

What About the Children?







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"Also everywhere I'm looking at kids, adults mostly don't seem to like them, not even the parents do. They call the kids gorgeous and so cute, they make the kids do the thing all over again so they can take a photo, but they don't want to actually play with them, they'd rather drink coffee talking to other adults. Sometimes there's a small kid crying and the Ma of it doesn't even hear."

Emma Donoghue in the book "Room," page 287

Oh, what an upside down world we live in.

When the yetzer hara disguises itself as the yetzer tov.

I spent some time with a family recently. A very successful family, by most people's standards.

What a lovely family – both the father and the mother so involved with doing good things. A mother who brings food to new mothers, is the first to volunteer to cook for shivah houses, gives classes for women, brings fresh challah to strangers in hospitals, has guests every Shabbos. Always there whenever she is needed. A husband who is out of the house early each morning to learn Chassidus before the morning minyan, works hard all day, gives tzedakah, learns, davens, farbrengs. And with a crew of

lovely children too.

Oh, how beautiful. "I don't know how you do it," people smile approvingly to the mother of the family. "You and your wife are such a power couple," is what the husband hears over and over again. "You must be so proud," is what the grandparents hear wherever they go.

But there is a deep dark secret in this family. So secret that even the parents themselves are not aware of what is going on.

The children are suffering.

Some of the children cry very easily. They do not know how to put it into words, but the pressure is building up in them. One of the children does not know when to stop eating. She eats and eats and is seldom seen going down a slide or riding a bicycle. Another child hardly eats at all. He is thin and weak and lethargic. And then there is the baby, who cries inconsolably when her mother is out of sight, and often has a blank expression on her face. The children don't play that much – they are busy crying and whining for their parents' attention. They are irritable, and trying to soothe and reassure themselves through rituals and comfort objects. Parental attention is the real currency in this family.

What is going on here?

These children are mommy-deprived. Even when Mommy is right there, nursing, playing, pushing them on the swings, her body is there, but her heart and soul are not. She is on her cell phone. She is planning – what to cook, what to speak about, how to arrange. She is texting while the children are talking to her. Her children's unconscious minds are tuned in to what she is thinking and that cancels out what she is doing. Yes, it is possible to nurse but not really satisfy, to care for but not really nurture. And that is why, for these children, it looks like they are having their needs filled, but they are not. Their mommy is so busy that there is not much space left for them, and they feel it. They are too young to express their pain in words, but they feel it. "Oh, but children are resilient," is what we hear. Yes, that is what we tell ourselves so that we can sleep well when we are neglecting our children.

When I see a baby get up from his nap, see one of his parents, but not run to them with a cry of joy, I know we're in trouble. When the parents don't beam at the baby who just rejoined the family after his nap, something is not right. When babies are allowed to cry for their mothers (who aren't home) for hours, there is a problem.

Yes, we live in a backwards world. Give a shiur or arrange an event or take a bride to the mikvah, and the world praises you. It feels good. Stay home and watch your child play, and the world is quiet. Nobody notices. It may not feel so good if you're measuring yourself by the world's yardstick.

Ironically, women with high levels of earning power end up doing much less physical parenting of young children than women without the means of making much money. It is a simple matter of economics –if all I can bring in is $20 an hour, and the babysitter costs $10 then I am not highly motivated to go to work. But if I can bring in $200 an hour, then the $10 that I pay the babysitter is negligible, and I have a strong motivation to go to work.

In Chabad, we value doing the work of Chabad – arranging events, doing favors for others, teaching, learning, giving, hosting. When we do these things, we get praised and we feel good. For those among us who are seriously successful at these things, there is a tremendous motivation to do more and more. The rewards are great and immediate. In fact, achieving success outside of the home is addictive. The more you succeed at it the more you want to do it. Walking away from worthwhile pursuits to *just be there* is very difficult.

But what about the children?

What about the children?



I read two articles in the *N'shei Chabad Newsletter* which support the point of view I share in this article. In the Tishrei 2009 editorial, the editors quote the Rebbe who talks about the prophetess Chana:

"An intelligent Jewish mother can busy herself in many valuable endeavors, even something as important as aliyah l'regel to Shiloh! And on the way she could have stirred up communities of Jews to join them also go to Shiloh! But Hashem already gave her something greater, for going up to Shiloh does not compare with what a woman can accomplish by staying home and making sure the home is built on the foundations of Torah and mitzvos in general… and the chinuch of her children in particular. …This is the heartache… if you look at what is going on and what has to be fixed. …[The misguided woman who entrusts the raising of her children to others] gives up the highest Shlichus which Hashem has entrusted to women, to uphold the Jewish nation, to mold children and grandchildren who can be brought to Shiloh proudly, with the words, *El hanaar hazeh hispalolti!"*

Approximately 25 years ago, *N'shei Chabad Newsletter* printed an article based on a sichah of the Rebbe (Likutei Sichos Chelek Gimmel), in which the Rebbe quotes a Gemara in Shabbos 23b. The Gemara explains that when one only has enough oil for either the lights of Chanukah or the lights of Shabbos, it is preferable to use the oil for the Shabbos lights, since sholom bayis depends on the Shabbos lights. The Rebbe explains further that "oil" can also mean "energy":

If a woman only has enough energy to reach out to others and light up the world, or to reach inward and light up her own home, she must choose to light up her own house first. Her first responsibility is to her children.

What about the children?

Dovie: "Are you going out tonight, Mommy?" (My wife sometimes tutors students.)
"No, Sweetie."
"Are you going to be home?" he asked.
"Yes," she said.
"Good," he said.
Pause.
"Do you have anything to do tonight, Mommy?"
"No," she said.
"Good," he said.
"Why?" she asked.
"Nothing," he said. "I was just hoping you'd be home."
Pause.
"Do you want me to do something with you tonight?" she asked.
"No," he said.
"Then why did you ask?" she said.
"I was just hoping you'd be home," he said.
"And...?" she asked
"And sit on the couch and crochet," he said.
"That's it?" she asked.
"Yup," he said.
"That's all you want me to do?" she asked.
"Yup," he said.
"Just sit on the couch and crochet?" she asked.
"Yup," he said. "That's my favorite kind of night."
-Jay Litvin in "My Favorite Kind of Night," chabad.org



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