Raising Children and Students

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Thoughts on Parashat Beha-aloteha, Shabbat June 14, 2008

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In describing Aaron's obligation to light the Menorah, the Torah uses the word "beha-aloteha", meaning "when your raise the lights". Rashi comments that this word suggests that Aaron was to kindle the lights until they were able to rise on their own.

Rabbis have applied this message to parent-child relationships and teacher-student relationships. The goal of the parent and teacher is to kindle the flame of enthusiasm and interest in their children and students. This is achieved only when the children and students are able "to rise on their own", i.e. when they have the inner drive and strength to grow into independent individuals. Parents are to guide their children in the ways of the Torah tradition, so that the children will grow into observant and knowledgeable Jews who will carry on the tradition on their own. Teachers are to instruct their students so that they will want to study more and will learn how to do independent research.

The key to being successful at the task of raising children and students is to be sincerely involved in the process. Parents who love the tradition are better able to convey that love to their children. If they attend synagogue rarely or grudgingly, the children learn this attitude quickly enough. If parents do not themselves observe and study Torah, it is not to be expected that the children will suddenly be able to "rise on their own". Likewise, if teachers are not genuinely interested in their lessons and don't really care how well the students learn, then it is far less likely for the students to advance properly in their studies.

Sometimes people speak respectfully about pious ancestors and/or teachers who were learned in Torah. Yet, while it may be nice to have worthy ancestors, it is even more important to have worthy descendants and students. To raise the lights of the future generations requires tremendous effort, sacrifice, devotion and love. It requires that parents, grandparents and teachers all set a proper example.