

Fortifying Our Future

By: Rabbi Shaya Cohen

Of recent, a problem that has been festering for quite some time, has been coming to public attention. Tragically, significant numbers of "frum" adults, married and with families, are drifting from a Torah-observant lifestyle. We find them in a variety of situations. Some get divorced. Others stay married and go through the motions, at least in front of their families and yet others openly exhibit their violations of Halacha. The sad truth seems to be that we are only becoming aware of a small part of this problem and the numbers seem to be growing.

The good news is that we have witnessed reversals in this phenomenon, with the proper intervention. These interventions have taught us two things. Firstly, we have gotten some understanding of what is bothering the people in these situations, and second, that they can be helped to return with positive feelings and genuine commitment to Yiddishkeit.

The logical conclusion would seem to be that we must inform educators and parents that these issues do in fact exist and guide them to be better equipped to prevent it in the future. Additionally, we must give them the understanding of how and when to intervene when the crisis has already occurred.

Based on significant experience listening to what people have claimed as the causes of their disenfranchisement with Yiddishkeit and the experience gained from trying to help them, it would seem that it could be beneficial to share these with parents and teachers. It should be noted that their ideas of causes may very well be excuses, but in order to help them return, which should be our one and only goal, we must address the excuses as well.

This discussion should not be taken as criticism of our parenting and teaching, only as an effort to better understand this issue, to hopefully help those who have drifted and better prevent such occurrences in the future. This presentation could be divided into three parts: 1. What this population claims as the causes of their attitudes toward Yiddishkeit. 2. Some suggestions for prevention strategies. 3. Suggestions for intervention strategies.

Here is a sampling of what they are saying:

1) We always had too many unanswered questions, but we did not feel safe enough to ask them

2) We never really understood what Yiddishkeit is all about. We didn't have a context with which to appreciate it and there was so much that didn't seem to make sense on the surface

- 3) So much time spent and emphasis was put on davening and learning, but we never really appreciated it or understood why
- 4) We feel a certain emptiness inside, we never felt a close relationship with the Creator that might have been able to alleviate this feeling
- 5) We felt pressured to go with the flow and didn't feel that we made decisions on our own
- 6) We constantly felt restricted and never realized the privilege and benefit of doing Mitzvos. We didn't understand how it would make us happy in life and now it doesn't
- 7) We didn't feel loved enough for who we were, rather for what we did
- 8) We didn't feel enough space to express our individuality. Everyone was expected to be the same
- 9) The suffering of the righteous confused us, as did sometimes the behavior of the "so called" righteous
- 10) We really never had clarity about what happened at Mt. Sinai and are confused about how the Torah was transmitted and very confused about the Oral Torah

These are some of the things that they are saying. There are also some things that they are not saying. They may be emotionally and psychologically unhappy in general and blaming the Yiddishkeit. They may be experiencing problems in their lives, but choose to blame their unhappiness on Yahadus.

Efforts at prevention of this phenomenon from arising, should address the issues that they claim to have problems with. Even before we begin, a definition of the process of Chinuch is important. In Parshas Lech Lecha, Perek 14 Pasuk 14, Rashi defines the word Chinuch as, "The beginning of the entry for a person to an occupation that he is destined to remain in." Two points are critical. First that it is only the beginning of the entry, which means that we must set him up to complete the rest of the entry himself. Second, it should last a lifetime. It seems that we must impart the tools for a person to be able to continue his growth process on his own and the lasting inspiration and understanding to do so.

A primary concern in the Chinuch must be the happiness of our children. "Osher" seems to be the highest form of happiness. The root of the word means, "validation." We must see to it that our children and students feel good about themselves. If we show love and respect for them, we help to validate them and if we help them to feel good about themselves, we have great influence on them. As per their expressed feelings, we see that love and respect for who they are, not just what they do, is necessary. In this area, teachers

can do even more than parents. A parent's love has limited validation power. They are genetically programmed to love their children and therefore their love has more limited validation power than a teacher. However, the constant criticism of a parent can have very detrimental effects on their children, since the genetically programmed person doesn't understand and love me, I must really be trash. We should also let them know that we believe in them. The message of, "I believe in you" can often have life-altering effects.

Religious pressure can be overwhelming to many young people, due to the fact that our relationship with Hashem is the most important relationship in the world and failure to appreciate it leaves no alternative to fill that void. We must teach our children to take advantage of the opportunity that we have to rejuvenate the relationship that each and every one of us has inside. By focusing on the attention that Hashem gives to each of our lives, we create a stepping stone to a deep and loving relationship.

We must find every possible means to deal with each child or student as the unique individual that he or she really is. Just like everyone in the world has a unique physical makeup, each individual has their own emotional makeup, and we must allow our children to excel in their own unique way. This can avoid a major cause of frustration and really help them to feel good about themselves.

It is very important to create an environment where they feel safe to ask questions. We should really even be encouraging certain types of questions. Above all, one of the most important pieces of advice, in this whole entire matter is to listen, listen, listen, whenever they talk. Empathetic listening, as opposed to sympathetic listening, can be extremely validating and even therapeutic.

Truth be told, Yahadus has an overwhelming appeal to the Yiddishe Neshama, when presented in full context and with painstaking detail. We must know that we cannot afford to take anything for granted, when it comes to the Chinuch of our precious children. Although in this forum we cannot go into the proper detail in each of the following areas, we should not assume that they know and understand the basics of Yiddishkeit. Yahadus is so relevant, meaningful and satisfying, but we must deal, in detail, with the many basic concepts. We must be able to articulate the purpose of creation, the benefits of a life of Torah and Mitzvos, and the testimony, evidence and the accuracy of the transition process of Maamad Har Sinai, to this day. We may have difficulty processing all of this information, until we have a standard for judging truth, but in reality, we all want to have Emunah, Bitachon and a meaningful and close relationship with Hashem.

We must be able to address all of the causes and, maybe more accurately, the excuses that are given and exhibit great love, respect and patience in the process.

Rav Yisrael Salanter told the Alter of Slabodka, when the latter was embarking upon establishing his Yeshiva, that the goal of a Yeshiva is, as the Navi Yeshaya says in Perek 57, Pasuk 15, "To revive the spirit of the downtrodden and revive the heart of the crushed." And this was for the Slabodka Yeshiva, that produced the Torah giants of the American Yeshivos!

Please note the following advice from Rav Meir Shapiro ZT'L:

"At a gathering somewhere outside Glina, he once had occasion to speak, and he tried to drive home the overriding need for a good teacher training institute. 'Just think,' he said: 'How many qualifications do we demand from a shochet before he will be accepted to do the ritual slaughtering in even the smallest shtetl, to provide the little community with kosher meat? He must know well all the relevant laws, down to the last detail. He must have those laws well in mind when he does his work, and his hands must move efficiently, so that he doesn't make any blunders. In addition, he must be a devoutly observant Jew, or else we won't trust him. ... Then after all that, what do we put into his hands? What do we entrust him with?- an ox!"

"Consider, then, what qualifications a melamed should have – a teacher in a classroom – when we entrust to him our children, the young souls who will build and form the future of our people. The children are the foundation of Jewry's next generation; and that makes them the most precious possession we have..."

Intervention, the last area that we must discuss, is more complex and probably should be left to professionals with more experience, if at all possible. There are, however certain basic ideas that could be helpful. It is very important not to give up hope on this person and to truly believe that he or she is closer to Yahadus than it appears. Despite this attitude, we still must try to get appropriate intervention. If there is any way that you can validate this person or any of his claims, that could be very meaningful and helpful to him. Your love and acceptance of him or her, as a person, must be unconditional. However, this does not mean, by any means, to endorse what they are doing. We must listen, listen and listen some more to them and their issues and feel their pain. Make sure not to pressure and have patience, there are no quick fixes. Any healthy progress will most likely come in small increments. Seek out an appropriate and experienced mentor and consult with that mentor, for the best way for you to deal with problem.

Just as much as there needs to be training for teachers and parents, our communities should organize special seminars for the families with these challenges. These seminars could compensate for anything these individuals may have missed in the appreciation of Yiddishkeit and, with Hashem's help, bring the family back together, on the same page.