Working and Walking Together: Thoughts for Parashat Ki Tavo

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Ki Tavo

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A few years ago, I read an article about Brandy Young, a second-grade teacher at the Godley Elementary School in Texas. She passed out a letter to every parent at a “Meet the Teacher Night” ahead of the start of the school year to explain her new homework policy -- or should we say, no-homework
policy.

“There will be no formally assigned homework this year. Rather, I ask you to spend your evenings doing things that are proven to correlate with student success. Eat dinner as a family, read together, play outside, and get your child to bed early. [Students] work hard all day. When they go home they have other things they need to learn there.”

Instead of having her students do busywork after a long day in school, Brandy Young wants the students to spend time with their parents, to have time for hobbies or reading for pleasure. School is only part of a child’s education; the whole child, though, needs educational nourishment from parents, family and a wholesome home environment.

As I was thinking (and agreeing with!) this article, I came across another piece in the New York Times. The article cited the work of Marshall Duke, a psychologist at Emory University. He was asked to explore ritual and myth in American families. He found that children who know a lot about their families and their histories tend to do better when they face challenges. “The more children knew about their family’s history, the stronger their sense of control over their lives, the higher their self-esteem and the more successfully they believed their families functioned.”

Duke and his colleagues used the “Do You Know” measure that they developed themselves to test children’s knowledge about their histories. Some of the questions were as simple as:

“Do you know where your grandparents grew up? Do you know where your mom and dad went to high school? Do you know where your parents met? Do you know an illness or something really terrible that happened in your family? Do you know the story of your birth?”

The more answers the child knew correlated greatly with the child’s emotional health and resilience.

These articles provide a profoundly important lesson. If we want to raise a healthy and happy generation of children, we need to invest time and effort. We cannot leave things to schools. We cannot expect children to absorb our values and ideals if they are constantly plugged into iPods or computer games. We need to spend time with them, to share our experiences, to learn of their concerns. If they do not know who we are or what we value, how can we expect them to draw on their family traditions when they grow older and face critical life challenges? If we do not know who they are, how can we offer intelligent guidance to them in the manner that is most appropriate to their specific needs and talents?

This week’s Parasha begins with the obligation of farmers to bring the first fruits of their land as an offering to the Lord. When they delivered the basket of produce to the priest, the farmers would recite a prayer of thanksgiving to the Almighty. But instead of simply saying thank you, the farmer needed to make a long declaration, recounting the history of Israel since the time of our forefathers, through the servitude in Egypt and the ensuing exodus, and through the arrival into the Promised Land.

The Torah is teaching an important lesson. A person is part of a larger historical context and must understand that context and tradition. We are not disconnected fragments of humanity, but are part of an extended family. We gain strength and resilience when we know who we are, where we belong.

Praise belongs to teachers who understand the need for children to spend quality time with their families. Praise belongs to parents and grandparents who genuinely relate to their children and grandchildren in a loving manner, giving generously of their time, listening patiently to the children and grandchildren. Praise belongs to those who value genuine communication, who understand how precious it is to spend quality time with the young generations. Praise belongs to

those who understand their history and family traditions, and who find meaningful and happy ways of transmitting these things to their family members. Praise belongs to the nation that understands where it has come from, what it has undergone, where it is headed.

Angel for Shabbat