

A letter authored by Yehudah B. Ilan on the potential problems caused by teaching *midrashim* in Jewish day schools and the intellectual development of children in general.

6 Tevet, 5777

Shalom,

Greetings to you as well. Thanks for reaching out, as always.

The subject of teaching midrashim to children is a complex one. However, it is also not a new one. I remember reading that Yehudah HeHasid (all of people, one of the founders of the 12th century dualist German ascetic movement known the Hasidei Ashkenaz, but as Maimonides writes in his introduction to the *Eight Chapters*, we must accept the truth from whomever says it) said firmly that midrash should not be taught to young children since it leads to them naturally taking those narratives that they hear literally, and they will thereby come to view all of Torah as a far-fetched fairytale to be dismissed, God forbid. Raavad also famously says in his *basagah* to *Hilkebot Teshuvah* 3:7 that those who come to the conclusion that God has a body do so because they see the words of the *aggadot* and it fundamentally skews their opinions and understanding of things.

Although we all would like to have the perfect day schools for our children wherein everything we wish was taught would be conveyed by informed, modern, rational, and source-oriented people - but this is unfortunately not the reality. Most of the time, we are faced with either public education (which is currently a dumbed-down cesspool in most parts of the United States) or orthodox institutions that teach a more or less traditional Ashkenazi curriculum of Humash, Navi, Mishnah, and Gemara - all with the commentary of Rashi. Rashi, due to his unique *shitah* of taking *midrashim* literally and applying them to the Biblical text, ends up constructing a mystical wonderland throughout the entirety of Jewish literature which causes many children to reject it later in life or even to disrespect it.

There are definitely those who would advocate not saying anything potentially dissonant to children, especially while they are young, so as to not upset their view of the world, but given what is at stake, I wholeheartedly believe that something must be done. However, whatever is done must take place with extreme sensitivity and care. I made mistakes in this area very early on. I often simply dismissed the outrageous things that their teachers had said, causing my children to experience a certain inner turmoil. This is not effective and creates a certain resentment in the child for their education. Instead, I propose the following strategy.

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Now, before I express my views and what I have found that works for me, I must say that it is my general policy to not give advice, as it is forbidden to give bad advice. Not to say that I believe that what I am about to tell you is not worthwhile. Rather, I say this to those who ask my advice so that there is an understanding that the individual is responsible for his or her own implementation of it. This being said, I also think it is important to know that you will have creatively work out what works for your own children, as everyone is different. A “disclaimer” like this essentially a formality for most intelligent and thoughtful people that I speak to, but I nevertheless always give it. People today tend to want to find creative ways to put the verities of their lives onto the shoulders of others, and in my experience this is often done through asking advice. When people make choices in the area in which they asked advice and they fail, they then go to the person from whom they sought advice and lay the responsibility for their poor choices on that person. This has happened to me and that is why saying this is my blanket policy. I’m really not worried about any of this in your case, however.

The mind of a child naturally homogenizes their reality into a cohesive whole. Because of this tendency, which apparently follows people into their young adult lives, young people tend to be ruggedly - and even foolishly - idealistic. And along with idealism comes a flawed need for utter consistency and almost perfection in all areas of belief and knowledge. I think you see where this is going. All of this, however, takes ultimate root, I believe, when children’s minds are left to develop without any guidance, and all the moreso when their parents and other authority figures encourage them to “dream big” and “never let anyone tell you anything is impossible” and other such nonsense. However, if parents take an active role in shaping the mind of a child with principles guided by reality, then children can grow up with a sense of a continuous context rather than a string of “rude awakenings” wherein they find out abruptly that what they always believed was wrong, etc. This latter kind of progression usually ends in distrust for everything and a hardening to any further explanation.

To be honest, some of the abruptness of learning cannot be stopped or helped, no matter how attentive the parent. Children will always experience times as they develop where they find that they were under false assumptions - this is natural and unavoidable. However, a diligent parent can guide their children in such a way that these assumptions consist of mistaking the words to popular songs or the exact mechanics of how babies are made, and other such common mistakes made by developing children. But since such things generally do not comprise areas of information that shape the outlook of a person, it is not really so traumatic. Religion, however, is the prism and the tool for how one views the world and processes experiences, putting them into context and giving them proper significance. If religion becomes a series of “rude awakenings” it can have devastating results.

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The minds of children are delicate and any training, especially training in abstract thoughts, must take place under the most accommodating and delicate circumstances, reinforced by love and acceptance.

The following things are very important to remember, especially for “truth seeker” types who tend to be ruggedly true to reality at all costs, desire precise intellectual consistency, and draw from their own journey and negative experiences with other Jews. I have seen too many free-thinking parents shipwreck their children by projecting onto their children and being harsh with the details of their learning process - all in the name of “honesty.”

1. **Not all false beliefs are problematic** - As I have said many times before, people tend to approach religion differently than they do other areas of life. For more mainstream religious people - both Jews and non-Jews - religion is approached with an almost complete abandonment of logic and a superstitious irrationality, which takes the form of unreasonable expectations about religion and their participation in it. For “truth-seeker” types, religion becomes the most rigorous area of life - and this is understandable since religious commitment is, as I mentioned above, the prism and lens for processing life and truth. However, their rigor is harsh and unyielding, allowing for no margin of human limits, either in knowledge or beliefs.

As it relates to children, in all other contexts we do not worry when our young children express fantastical or silly beliefs about the world around them as they develop intellectually because we are: a) aware of their limits, b) confident that over time they will duly reform their perceptions, and c) we are committed to correct such things gently and little-by-little. But the same needs to be true of religion. Harmless religious beliefs or misperceptions should not be obsessed over. Unless the child thinks idolatrous thoughts or comes to incorrect ethical conclusions, it is best to leave their beliefs alone. Not completely, just not in a corrective fashion. Instead, when such beliefs have been ascertained by the parent, they should come up with a game or a *davar torah* or even an open family discussion where the correct ideas are explained and then can positively replace the mistaken ones. And doing this may take several attempts until you hear your presentation(s) of the topic(s) being repeated in the mouths of your children. But when dealing with them through indirect correction, you should be aware of their limits as young children (you don't know how many times I have heard well-meaning fathers lecturing their six year olds on halakhic and hashkafic subjects at a college level). They simply do not have large *kelim* and in any case they are not on our level.

We also need to be confident that while children are certainly affected by friends and teachers, they ultimately draw their identity, ideas, and truth from their parents at home. If we are consistent, we can have confidence that they will eventually differentiate between what is expressed at home and that which is heard when out in the world (or at day school, as the case

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may be). There is no need to be obsessively nervous about their spiritual development, only diligent.

Lastly, we need to make sure that all correction is gentle. I try to view my children as innocent victims of the contexts into which I have put them. They are sponges and they soak up the water in the tubs into which they were put - it's not their fault, that's just what sponges do. I have watched misguided parents get angry with children who express foolish and idolatrous religious ideas that they learned at school. This can be very damaging and should be avoided at all costs. In fact, it's good to remember that any direct correction of a child where he or she is asked to call into question the words of their teachers is jarring and difficult, frustrating even the most agreeable child somewhat. Therefore, all of this must proceed with sensitivity.

2. Children do not always share our issues or values...yet - This basically amounts to understanding that our children are not us. They approach Judaism differently because they were either born into it or brought to it by us rather than having come to it on their own. As a result, they often will not understand why we are worried or frustrated with - or even why we object to - certain ideas, practices, or beliefs. Not remembering this will often mean that parents carry on one-sided conversations and answer questions that no one among their children has even asked. Regardless of the tough things many of us have experienced, they have not and this needs to be at the forefront of our minds when bringing any sort of correction or redirection to their religious studies.

3. Children just want to be normal, and need to be normal - Children rely on their families and their peers to feel stable within themselves. However, this does not mean that all differences among children need to be removed since learning to deal with differences is an important life skill without which people become socially deformed. So, a balance must be struck between normalcy (i.e. "fitting in") and being different from the crowd. Human nature naturally divides people into "those like me" and the "other." However, if a child begins to feel like the "other" it can be damaging to them. So, where is this balance? In my opinion balance is to be found between what is forbidden and what is permitted. In addition, being as halakhically flexible at home (within one's conscience, of course - being absurdly "flexible" communicates disdain to children, who generally thrive on rules and routine) can help them feel comfortable doing, eating, and saying what their classmates do. Admittedly, this bullet point does not have much directly to do with midrash and education, but it is related to the overall psychological health of children which is related to this context.

Source-oriented people usually have an especially difficult time with this because they want their children to simply and only do what they themselves do, but this is not always possible, or

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even advisable. As an example, I do not like the custom of costumes on Purim. I personally do not dress up and have strong feelings about the origins of this practice. However, I allow my children to dress up on Purim - as long as their costume is modest and not connected to idolatry - because denying them would be too traumatic, mostly for reasons expressed under #2 above. To me, it is a borrowed practice of licentious culture, but to them it is just plain fun, and they do not see a *mitzvah* in the Torah that says that either costumes or having fun are forbidden. But, I feel that wearing costumes to the *megillah* reading or the *seudah* is disrespectful, so I set out the following rules for them. Under *bar* or *bat mitzvah* age, they can wear costumes to the *megillah* reading, but no one is allowed to wear them at the *seudah*. They have to wear nice clothes out of respect. But they can dress up at school functions and even the party after the *megillah* reading (my older children just bring their costumes and change at the *shul*). This respects the *halakhab*, my personal convictions, and their needs to be a part of the community.

Another example is helping my son to learn through his religious studies material for school. Even though I am not a fan of Rashi's commentary on the Torah, I nevertheless help him learn it because that is what his peers do and there is no prohibition in doing so. But allowing grudgingly and allowing with a full heart are two different things. Children are perceptive and a parent should always strive for the latter while maintaining honesty with their children about their own convictions. What is forbidden, that I am gently and compassionately firm on, while with regard to things that are permitted, I make no issue of them.

Okay, so with that long-winded introduction, I will now discuss the subject at hand directly. In light of the above, I have taken the following approach with my own children:

1. Make a distinction between potentially harmful midrashim and innocuous ones - This means that when my son explains that Rashi says that Yaakov was "showing off" for Rachel when he removed the stone from the well, I do not argue, regardless of what I believe that the "real" *peshat* is. Whether he showed off or not has no real consequence and does not flex or skew my children's hold on reality. However, when he says that Esav tried to kill Yaakov by biting his neck, but that Yaakov was saved because his neck turned to marble, now I must intervene with an explanation of the *mashal* inherent in that explanation. But I do it this way: I begin by saying to the child who has just recited it, "Nice job. You remembered that very well. I am proud of you." Then I proceed to say, "What does the story mean?" When I am then asked by the child what I mean by it having a "meaning," I respond by saying simply, "Body parts don't turn into rocks, right? So Hazal are trying to teach us something here." Then I proceed to explain that Esav always symbolizes the actively conquering idolatrous [usually] Christian world in the Midrash, while Yaakov stands for the Jewish people. And Yaakov's neck becoming marble is just another way of

saying that the Jews are an “*am kashei oref* - a stiff-necked people.” So, Hazal are telling us that when the non-Jewish nations cannot win by military conquest, they often seek to embrace us as “brothers” but only while trying to bite our necks (our strong dedication to Judaism and *mitzvoth*), as it were. But we avert their efforts by being stubborn in our dedication to our values. And when the non-Jewish world offers for us to unnecessarily take of what is theirs, we should respond by saying “*yesh lanu kol* - we have everything.”

Now, if they object and say, “But Abba, it was a miracle,” then you have to decided how you are going to respond, but you can tell them that miracles are always a part of nature and within nature, and it just isn’t the nature of body parts to ever turn into rocks. This was just one example, but I think you will understand what I mean.

2. Be proactive at your meals and Shabbat table in educating your children about midrashim and how to relate to them - Without putting it into an argumentative context, make tangential comments about how Hazal were so creative and ingenious that they used stories and characters from the Torah to teach us lessons and truths about life and wisdom. Use terms like “true meaning” versus a “true story.” For instance, sometimes my children have asked if certain *midrashim* really happened, or if a certain *midrash* is a “true story.” I tell them gently that yes, it is true, but because it has a “true meaning,” e.g. that we should be respectful, thankful, not steal, etc. Then I reinforce that *midrashim* are most of the time true because they have a “true meaning” not because they really happened. Then I tell them that our best understanding of what “really happened” is based only on what is written in the Torah itself. Be sure to tell them that Hazal also knew this and emphasized that a *pasuk* could never permanently depart from its *peshat*. The point here is that active [re]education in what *midrashim* should be completely without putting such statements into a confrontational context, if at all possible. Putting such truths in a confrontational context often presents the child with a subtle ultimatum between school and home, which is definitely not what anyone should want. What we should want is to help the child “homogenize” their school education with their home-learned Torah values into a functioning cohesive whole. And comments do not always need to be detailed and complete. Just planting disparate seeds with eventually yield many good results.

3. Anticipate the content of their weekly parashah learning - I’m not sure what your children learn in their schools throughout the week, but mine learn a little bit of *parashah* everyday and then focus almost solely on it during their Friday hours. Then they come home with presentations they worked on at school that consist almost entirely of Rashi and other *midrashim*. Rarely is the text itself engaged - to the great shame of our religion. This means that loads of legends come home and without knowing how to understand and/or give simple *nimshalim*, opportunities are often lost

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to reroute or hone their understanding of what they are presenting. Read up on the relevant *midrashim* and be ready with answers that connect them to the real world of ethics and values so that it will continually be clear the wisdom, genius, and preciousness of *midrash* as a teaching device.

4. **Get them involved in interpretation** - One of the main problems in teaching *midrashim* to children is that the study of *midrashim* was intended mainly for an intellectually mature audience. However, because of the reality we face today, that all children are plunged into the world of the Midrash from a young age, we have no choice but to take action within this set of circumstances. This is much like the conundrum we face when presenting the deep and complex philosophical truths of Maimonides' *Guide* - since the world is now filled with Kabbalah and other mystical constructs, we have no choice but to present our version to offset them. This being the case, I get my children involved in interpreting *midrashim* even though they are not technically ready for such things. After they present a story, I will often ask them gently, "What do you think we learn from that *midrash*? What lesson does it teach us?" I then let them answer and, most importantly, I respect their answer even if it might technically be off. As long as they are looking for instruction in goodness and morality from the *midrash*, I compliment them on their insights. I have had my children say, for instance, that they learned not to talk over others during class from a certain *midrash* - and it had almost nothing to do with that subject. But their explanation was well thought out and they were serious about their ethical insight, so I affirmed them and told them that it was great. Doing this endears the *midrashim* to them and also has them using midrashic narratives as they were originally and properly intended.

I hope that this has been helpful. I apologize for the length and the stream of consciousness style (as well as my instructive tone - it's a habit). If you have any other questions for me, please don't hesitate to ask. It is only my pleasure to help if I can.

I would also, if you are willing, enjoy updates from time to time on how the implementation of any of this goes. Of course, you are at perfect liberty to completely ignore my recommendations and I take absolutely no offense should you choose to do so.

Best wishes for success with your children and all good things,

Sincerely,

Yehudah B. Ilan