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Raising Children: Painful Rejections and Lasting Impressions

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While traveling together to Eretz Yisroel, down to Mitzrayim, and back up to Eretz Yisroel, Avrohom and his nephew Lot became very wealthy. As a result of a disagreement between their shepherds, they decided to part ways. Avrohom asked Lot to choose where he would like to live and Lot chose to move westward towards the city of Sodom. The Torah describes Lot's departure as "*Vayisa Lot mikedem* - and Lot traveled from the east, moving westward".

In addition to the simple meaning of the words, Rashi (13:11) brings the midrash that "*mikedem*" is also a reference to Hashem. The Torah is telling us that Lot's separation from Avrohom, was not merely a physical departure from his uncle who had raised and educated him, but a spiritual one as well. Lot was rejecting all that Avrohom stood for including the Torah values and the way of life that Avrohom had taught him. To Avrohom, who had devoted his entire life to teaching people about Hashem and inspiring people to serve Him, it must have been a crushing blow to lose his own flesh and blood to the influences of his generation and the materialistic, selfish culture of Sodom. It seems that even thousands of years ago, having excellent caregivers and role models did not guarantee the spiritual fidelity of their offspring. However the story of Lot's spirituality didn't end there.

As we will read in Parshas Vayeira, the people of Sodom were so cruel and wicked that Hashem decided to destroy the city. To do so, Hashem sent two *malochim* (angels) to Sodom, one to save Lot and the other to overturn the city. Lot noticed these two strangers arrive in town, and at great risk to his own personal safety and that of his family, he invited them into his home. He fed them and gave them a place to sleep knowing that this kind of generosity would cause great animosity among his neighbors. Indeed, Lot's home was immediately surrounded by an angry mob intent on eradicating any shred of *chesed* and hospitality from their community.

An obvious question: How did Lot acquire such selfless dedication to the mitzvah of *hachnosas orchim* (hosting guests)? From where did he learn to place this mitzvah above his own safety? Rashi (19:1) explains that Lot had learnt this from Avrohom Avinu in whose home he had grown up. Lot had witnessed Avrohom's dedication to the mitzvah of *hachnasas orchim*, and although Lot was not meticulous in his observance of many other mitzvos (*Sifsei Chachamim*), his commitment to this particular mitzvah remained steadfast. Despite the danger to himself, he would not allow these two strangers to spend the night on the street.

This seems inconsistent with Lot's earlier declaration that he wanted no part of Avrohom or the Torah. If, as we learned earlier, Lot already rejected Avrohom's lifestyle and values, why was he still enamored with the mitzvah of *hachnasas orchim* to the extent that he was prepared to perform this mitzvah even at great personal risk?

We see from here that the process of accepting or rejecting what one learns is not entirely voluntary and it is rarely absolute. The learning process functions through multiple channels and occurs on many different levels. Just as we learn by hearing a lecture or through textual self study, we learn by observing the behavior of others. The behavior one witnesses in others becomes a part of his own perspective on life. Even if he makes a conscious decision to reject a certain lifestyle, some effects of what he has learned, witnessed, and experienced will remain, and the lessons they contain can have a dramatic impact for the rest of his life.

As parents and teachers we would like our children and students to remember all the lessons we teach them and to absorb all the values that we try to instill in them. Realistically though, things often don't turn out that way. Often parents are frustrated and disappointed with their inability to direct and influence their children's progress, development, and spiritual commitment. Sometimes this experience can be difficult and discouraging, occasionally even devastatingly painful. When our children don't seem to be turning out the way we expected we tend to get discouraged and wonder whether the efforts we put in to them had any meaningful impact, or were entirely in vain.

From this incident we see the power and receptivity of the *neschama* (soul). The *neschama*, with its natural receptivity to *ruchniyus*, absorbs good *midos* and *yiras shamayim* even if the person on a conscious level does not want it to. We don't know which lessons penetrate more deeply than others, but important values remain and affect the child even if he is completely disinterested at the time. Mitzvos, acts of *chesed*, and Torah study that we perform with dedication and sincerity leave an indelible mark on our children's *neschamos* and remain with them for the rest of their lives.

We all need to daven for *s'yata d'shmaya* in raising our children properly. We also need to keep on teaching, inspiring, and modeling proper behavior to our children. We should never get discouraged and feel that our efforts are a waste because our child is not listening anyway. Even if *he* isn't listening, his *neschama* is, which at the end of the day, may make all the difference.

Shabbat Shalom