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IX

חנך לנער על פי דרכו גם כי יזקין לא יסור ממנה

**“Raise the boy according to the course his
life will take when he is grown; then he will
not depart from it even in his old age”**

—Proverbs 22, 6.

Pedagogy could hardly have set forth a more significant truth, yielding such fruitful results in the education of the young, than the one stated in this maxim of Jewish education. In all likelihood, no other principle has had a greater impact on the education of a whole nation than this one. By introducing the concept of חנך into the sphere of education, this maxim contributed to Jewish education a principle more productive and beneficial than any other.

Even a fleeting glance will reveal the significance of this educational maxim: Raise the boy according to the course his life will take when he is grown. In raising your child, always keep in mind the future that is in store for him. Let your conception of the future course of his life determine the education you will give him.

Let us briefly examine a few cases in point to see how different, and how much better, the physical, intellectual and moral upbringing of our children could be if this maxim were always given the proper attention. Let us first single out one of the most conspicuous examples that should demonstrate the value of this educational principle.

Who would not be able to name wealthy families whose splendor, indeed, whose respectability lasted no further than their founding fathers? Who could not document, from personal knowledge, the sad truth that wealth is rarely passed on from the first generation to the

next, and that, all too often, children of wealthy parents end their lives in abandonment and poverty? And what is the reason for these commonplace tragedies? It is that the parents forgot our principle and also the fact that family wealth gets divided as it passes from one generation to the next. The parents owned hundreds of thousands of dollars and lived as people usually do when they have such wealth. The opulence and luxuries that only those with wealth can afford were their daily diet. "And why shouldn't they enjoy their wealth?" you may ask. "Shouldn't you enjoy life? Why shouldn't you live as well as your finances permit?" Our principle questions the soundness of such notions. Consider: These parents had children, and, as was to be expected, these children were raised in the comforts and luxuries typical of wealthy families. They acquired habits and demands that can be satisfied only if thousands of dollars are indeed available to cater to such a lifestyle. But eventually these children come up against a very simple mathematical problem: If one man owns one hundred thousand dollars and has ten children, how much will each child inherit? What will happen when children raised by parents with thousands of dollars will have to make do with only one-tenth of that amount? What will happen if they insist on maintaining the thousand-dollar lifestyle of their parents, even though they themselves now have only hundreds to spend, simply because the opulent lifestyle of their parents has become their second nature and they cannot conceive how anyone could do without chocolate for breakfast or roast goose for dinner or all the other pleasures of the affluent life? How can they not come to a tragic end, if this is their moral and social attitude?

In such a case, the principle *חנך לנוער על פי דרכו* would teach affluent parents to divide their total wealth by the number of children they have, and then to reduce the standard of living in their home to a level their children will be able to maintain when they set up homes of their own with, presumably, much more modest means than their parents.

Or take another argument in favor of our principle. Why is it that, as soon as he left home to become an apprentice or a clerk in the "real world," and was no longer under his father's supervision, the son of Mr. X. became an immoral, pleasure-seeking, wasteful individual? He had seen only goodness and morality at his father's house. He had never been allowed to taste the temptations of frivolous amusements.

In fact, he had been anxiously kept away from all pleasures beyond those entailed in the basic necessities of life; he had not been allowed to attend parties, formal social events, plays and concerts. The only kind of life he had known at home was one of serious resolve, strict punctiliousness, ceaseless endeavor and constant devotion to duty. Why, then, this sudden transformation, this complete change to the very opposite of what the young man had been while he lived at home? The answer may be found where you would least expect it. It happened precisely because the parents, honest and well-meaning people, failed to consider that their son would not remain at home with them forever, under their supervision and within the constraints of their home life. They did not understand that the goal of all child-rearing should be to train the child for his future unsupervised, independent life in an adult world. Parents must educate their child in such a manner that he should not be a stranger to the adult world outside his parental home, for if he enters that world without being adequately prepared for it, he will succumb to its temptations. Precisely because the world of which our children will someday be a part will offer them opportunities not only for work but also for pleasure, we should not only train them for the world's work but also teach them how to partake of the world's pleasures, how to be moral and moderate in their enjoyment of permitted delights. We should teach them, by our own guidance and personal example, how to live in a world full of pleasures and how to take part in the amusements it offers without departing even one hair's breadth from the path of duty and without compromising in any manner the principles of morality we have taught them. A home in which austerity reigns supreme and from which all the joys of life are dourly excluded is the best place to raise sons who will become frivolous to the point of immorality. For in such a home the parents have forgotten our wise principle of education, namely, that they should raise their sons על פי דרכו so that they will be able to stand their ground, spiritually and morally, in the midst of the future that is in store for them.

Or who among us did not know Mr. Y., that wonderful man who was so thoroughly imbued with the true Jewish spirit, with Jewish learning, Jewish punctiliousness and Jewish religious fervor? His home was a well-known shining example of a pious Jewish abode in which the תורה was studied and מצוות were practiced so that it stood out like an

oasis in the wilderness of present-day moral and spiritual corruption? Anything that bore even the faintest tinge of un-Jewish* thought or un-Jewish belief was kept far away from the threshold of that home. Is there anyone who does not remember this father as one of the outstanding and devoted champions of tradition in Jewish communal life, how he fought against all forbidden innovations at the synagogue and at our school, and saw to it that the religious institutions of our community should remain painstakingly faithful to the requirements of Jewish law? He regarded ignorance of things Jewish as the greatest of all evils. He viewed so-called modern education as the worst threat to Jewish survival because he felt it would supplant Jewish learning. Mr. Y. therefore regarded it as a sacred matter of conscience not only to get his sons to perform the duties of Judaism most scrupulously but also to make them competent בני חורה by seeing to it that the sacred writings of Judaism should remain virtually their only intellectual and spiritual nourishment. Moreover, in order to protect them from the poison of modern education, he not only anxiously isolated them from every contact with the "moderns" but filled them with arrogant contempt for all other knowledge and scholarship that he deemed as nothing compared to the study of the knowledge given us by God.

It is said that this man died of a broken heart, grief-stricken because not even one of his sons remained Jewish in feeling and practice. All of them, as youths and later in manhood, had been spiritually ruined by the very tendencies from which he had so zealously sought to protect them in their education. Anyone who knew this man and knows his sons today will see no reason to doubt the truth of this tragedy.

But anyone who would have evaluated this father's educational approach by the standard of חנך לנוער על פי דרכו, our maxim of education, could have predicted these sad results from the outset. The best way to have our children catch cold the very first time they go out of doors is to shelter them most anxiously from every breeze, from every contact with fresh air. If we want our children to develop a resistance to every kind of weather, so that wind and rain will only serve to make them stronger and healthier, we must expose them to wind and rain at

* See footnote, p. 21 (Ed.)

an early age in order to harden their bodies. This rule holds good not only for a child's physical health but equally for his spiritual and moral well-being.

It is not enough to teach our children to love and perform their duties as Jews within the home and the family, among carefully chosen, like-minded companions. It is wrong to keep them ignorant of the present-day differences between the world outside and the Jewish way of life, or to teach them to regard the un-Jewish elements in the Jewish world as polluting, infectious agents to be avoided at all costs.

Remember that our children will not remain forever under the sheltering wings of our parental care. Sooner or later they will inevitably have contacts and associations with their un-Jewish brethren in the Jewish world. If, in this alien environment, they are to remain true to the traditions and the way of life in which they were raised at the home of their parents; if we want them to continue to perform their duties as Jews with calm, unchanging determination, regardless of the dangerous influences and, even more dangerous, the ridicule and derision they may encounter; indeed, if the contrast they note between their own way of life and that of the others will only make them love and practice their sacred Jewish heritage with even greater enthusiasm than before, then we must prepare them at an early age to meet this conflict and to pass this test. We must train them to preserve their Jewish views and to persevere in their Jewish way of life precisely when they associate with individuals whose attitude and way of life are un-Jewish. We must train our children, by diligent practice, to be able to stand up against ridicule and wisecracks. We must train them so that they may be able to draw upon the deep wellsprings of Jewish awareness and upon their own sound judgment based on true Jewish knowledge in order to obtain the armor of determination and, if need be, the naked weapons of truth and clarity, from which frivolity and shallowness will beat a hasty retreat.

Finally, it would be most perverse and criminal of us to seek to instill into our children a contempt, based on ignorance and untruth, for everything that is not specifically Jewish, for all other human arts and sciences, in the belief that by inculcating our children with such a negative attitude we could safeguard them from contacts with the scholarly and scientific endeavors of the rest of mankind. It is true, of course, that the results of secular research and study will not always

coincide with the truths of Judaism, for the simple reason that they do not proceed from the axiomatic premises of Jewish truth. But the reality is that our children will move in circles influenced and shaped by these results. Your children will come within the radius of this secular human wisdom, whether it be in the lecture halls of academia or in the pages of literature. And if they discover that our own Sages, whose teachings embody the truth, have taught us שנתן מהכמתו לבשר דים that it is God Who has given of His own wisdom to mortals, they will come to overrate secular studies in the same measure in which they have been taught to despise them. You will then see that your simple-minded calculations were just as criminal as they were perverse. Criminal, because they enlisted the help of untruth supposedly in order to protect the truth, and because you have thus departed from the path upon which your own Sages have preceded you and beckoned you to follow them. Perverse, because by so doing you have achieved precisely the opposite of what you wanted to accomplish. For now your child, suspecting you of either deceit or lamentable ignorance, will transfer the blame and the disgrace that should rightly be placed only upon you and your conduct to all the Jewish wisdom and knowledge, all the Jewish education and training which he received under your guidance. Your child will consequently begin to doubt all of Judaism which (so, at least, it must seem to him from your behavior) can exist only in the night and darkness of ignorance and which must close its eyes and the minds of its adherents to the light of all knowledge if it is not to perish.

Things would have turned out differently if you had educated and raised your child על פי דרכו; if you had educated him to be a Jew, and to love and observe his Judaism together with the clear light of general human culture and knowledge; if, from the very beginning, you would have taught him to study, to love, to value and to revere Judaism, undiluted and unabridged, and Jewish wisdom and scholarship, likewise unadulterated, in its relation to the totality of secular human wisdom and scholarship. Your child would have become a different person if you had taught him to discern the true value of secular wisdom and scholarship by measuring it against the standard of the Divinely-given truths of Judaism; if, in making this comparison, you would have noted the fact that is obvious even to the dullest eye, namely, that the knowledge offered by Judaism is the original source of all that is genuinely true, good and pure in secular wisdom, and that secular

learning is merely a preliminary, a road leading to the ultimate, more widespread dissemination of the truths of Judaism. If you had opened your child's eyes to genuine, thorough knowledge in *both* fields of study, then you would have taught him to love and cherish Judaism and Jewish knowledge all the more.

Had you followed this approach, then your child would have continued to perceive Judaism, Jewish knowledge and Jewish wisdom as the beginning and the end, the root and the flower, of every development of the human spirit. And then the growing number of associations into which life would have led him would only have served to confirm for him in ever-growing measure that which you taught him about both Jewish learning and secular studies while he was growing up. You would then have molded and educated him *על פי דרכו* in accordance with the future path of his life, for the one, sole way of life proper for him, and you would have had the joy of seeing that *גם כי יקץ לא יסור ממנו* he would not depart from it even in maturity.

Furthermore, our educational principle has invaluable significance not merely as an aid to our children in coping with the conflicts which secular life has in store for them but, in fact, all our efforts at raising our children should be founded on the maxim *על פי דרכו*. For, after all, the sole purpose of the education we give to our children is to prepare them to be devout Jews, fulfilling the spiritual purpose of their future lives, independently of us. Therefore we should not wait until our children are in the midst of adult life to help them acquire the prowess and vigor, purity and firmness, the ability and skills of body, mind and spirit that they will have to demonstrate when they have reached maturity. No, we must begin to train their physical skills, their emotional impulses and their mental faculties in their youth by giving them practice in enduring and overcoming the difficulties, and in mastering and performing the tasks, that will form the content of their lives when they are adults. Even as we must not wait for the practical challenges of life to harden our children, to test their resolution, their courage, patience, endurance and self-restraint, so, too, we must not allow our children to be sheltered from spiritual temptation until they actually come face to face with it. These tests, albeit on a reduced scale suited to their age, must be part of the training of our children when they are still very young. Their bodies, minds and hearts must be put through a course of spiritual and moral exercises so that they may

acquire the strength and the skill they will need to make them mentally and morally fit for life. But above all, the duties of adulthood in all their aspects must be introduced into the child's life when he is still young, and the child must already be trained in the punctiliousness and devotion to duty which he will have to put into practice, independently of you, after he has reached adolescence and maturity. The Jewish man and woman of the future must have started out as a Jewish boy and girl. All the qualities that should one day grace the grown Jewish man and woman—truthfulness, integrity, modesty, moderation, rectitude, humaneness, forgiveness, gentleness, softness coupled with strength, firmness coupled with flexibility, the fear and love of God, trust in God, painstaking faithfulness in the observance of God's Law, in short, that joyous and solemn obedience toward God which must shape all our lives in order to be pleasing to God—all these qualities our children must learn by active practice when they are still young boys and girls, if these character traits are to remain with them throughout their lives.

The foregoing explains why the Hebrew term for the business of Jewish education is חנוך, literally, "consecration." The use of this term has lent to Jewish education such grandeur and majesty that the act to which our contemporary era refers as the "consecration of the young"* is reduced to a rite of mockery. What is the value of the ceremony called "consecration" or "confirmation," despite all its theatrical effect, transient sentimentality and its semester of catechism study, as compared to this truly Jewish consecration, this truly Jewish preparation for life?

By his teachings and his personal example that reigned supreme within his tent, Abraham snatched the members of his household from the evil trends of an ungodly world. He consecrated and trained them for God and they were therefore described as חניכיו, those who had been consecrated and initiated by Abraham into true life. These were הנפש אשר עשו "the souls which Abraham had molded." The task performed by Abraham is one that should be performed to this day by every son of Abraham in his own home. By word, by his personal guidance and example, every father should mold his own children to be

* The author refers to the *bar mitzvah* ceremony as it was performed in Reform circles. (Ed.)

חניכיו. By active practice within the quiet sanctuary of domestic life, he should raise his children for a lifetime of service to God. When, at some point in their lives, they, like Abraham and his חניכיו, will have to wage the struggle for a pure and active life, dedicated to God and free of all selfishness, they will emerge victorious in all that is Divinely pure and true.

How is a father to accomplish this? How can he prepare his child for a life of service to God; how can he introduce his child at an early age to this Divine service, and teach him how to serve God? Exactly in the same manner in which he teaches his child how to walk! When a father teaches his child how to walk he does not spend his time with demonstrations and sermons, nor does he extol the benefits of being able to walk. He teaches his child to walk by walking. This is the way in which a father should also teach his child to practice all the virtues, to observe all the commandments of God's Will—by constant practice. Even as our houses of worship are truly consecrated not by planned dedication festivities but only by the first real prayer services held within their walls, even as everywhere לאו מלחא היא only practical action can place the stamp of genuine consecration on all sacred things, so, too, the lives and personalities of our children can be consecrated only through the active practice of virtue. Through training and practice all our strengths and abilities are tempered and guided to the paths on which they should remain for the rest of our lives—גם כי זיקין לא יסור ממנה.

The fact that the maxim חנך לנער על פי דרכו directs our attention separately to each individual child whose education has been entrusted to us, and bids us raise each of our children according to the future course of his life, should make us mindful of yet another reflection that is no less worthy of our consideration: *Every child must be raised as an individual.* The overall objective of child-rearing is the same in every case, namely, that the child should grow up to lead a life of duty that is pleasing to God. But the practical means by which we are to guide each individual child to this height of pure devotion to duty are not the same. They are as different from one another as the tendencies and abilities, the temperaments and proclivities, the intellectual and emotional potential are in each individual personality. Every shoe does not fit all feet. The objective of our educational work should be to raise children as different as Jacob and Esau in such a manner that both of

them will grow up to be good and capable men. But if this purpose is to be achieved, the two cannot be raised by the same method. Each must be guided in accordance with his own unique qualities that will make each of them follow a different path of life. In each case, different methods must be employed to lead both of them to that path which is good and pleasing to God.

our educational maxim proclaims. Accordingly, we should study our children to see which personal character traits, if left to develop on their own, would predominate in the child's maturity. We should evaluate how each of these individual characteristics could be won for the happiness of the world and the approval of God, and how they can be kept from straying into evil and wrongdoing. In channeling the child's personal traits onto paths of goodness and diverting them from the ways of evil, we must train each child as an individual according to his unique personal ways. This should not be taken to imply that any one individual is better than the other from the very outset. What is difficult for one to accomplish may be simple for the other to do, and each individual is assigned a different task in the exercise of life. Fortunate the child whose special character traits have early attracted the attention of his parents, who then, by quiet but serious and constant practice, divert these qualities away from evil and guide them into the path of goodness. For no one trait given to man by his Creator is evil *per se*, even as no one human trait is good in itself. Any human character trait becomes either good or evil through the use to which it is put, the objectives toward which it is directed and the purpose for which it is employed. Therefore, חנך לנער על פי דרכו. That is why we should study the tendencies of the young human souls entrusted to our care. That is why we should guide each child in his own individual path toward the good and away from evil. That is why we should train our children, while they are still young boys and girls, with all their individual tendencies and character traits, in that path of self-control and devotion to duty that is best suited to their proclivities. If we do this, then our children will continue to practice the same self-control and devotion to duty when they are grown men and women, גם כי יוקץ לא יסור ממנה. They will harvest, in the secure happiness of a life that is pleasing to God, the seed we have planted and taught them to nurture within themselves when they were still very young.