

PARASHAS NITZAVIM

Family Values

We have heard a great deal recently about family values. For a while, the phrase was mocked and ridiculed. Then it enjoyed a shift in popularity, and everyone claimed to be its champion. Today, it is universally acknowledged in our society that family values are important. But what exactly are family values, and how are they to be transmitted to our children? These questions remain points of serious contention.

Let us look into this week's portion to see what the Torah has to say about this subject. The Jewish people are standing on the Plains of Moav, about to enter the Land of Israel. Moses, however, knows that he will not enter the Land and that he is about to die. "I have placed before you life and death, blessings and calamity," he admonishes the people from whom he will soon be parted, "and you shall choose life, in order that you may live, both you and your children." (*Deuteronomy* 30:19)

These words are a veritable enigma. Why did the Jewish people need to be instructed to "choose life"? What sane person, when presented with a choice between life and death, would not choose life? And how would "choosing life" ensure that their children would live as well? Wouldn't the children be presented with the same choices as their parents?

The famous medieval commentator Rabbeinu Yonah of Gerona, author of the classic *Shaarei Teshuvah*, explains that our decision to embrace the values of the Torah should not be based solely on our obligation to God to obey His will. Rather, we should embrace it with a profound appreciation of its awesome power and eternal truths. We should appreciate fully that the Torah, which is the Word of the Creator of the Universe, is the true source of life - the only source of life. He goes on to explain that the importance of developing this outlook with regards to developing a relationship with God is not only in order to ensure that we have the proper attitude. It is to raise us to a higher level, to make us servants who serve their lord out of exuberant joy rather than sullen obedience.

With this in mind, a great sage explained how "choosing life" affects one's children. If parents fulfill their obligation to God as if it were a burden upon them, the children may choose to do even less. However, if children see their parents living by the wisdom and guidance of the Torah with joy and enthusiasm, the children will associate their precious

Jewish heritage with the essence of life itself. Then they too will “choose life.”

There was once a noted scholar who taught many disciples and received people from early morning until late at night. To his great disappointment, however, his son was wild and displayed little interest in his studies. Down the street lived a simple shoemaker whose son was a budding young scholar. One day, the scholar paid the shoemaker a visit.

“Tell me, my friend,” he said, “what do you do that has earned you such a fine son? I want to learn from you.”

“It is very simple, rabbi,” said the shoemaker. “Friday night, you come to the table exhausted from your holy efforts. You rush through the meal, give the children a few minutes of your time and go to sleep. On the other hand, the highlight of my whole week is Friday night when I can linger over the meal, sing songs with my family and review the events of the week in the light of the wisdom of the Torah. The spirit of Shabbos is alive in my home, and my children love it.”

As we face the new year, let us take these lessons to heart. Family values begin with ourselves. If we know what to value in life, if we appreciate the priceless gifts of the Torah, our own enthusiasm will automatically be transmitted to our children. And when they are presented with the awesome choices of this week’s Torah portion, they will undoubtedly “choose life.”