



Parenting Through The Rebbe's Prism

A FIRST-PERSON RECOLLECTION

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Based on a lecture given to The Beis Medrash Women's Circle on 10 Tammuz, 5774, in commemoration of the 21st yahrtzeit of Mrs. Miriam Yudis bas Reuven a"h Lakein

BARUCH HASHEM, I have 11 children, many grandchildren and over 20 great-grandchildren *ka"h*. As I watch them growing up, I keep hearing new-fangled philosophies about raising children that get some people very excited. Sometimes it is frightening, because I'm not sure how well-founded these philosophies are in Torah and Yiddishkeit and Chassidus.

I remember in 1980 or 1981, the Rebbe started to talk about *taharas hamishpachah* and family planning. He spoke about the unhealthy effects on marriage—even for non-Jews—when you introduce family planning.

Now this is something I need to *klap al chet* for—while listening to that *sichah*,

I felt so embarrassed. There were men and *bachurim* listening, and the Rebbe was speaking about intimate details of a couple's private life. I was so foolish. The Rebbe realized it was an emergency and he had to speak about it publicly. During that *sichah*, the Rebbe said that we should get together and explain to people what a *brachah* every child is, and what a *brachah* it is when a couple allows Hashem to run their family life according to Torah and lets Him decide when the woman should become pregnant.

Who says someone else's Shmuel is not as great as your Shmuel?

At the time, Rabbi Nachman Bernhard, *a"h*, the rabbi of a large modern Orthodox congregation in South Africa, was visiting. He wrote to the Rebbe and asked for guidance on how to approach the subject in his community. The Rebbe wrote back to him with a beautiful answer. The Rebbe said to tell the congregation, why would they want to be involved in something where their only power is negative? Only Hashem can give a child. All we can do is to stop it, to prevent the blessing. When parents choose to space their children, who says that when they decide they want their next child, Hashem will want to give them a child then?

The Rebbe begged us to leave this in the hands of Hashem. We have to live a life of Torah, and whether or not she becomes pregnant is Hashem's will.

I know many people—including some of my own relatives—who have secondary infertility. They had a few children, and then they stopped becoming pregnant, with no clear reason. They're young and healthy, they have no reason to wait—they want more children, but Hashem is not giving them right now.

It is up to Hashem alone when a child is born. Hashem knows exactly when to give a child and to whom. How can anyone say that a child is emotionally damaged because he was born too soon after a sibling?

Sometimes the problem is that parents don't know how to give enough care and attention to each child. That is a problem that can be addressed. There are solutions. Parents need to learn how to relieve some of the pressure so they

can enjoy each of their children and give them what they need. But the concept that we're in control and we have to space children—I don't believe that this is in accordance with Torah.

In a well-known *sichah*, the Rebbe relates the story of Chana and Shmuel.

Chana's husband, Elkanah, was very wealthy. Every year he would travel to Shiloh for the *shalosh regalim*. He would hire many wagons and encourage people to go with him. But after Shmuel was born, Chana chose to stay home with him for two years.

The Rebbe asks, why did Chana not hire a babysitter or wet-nurse? Elkanah was very wealthy—Chana had many options available to her to care for her child so she could go. And Chana was a *nevi'ah*. Who better than her could appreciate the value of a visit to Shiloh? Yet she gave up something so precious—to see *Elokus*, to be close to Hashem—in order to take care of her child.

Based on this story, the Rebbe taught us that the greatest *tafkid* for a woman is to bring up her child. That is her greatest mission in life.

After the Rebbe said this, some teachers in Bais Rivkah became very frightened. We were giving up being with our children to go teach. Maybe we were not supposed to be working. So we wrote to the Rebbe for clarification.

The Rebbe wrote back with two types of answers.

To some women, the Rebbe wrote:

Who says someone else's Shmuel is not as great as your Shmuel? If you are teaching other Jewish children, who says that child is not as important as

your child?

To other women, the Rebbe's answer was:

Anybody who works for an institution of my father-in-law (the Frierdiker Rebbe), that *zchus* will protect their children.

The Rebbe did not feel a woman should give up her job as teacher or Shlucha, or working in any capacity for Jewish children or the Jewish people. Such work will not harm their children. That's how we have to approach it if we have a job that requires us to be away from our children for part of the day. Not every case is the same. Some women need to work for *parnassah*. Their obligation is to make sure that their child is in a Jewish environment and is being well cared for while they're away.

I know for sure that the Rebbe approved of mothers going out for at least a few hours a day on their own. The Rebbe realized that it is difficult for many women to stay home alone with children all day. Women need stimulation, but not at the expense of a child being neglected.

Sometimes the amount of time we spend with our children is not as important as the quality of parenting. There are mothers who are very busy during the day, but they make sure that when they're home with their children, they give their full attention. They're not on the phone or doing other things. When a child wants to talk to them or a child has a problem, they set everything aside and tune in to that child. The child feels that the mother is there for him and cares for him.

A mother does not need to worry that if she has too many children, the other children will suffer.

The Rebbe coined the phrase, *mishpochos bruchos yelodim*—families blessed with children. Unfortunately today you hear all kinds of expressions for women who have many children. "Oh, she has a million children..." or "She's always popping out a baby." These phrases are actually being *mezalzel*, degrading women who choose to have many children.

Who knows, maybe when a woman sees that her choice to have another child is respected rather than ridiculed, that will also affect her ability to cope.

After the Rebbe started talking about this topic, N'shei Chabad formed a committee to gather more information and help women understand the importance of having as many children as Hashem would bless them with. I wanted to get involved in this campaign. The Rebbe answered me, this is an *inyan* of *pikuach nefesh mamosh mamosh mamosh*.

Nobody should think they are dam-

does indeed have a medical problem or cannot cope physically or emotionally with another child, she should not become pregnant. But it would be very foolish for a woman to go to a Rav and say that she can't have more children because she is too weak, when the real reason is because she wants to travel or is afraid of gaining weight.

We have to believe that each baby is given to us by Hashem. Some are blessed with many children, some with fewer, but each child is a *brachah*. Trust in Hashem and let Him run the world.

mine? She wasn't complaining about staying up all night. Yes, she was making sacrifices, she was giving up sleep for something that she believed was important. Why is what I am doing any less? Why do we think that if a woman is "only" a stay-at-home mother, it must be because she is not smart enough or educated enough to do anything else? There was a time when being a stay-at-home mother was looked down upon. Today, *baruch Hashem*, it is more accepted, more respected, even in the secular world. Mothers themselves realized that

The need for help is temporary and the *brachah* of a child is forever.

aging their children by having too many children.

If a woman has a medical or emotional problem that prevents her from having children, or is told by a medical professional she must not become pregnant, she must ask a Rav for a *heter*. Only a Rav can give a *heter*, not a doctor. But when you go to a Rav, you need to be truthful in what you are asking.

I'll give you an example of how words can be misleading. My mother was once feeling unwell, and she said to the doctor, "I can't even walk on my feet." She meant this figuratively, to describe how weak she was feeling. Based on what she said, the doctor thought she was having a heart attack. She was admitted to the hospital and kept in the intensive care unit for three days.

When a woman presents her situation to the Rav, she can use words that make the Rav think that she is in danger. A woman needs to be honest with herself and honest with the Rav when she speaks about her situation. This does not mean that she should downplay her difficulties! If a woman is really struggling she needs to be honest about this as well. Hashem knows the truth. If the woman

I know a woman who had many small children close in age. Her two youngest children were less than a year apart. She spoke to a Rav and received a *heter*, but became pregnant regardless. She did not know how she would cope and she wrote to the Rebbe in tears.

The Rebbe's answer to her was: Whatever household help you currently have—you need to get twice as much.

Household help costs money, and you need to figure out how to budget so you can afford more help. But the need for help is temporary and the *brachah* of a child is forever.

Recently I had four married granddaughters staying in my house with their babies. And they were busy constantly with bathing and diapering and waking up in middle of the night. Now I'm past that stage. I can enjoy my grandchildren without doing the work. That stage does not last forever.

Many years ago, while I was still in the diapering, waking-up-at-night stage, I was speaking to a friend of mine who is a lawyer. She told me that she was up the whole night preparing her case for court. When I heard that I thought to myself, why is her career more important than

the stress of having a career while taking care of children was not worth it. They had to make a choice, and those who could chose to stay home with their children.

There is a famous story of Rabbi Manis Friedman. He was speaking to a group of women about the role of women in Judaism, when one of the participants asked, "Rabbi, what does your wife do?"

Rabbi Friedman responded, "She runs a home for unwanted children."

All the listeners were very impressed, until he said, "Actually, the children are ours. Nobody else wants them, so she takes care of them."

To care for someone else's child is a respected and valued profession. Is taking care of our own children any less important?

We know our priorities and we know every child is a blessing. We women were given this *tafkid*.

Recently in this magazine (Tishrei 5775) there was a letter to the editor, in which someone expressed her confusion about what a Shlucha is supposed to do if she cannot take a break from her responsibilities after giving birth. There is no one to take her place and she

must therefore go right back to cooking Shabbos for dozens of people or making seders despite having just given birth.

This is something that the Rebbe addresses explicitly in a *sichah* (Rosh Chodesh Shvat, 5741). The Rebbe's answer has several points. One is that Hashem knows the *tafkid* of every person. If Hashem wants you to do Shlichus or *mitvza'im*, then Hashem will arrange things in such a way that it will be possible for you. *Hakol asah yafah b'ito*—everything will be accomplished in its proper time. If having a child interferes with your ability to be involved in Shlichus activities, this is a sign that having a child is your Shlichus for now. The *mitzvah* of giving birth to another Jewish child is greater than anything you could accomplish with all your *mitvza'im*.

The Rebbe adds that this child may grow up to be an activist in *mitvza'im*, and possibly accomplish more than his mother and father could have. Furthermore, when we focus on doing the

Shlichus that Hashem wants from us, Hashem will give us *hatzlachah in zman*, success in time, so that we will be able to use our time well and accomplish more in a short amount of time.

I remember a *sichah* that the Rebbe said close to my birthday, Beis Sivan. This is the date on which Hashem said, *v'atem tih'yu li mamleches kohanim v'goy kadosh*. You shall be a kingdom of *kohanim* and a holy nation. Kohen literally means *meshares*, worker, and also *sar*—prince, leader.

What kind of work do you think the *kohanim* did in the Beis Hamikdash? Their job was to keep the Beis Hamikdash clean. The work was not pleasant! They had to clean the fat and ashes from the *mizbe'ach*, and they walked barefoot on floors that were spattered with blood. The *kohanim* were divided into *mishmaros*—"guards"—and each group had its turn to serve in the Beis Hamikdash. They would actually fight for a turn to do all these unpleasant jobs.

In the *sichah*, the Rebbe spoke to N'shei u'Bnos Yisroel and said that sometimes they could think the work they're doing in their homes is dirty work, lowly, belittling. Yet a Jewish home is a *mikdash me'at*. The work we do to keep our homes clean and orderly is holy—like the work the *kohanim* do in the Beis Hamikdash.

I was so inspired by that *sichah* when I first heard it. Once we realize that the work we do in our home is holy, then everything falls into place and we are happy with our lot. How proud and fortunate we are to be given this job—not *chas v'shalom* to feel second class.

To Be Continued:

Part II: "But what will we eat?"—practical responses of the Rebbe to the challenges and pressures of having a large family

Part III: Creating a Chassidische atmosphere in the home

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