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Chinuch and Education


BY JEREMY RICHARDS

The Torah concept 'Chinuch' is not precisely synonymous with 'Education', although, of course, the two do often overlap and intersect. Edu-

cation is about pedagogy, systematic or less formal modes of instruction. And at its core, education is about learning and is driven by the need for all of us to know and understand ourselves and others, the world we inhabit, our past and what we might contribute to the future.

However, education is often a fluid and fickle edifice, whose architect is an unlikely fusion of educational theory and government policy, both in constant flux.

'Chinuch,' on the other hand, is not a product of the human imagination, nor subject to its whims and inconstancies. It is a Divine construct, and so both timeless and always timely. The verse in Proverbs (22:6) directs us to: "Train the

child according to his way, then even when he is old, he will not depart from it."

A pupil once wrote the following to me in an end of year thank you card: "I like it when you get excited about a Rashi because it makes me excited about the Rashi." Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki), the great 11th Century Torah commentator, is studied together with the Chumash text. His illuminating explanations provide both clarity and depth in our understanding, and can often be exhilarating to explore thoroughly. Our Chumash-Rashi lessons had left a lasting impression on this ten-year-old girl such that she chose to reference them in her year-end message of thanks to her teacher.

I found this comment both moving and powerful. Moving, simply because it reflects a ten-year-old child's love of Torah

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study; and powerful in the sense that such a declaration is a strong statement about the dynamics between teacher and pupil. For, to paraphrase the teachings of Rabbi J. B. Soloveitchik, the pulsating heartbeat of Chinuch lives and thrives in the sparking current of shared insights and experiences that flows between teacher and student.

And Rabbi Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira (the Rebbe of Piaseczna) taught that Chinuch is an endeavour that transcends pedagogy and involves shaping a child's entire being.

Let us be clear, a competent teacher must certainly employ numerous professional methodologies and strategies, much as a gardener uses many tools in tending her beloved pegenias.

But Chinuch is akin to the watering

system beneath the ground's surface that sustains directly from the roots; it is, writes Rabbi Soloveitchik, a shared creative-dramatic experience that touches our children's very souls.

Yet even more than that, the verse directs both parents and teachers to somehow anticipate the trajectory a child's life will take towards adulthood, and to put him or her on that path.

When someone asks me what I do, I like to say: "I'm in futures." "Oh yes, and what kinds of futures?" "Children's futures!" I clarify: "I'm a teacher!" "Ah, very good! ...And there was I thinking you're in investments!" But at this, I just pause and maintain eye-contact, until the penny drops.

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