

Weekly Teaching

October 26, 2018

Two thousand years ago a rabbi asked his students: *“At what time in the morning should you recite your morning prayers?”*

The students began to provide varying answers:

- *“When there is enough sunlight to distinguish between colors of the grass.”*
- *“When there is enough sunlight to note the distinction between colors of the leaves.”*
- *“When there is enough sunlight to see your hands stretched out before your face.” Etc., Etc. Etc.*

The rabbi listened patiently to each of his students, admiring their clever answers, but always responding that they were “wrong”.

Finally the students gave up and asked, “At what time in the morning should we recite our morning prayers?”

The rabbi heard their “ritual” question but then answered ethically: “When you can look into a stranger’s face and see a brother or sister, then you are capable of reciting your morning prayers.”

Within Judaism, the cornerstone of all of our observances is how we live an ethical life.

The most important Jewish historical experience we routinely recall is our slavery within Pharaoh’s Egypt.

From this experience, liturgically remembered in every prayer service, and commemorated so beautifully with our annual observance of Pesach (Passover), we constantly strive to remember that “once we were slaves in Egypt.”

And for this reason God commands us to “welcome the stranger” and “love our neighbor as ourselves,” for “once we were strangers in the land of Egypt.”

Judaism commands us to live the principles of love, respect and honoring differences.

We are also commanded “to teach our children diligently,” and therefore need to ensure that our children understand how to fulfill God’s will in understanding how to respond to differences with love and respect.

Children, beginning at a very young age, notice the distinguishing characteristics between gender, race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, disabilities, etc.

Our children also readily pick up the attitudes about these differences as exemplified by their parents, or other family or close friends.

If we want our children to fulfill the mitzvah of “loving the stranger” then we must diligently teach and exemplify for them how they need to cast away prejudices.

Here are 5 steps that we can utilize in teaching our children the mitzvah of “love and respect”:

- 1. Listen respectfully and answer a question simply and quickly.** When the child asks about differences, affirm that the observation is correct, but there are differences within their own family. For example, “someone has darker skin than you, but you have darker hair than your brother.” Don’t dissuade the observation, rather embrace it and utilize it as an opportunity to teach the reality of differences and how we come to love and respect differences.

2. **Teach children overt messages that combat stereotypes.** Provide multi-ethnic dolls, toys, games. Participate in volunteer activities that expose children to people who are “different”. Switch up traditional gender roles for activities between the mom and dad. (Let Dad light the Shabbat candles and Mom recite kiddish.) Provide numerous opportunities for children to interact with other children who are different than them.
3. **Never permit teasing or rejection.** Don’t tolerate for any reason teasing or rejecting someone because they are different. Be firm that this is not “how a Jew behaves.”
4. **Teach children how to challenge prejudice.** Demonstrate how we utilize words to face down others who say something biased towards another. Help your children talk about differences. Ask questions about something they’ve watched on TV or at a movie, or read in a book. Share how you may have had to face down a prejudice. Teach them how to “walk in someone else’s shoes” and to see through “others’ eyes.”
5. **Don’t be “blind” to the reality of differences.** There is an understandable desire to deny that there are differences between people. However, this is simply untrue. The “stranger” does exist. People look different, act different, eat differently, dress differently, pray differently, etc.

It may be politically correct to try and deny “differences”, but it is like the proverbial ostrich sticking their head in the ground.

Avoiding the reality that differences exist will prompt us to fail in teaching how our children should fulfill their mitzvah of love and respect.

Instead, the assumed “false-blindness” will result in a child not being prepared to appropriately challenge prejudice and honor differences.

We wouldn’t pretend that junk food is good for you, smoking is fine, or not needing to do your homework.

We have to be constantly mindful for how we can teach and reinforce the lessons of how to “see that the stranger is also our brother or sister.”

Shabbat Shalom,
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