and care which they have given their children, which lies at the root of this כבוד אב ואם . . .” [honoring of father and mother].

If we refuse, for whatever reasons, to acknowledge our own inadequacies and failures in this arena and, in that refusal, diminish a child’s opportunities to go beyond us religiously and spiritually, then we have grievously wronged our child and also deceived ourselves, damaging our own souls. The *לא תנונו* in our phrase *את-עמיתו* is there to teach us that we should not deceive *ourselves*. As Rabbi Naftali of Ropshitz (1760-1826) used to say: “According to the law, a person should

not deceive another; *לפנים משורת הדין* going beyond the letter of the law, a person should not deceive himself.”

Our experience leads us to believe that virtually every parent wants his or her child to have greater material success than the parent has achieved. More than anything parents want their children to be happy, so they’re wonderfully self-sacrificing to make their children’s secular success more likely. They make great investments of time and energy, expend extraordinary amounts of money and other material resources, to achieve this objective. But for parents whose own lives are far from fulfilled despite their own secular success, these outsized investments in the future secular success of their children have the earmarks of doubling up on a bad investment, ensuring that yet another generation stays knee-deep in the big muddiness of religious and spiritual anomie.

We far less frequently meet parents who are making comparable investments in their children’s religious and spiritual accomplishments. The most parsimonious explanation is that they are operating in unfamiliar territory. We can’t lead others where we ourselves have not successfully navigated. Moreover, to acknowledge to our children and ourselves not only that we can’t lead them in those dimensions of their lives, but also that this is an area of failure in our own lives, places demoralizing pressures on us.

If we are to acknowledge our lack of success in building a religious and spiritual foundation of meaning and fulfillment in our own lives, yet be committed to see that our children don’t experience the same outcome, then very possibly we will find ourselves the students of our children—which, for many parents, is a source of shame and embarrassment.

What does it say about us as parents if we increase the likelihood that our children will experience shame and embarrassment later in life because we failed to invest sufficiently in their future religious and spiritual potential and, as a consequence, they took moral and ethical wrong turns? And what is our culpability for the damage to our own souls if now, when we have the wherewithal, we fail to adequately guide and support our children, so that out of 168 hours in the week, barely a handful are focused on their religious and spiritual development?

The challenge to us as Jewish parents is to set our children on a course that takes them beyond the learning that we received and beyond our own achievements. On the one hand, to the extent that we have achieved material success in the secular world, that we are knowledgeable and proud of our accomplishments, we are comfortable with the idea that our children can achieve much more than we have. On the other hand, to the extent that we have

achieved little religiously and spiritually in our own lives, we are much less competent and less committed to ensure that our children achieve more than we have.

The *Sefer haHinnuch* notes in its discussion of the *mitzvah* not to wrong one another, “Even toward young children it is right to take care not to

pain them unduly with words, except for what is greatly necessary so that they should learn ethics and morals. . . .” This is the foundation not only of their future happiness and fulfillment, but also to ensure the survival and success of our families, our congregations, and our people.

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