When Leadership Fails: Talking to Our Children about Moral Failures in Our Leaders

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How do we speak to our children about scandal—whether it is rabbis who have been convicted of sexual impropriety, or our nation's leaders in the United States or Israel?

Our goal in this article is to keep the tone apolitical. To frame the focus, I will begin with an experience I had in a Modern Orthodox Jewish community after a prominent rabbi was arrested and convicted of sexual impropriety with a number of his congregants. This tragedy was heavily covered by the local and national press and was the subject of extensive discussion on social media.

Shortly after the scandal erupted in the public eye, I was invited to speak in separate meetings with the parents, teachers, and children attending one of the local community yeshivot. I began the meeting with the students by asking "What guidance have you received from your teachers or parents about whatever questions and concerns you had regarding the rabbi's behavior?" To my dismay, with very little exception, the children were left to cope with the situation on their own. The parents assumed that the school would take care of educating the children about the moral and educational lessons that should inform their approach in responding to the scandal; the educators believed that this was something best dealt with at home. The children were left in a moral vacuum. A teachable moment that presented priceless opportunities for clarifying Jewish values related to sexuality, and how to respond to situations where leadership fails, was squandered.

With that as an introduction, let me relate this to educational and ethical challenges posed to us by the behavior of political leaders in the United States and Canada. I know that we have a debt of gratitude for President Trump's strong support of Israel and the drastically changed policy his administration has put in place in dealing with Iran and their proxies. I also know, that depending on one's political perspective, much of what follows can be said about current and former leaders of the Democratic Party. Regardless of where one stands, however, the reality is that our children are being raised in an atmosphere marked by adults who are absolutely certain of their view. Respectful dialogue and healthy perspective-taking has given way to disrespect, stridency, and failure to foster an ability to see the

world through the eyes of the other.

Dr. Gene Beresin, a child psychiatrist at Massachusetts General Hospital's Clay Center for Young Healthy Minds makes a number of important points about how to address concerns raised by troubling behavior on the part of leaders. The guiding principle, Dr. Beresin recommends, is to stay away from discussion about politics and policy and, instead, focus on how the behaviors our children have been exposed to may raise questions in their mind. Examples of troubling behavior exhibited by various leaders include lying, mocking others, making fun of those who aren't viewed as attractive, externalizing blame, and seeking revenge for perceived slights.
Conversations with children on this range of behaviors from supposed role models must begin with understanding how the child or student is processing the information they may see online, in the papers, or in discussions around the dinner table. Among the initial questions that Dr. Beresin recommends parents or educators use to trigger a productive discussion is to calmly ask these questions:

- What have you seen?
- What have you heard?
- What do you think about this behavior?
- How does it make you feel?

The discussion can then lead to exploring what similar behaviors they might have seen in friends, family, or acquaintances at home or in school. Parents can engage their children in discussion of how, in their dealing with similar challenges in their own life, they can find more effective alternatives in trying to achieve their goals. Parents should keep in mind that such conversations are not a one-shot event, but a process that ideally can become an important tool in shaping our children's moral development.

I play a game with my grandchildren called "moral dilemma." While it might sound like one of the many annoyances that go along with having a grandfather who is a psychologist, my grandchildren love the game and actively push me to play it with them whenever we spend Shabbat together. The game consists of presenting a real-life ethical dilemma that I might have faced during the week, followed by a discussion of how they would respond to a similar dilemma. This approach to clarifying moral values is described by Dr. Mary Gentile, a senior research scholar at the Yale School of Management.[1] Dr. Gentile and her colleagues assume that most people know the right thing to do in a particular morally challenging situation. The challenge is how to translate this knowledge into action. She uses discussions of moral dilemmas as a bridge from knowledge into action by giving people the opportunity to practice and pre-script responses to situations that call for an ethical response.

At a hotel-based Pesah program, one of my grandchildren was playing with friends at the program's camp, when the girls in her group decided to play a game of pretending that their counselor was invisible. They pretended that the counselor wasn't there and ignored every attempt that she made to engage the girls in activities. My granddaughter, not comfortable with the game, ran to my daughter and said, "*Ima*, I have an ethical dilemma!" After my daughter and granddaughter discussed the various approaches to dealing with the girls' behavior my granddaughter was able to rejoin her friends and act in a manner that assertively gave voice to her values.

The next sections will elaborate on three areas of moral education that inform a response to the challenges just described—the key role of promoting perspective taking in our children, the power of growing from mistakes, and recent research on the importance of quality time with children as a crucial ingredient in the transmission of values.

Indirect Transmission of Values and the Importance of Perspective Taking

In addition to directly transmitting our values to our children, the transmission of proper values is often a subtle process.[2] It is important to be aware of the many indirect forces that shape our children's values since raising a *mensch* is so much more complicated than only telling them what to do. Longitudinal studies that identify the core ingredients associated with raising an empathic child identify a subtle process that is typically present in such families. Parents who raise children who are kind and charitable as adults expose them to discussions that show respect for those with whom they disagree. Imagine a family sitting around a Shabbat table discussing an issue about which they feel passionately. Parents who show contempt or disrespect regarding those with whom they disagree are conveying a very powerful message to their children. They are modeling an approach to conflict that includes disdain and contempt for those who view the world differently. Whether the discussion is about family members, friends, or the leadership of the local *shul* or yeshiva, showing respect for those with whom we disagree is a very potent lesson for children.

A crucial facet of this process is parental promotion of perspective taking in their children. It is common sense that children who are encouraged to see things respectfully—through the eyes of others, even those with whom we disagree—are getting an important lesson in one of the basic building blocks of empathy. Parents whose discussion style is associated with instilling the proper values in their children are also more likely to actively encourage their child's participation in family discussions. These parents pull their children into discussions with adults and supportively challenge their child's thinking in an atmosphere that is marked by respect for the views of others, as well as that of their child.

After I gave a lecture that included a discussion about the importance of showing respect to others in conversations we have in front of our children, a rabbi in the audience told me the following story. He had just taken a position as the leader of a *shul* that had a rocky relationship with the previous rabbi. He was shocked to hear that the son of one of his congregants had just become engaged to a non-Jewish woman. He met with the young man to try to understand how this happened and to try to dissuade him from his decision to intermarry. The young man explained that all of his life, the conversation he heard around the Shabbat table was dominated by his parents' bitterly complaining about the previous rabbi. When company came over, this too was a major topic of conversation. He asked the rabbi: "How do you expect me to view this religion? I was a young, impressionable boy and my view of Judaism was mainly informed by the bitter anger my parents and their friends felt toward their spiritual leader. I see no reason to continue to belong to a religion that was so devalued by my parents and their friends."

Who do you want your children to marry one day? Somebody who comes from a family where the views of others are dealt with respect, and where there is an effort to understand the opposite viewpoint? Isn't that an essential building block of a good marriage? Were your future daughter-in-law or son-in law exposed to a home environment that taught them to live with the grays?

There is a fascinating Rav Nachman story that explains the significance of the Torah being given in the *arafel*, in the mist. It is in the fog that we acquire wisdom. "The people kept their distance but Moshe approached the fog where God was" (Exodus, 20:17). Rav Nachman explains this passage as having the following implication: "For when they saw the mist, the obstacle, they kept their distance." But Moshe approached, into the obstacle, which is precisely where God was hidden (*Likutei Maharan*, 115).

Even the most basic examination of the Talmud is an education in the core value of Jews being comfortable with uncertainty. How often in talmudic discussions do we see a high level of comfort with concluding: "*kashya*" (that is indeed a question) or "*tayku" (*we will have to wait for the coming of the messiah to come to a conclusion about this issue). The Talmud tells us that the reason we adopt the opinions of the house of Hillel over the house of Shammai is because the house of Hillel was able to appreciate the perspective of the members of house of Shammai and take that perspective into account in making their decisions.

Antidote to Externalizing Blame: Embracing Mistakes

In an oft-cited study,[3] Dr. Charles Bosk, a sociology professor at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, analyzed the difference between the most outstanding neurosurgeons who, after years of extensive training and practice, had the best success rates and lost the fewest patients, and those who were at the other end of the spectrum, losing so many patients that their attending privileges at their hospital were terminated. The top surgeons weren't those with the best manual dexterity, the highest MCAT scores, or graduates of the best training programs. Rather, the best predictor of being in the top tier of this select group of doctors was how they handled their mistakes. If they lost a patient, these top tier neurosurgeons wouldn't rest until setback was transformed into feedback. They typically wouldn't allow themselves to go home until they determined how they could do the surgery better in the future. They would go to the medical library to see if they missed a recent study and they would call leading surgeons around the world to discuss what approach might work better the next time. In contrast, the transcripts of the interviews with the worst performing surgeons were chilling. They would blame the lighting in the operating room or the "incompetent" nurses assisting them with the surgery. These doctors externalized all blame and failed to learn from their mistakes. Stanford University professor Robert Sutton quotes similar studies[4] that document how creating an atmosphere marked by emotional safety and the ability to calmly view mistakes as an opportunity to grow and improve is a central ingredient in effective teaching and leading.

In one of the last speeches my late father made, at an event commemorating his 65th year at the White Shul in Far Rockaway, he shared his belief that the older he gets the more he realizes that one of the most important goals in life is to learn how to "fail better." He quoted Samuel Beckett, who said: "Ever tried, ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better."

Quoting this speech, one of my father's students, shared the following story: He was one of the many *baalei tokeah* (shofar blowers) who, over the years, blew shofar on Rosh haShana in the White Shul. After years of doing this, he became anxious at the prospect of continuing to bear the immense responsibility of blowing the shofar properly for a packed shul on *yom tov.* In spite of being a talented *baal tokeah*, he resigned from that position. My father tried to build up his confidence by regularly meeting with him and reviewing the laws of shofar together. Unfortunately, this approach did not work. Harnessing the power of learning to "fail better," my father arranged for there to be a class on the laws of blowing the shofar properly for the entire community. The job assigned to the former *baal tokeah*, in co-teaching the class, was to teach those attending the *shiur* what mistakes in shofar blowing looked like. Of course, as planned by my father, the *baal tokeah* performed flawlessly, regained his confidence, and was able to once again resume blowing shofar for the *shul*.

When sociologist Dr. Sam Oliner was 12 years old, the Nazis came into his small town, in Poland, and murdered his family, neighbors, and friends. During the chaos, he escaped to a farmhouse in the outskirts of town and was taken in by a Polish Gentile family who sheltered him at tremendous risk to the life of their family and friends. As an adult, Oliner dedicated his career to researching what the active ingredients were in the childhoods of these moral giants which resulted in such remarkable courage and moral clarity. Oliner found that a crucial contributor was how their parents handled their

children's mistakes. When they did something that violated the moral code of the family, rather than berating them, their parents patiently explained what was wrong with their behavior, and conveyed a clear belief in their child's ability to engage in a *teshuvah* (repentance) process that would repair the mistake by making appropriate apologies and righting the wrong done to the injured party.

In contrast to the prevailing atmosphere our children are exposed to in the media and by many of our leaders, adults should try to teach children how to have broad enough shoulders to accept responsibility for wrongdoing by calmly suggesting corrective action while simultaneously communicating a belief in their ability to grow from their mistakes.[5]
In 1975, in Cologne, Germany, world renowned jazz pianist, Keith Jarrett arrived early to try out the piano he would be using for the sold out concert he would be performing that evening in the Cologne Opera House. He immediately discovered that the piano was not usable. The black keys stuck, the pedals didn't work, and the upper register of the keyboard produced sound that was harsh and thin because all the felt had worn away. The 17-year-old girl who was in charge of producing the concert, desperately tried to obtain an appropriate replacement piano but was not successful on such short notice. When Jarrett told her that he would have to cancel the concert, she became extremely upset at the prospect of being publicly humiliated in front of the 1,400 people scheduled to attend the concert. Jarrett took pity on her and agreed to perform. The performance that evening, on this ostensibly unusable piano, has become the best-selling piano recording in history, as well as the best-selling jazz piano solo in music history. If you download the recording of "the Köln Concert," you instantly recognize how the seemingly insurmountable challenge became the source of genius. The adjustments that Jarrett had to make to cope with this broken piano made the music better. Forced to avoid the harsh registers, Jarrett stuck to the middle of the keyboard. You can hear him huffing and puffing as he pounded down on the keys to compensate for the fact that the piano was so quiet. This passion and effort brought out a level of sublime artistry that over 40 years later hasn't been surpassed.

The Talmud tells us: "A person does not understand statements of Torah unless he stumbles in them" (*Gittin*, 43a). The lesson of the Cologne concert is that parents and teachers need to educate children on the power of risking failure, and viewing mistakes as a crucial engine of growth.

Perspectives from Cognitive Psychology

Effortful learning changes the brain, building new connections and abilities. Research in cognitive psychology consistently highlights the power of struggle as a pathway to growth.[6] Among the studies that illustrate this is the finding that when text on a page is slightly out of focus or presented in a font that is hard to decipher, people recall the content better. Educational psychology studies have found that when the outline of a lecture mismatches the text in some way, the effort to reconcile the discrepancy promotes learning. After French elementary school students are taught that difficulty is a crucial part of learning, that errors are natural and inevitable, and that practice helps, they do better on a test of anagrams than a comparison group. This finding led to a "Festival of Errors" in Paris and "Failcon," in the technology industry. Both events actively celebrate mistakes and absorb their lessons as a source of learning and growth. It is of note that recently, this trend has been adopted by the world of Jewish education. The Kohelet Foundation gives an award for risk taking and failure. A cash prize is given to educators who can demonstrate what they learned from educational initiatives that failed when implemented in Jewish schools.

The Power of Time and Connection in Moral Education

A core predictor of which families produce children who grow up to be described as a "*mensch* " is the amount and quality of time spent by parents with their children. In a carefully researched national survey of working parents in the United States, the Pew Research Center[7] documented the

reality that most children grow up in a household in which both of their parents work. Many parents find it difficult to balance the demands of work and family. Most parents, including at least eight in ten mothers (86%) and fathers (81%), say they feel rushed at least sometimes, while four in ten (40%) full-time working moms say they always feel rushed.

Almost 1,000 years ago, Rabbeinu Bahya introduced a four-word prayer that captures the essence of our objective: "May God save me from fragmentation of the soul." *(Hovot haLevavot,* Introduction to the Gateway to Faith). A similar statement was made by the Piacesner Rebbe, who quoted the Baal Shem Tov as saying that another way of understanding the words we say several times a day in the Shema "and you will be swiftly banished" (*Devarim* 11:17) is that we should strive to get rid of the rush in our life (instead of the literal translation "you will be quickly lost" it can be read out of context to mean "you should lose 'quickness'"—i.e., don't rush).[8]
The amount of time parents spend with children is not necessarily correlated with positive child outcomes. Rather, it is the quality of the time. For example, there is evidence that when parents are stressed, irritable, and sleep-deprived, time they spend with their children can actually be harmful. In contrast, quality time spent reading to a child, enjoying a family dinner together, or engaging in calm one-on-one discussion is clearly associated with positive outcomes in children.[9]

In a fascinating series of studies, researchers have found a direct correlation between the number of times a week parents eat dinner with their children and their children's risk for drug abuse.[10] Families that eat dinner together once a week have children with lower risk for drug abuse than those that never do. With each increasing night that parents and children eat together, drug abuse risk decreases to the point that there is virtually no risk for drug abuse in families in which parents and children eat dinner together every night.[11] The importance of "eating dinner" together is not the eating or the dinner; it's the uninterrupted, focused interaction that seems to bear such valuable fruit. Children have sensitive radar and can tell whether their parents are really there and paying attention to them, or if their minds are preoccupied with concerns about work or other problems. Making time for your child entails truly being present both in mind and body, and providing the undivided attention that children need to develop and internalize proper values.

In addition to eating meals together, routine family "rituals" such as regularly scheduled family vacations, bedtime rituals, and holiday and birthday celebrations are more important to a child's healthy development than has been previously appreciated. Research has documented that children appear to benefit in a very powerful manner from partaking in regularly scheduled, structured and predictable activities. For example, studies indicate that families who value these activities and invest time and energy in ensuring that children experience these rituals in a meaningful and predictable manner, raise children who are less anxious, feel more "loveable," and have more positive self-concepts.[12] Conversely, when these activities are disrupted because of traumatic family events such as divorce or chronic illness, children are at increased risk for a wide range of behavioral, academic, and emotional difficulties.[13]

The central role that Jewish thought puts on having control over how one's time is spent is illustrated in a comment by the *Sforno* on the verse: "This month shall be for you" (*Shemot* 12:2). What does the Torah mean by "this month is yours?" We are talking about the importance of control over one's time. The language of "*lakhem,*" to/for you, is to highlight the contrast between a free person and a slave's experience of time. The Sforno explains: "Henceforth, the months of the year shall be yours, to do with them as you desire. During the bondage, your days, your time, did not belong to you but was used to work for others and fulfill their will." A slave has no control or mastery over time. He cannot sit down and make his own schedule. What is the essence of freedom? It is the freedom to control one's priorities, to choose to pursue what one's heart desires.

The Kotzker Rebbe has a beautiful interpretation of a verse found at the end of *Tehillim:* "Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, so are the children of youth" (*Tehillim* 127:4). The obvious question is what is the connection between a warrior holding his bow and arrow and childhood? The Kotzker answers that just like with an archer, the closer he pulls the bow, the further and straighter the arrow will go, so too, with children: The closer we hold them, the further and straighter they go.

The role of strength of parent-child connection is another crucial determinant of internalization of religious values. In a classic longitudinal study,[14] USC Sociology professor, Vernon Bengston, asked a basic question about internalization of religious values: Looking over the span of four generations, what kind of parenting practice best predicts which great-grandchildren would continue to share in the basic religious values and practices of their great-grandparents? Bengston's basic findings were what common-sense would dictate: a consistent religious message, a lack of hypocrisy demonstrated by practicing what was preached, and marriage to a partner who was committed to carry on in the family religious traditions. Perhaps, most importantly, however, the most powerful predictor of what determined whether a child who left religious practice returned was the level of warmth and closeness between parent and child. As long as at least one parent continued to metaphorically hold their child's hand, even after they left religious practice, the continued warmth, connection, and love made it more likely that the child would ultimately return to the religious tradition in which he/she was raised.

The challenge of how to respond to the exposure of our children to morally questionable behavior on the part of some religious and political leaders presents an opportunity to clarify our thinking about our responsibility to foster the moral education of our children through direct discussion as well as awareness of some of the more subtle ways that children internalize our values. Awareness of some of the "silent" modes by which children learn moral lessons include prioritizing spending quality time with them in spite of our hectic schedules, helping them see their mistakes as opportunities for growth, and modeling respect and curiosity regarding the perspectives of those we disagree with. It is hoped that some of the ideas shared in this paper can help bridge the gap between moral knowledge and moral action.

[1] Gentile, M. *Giving Voice to Values* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2010).
[2] The next three paragraphs are adapted from Pelcovitz, R. & Pelcovitz, D. *Balanced Parenting* (New York, New York: Artscroll Press, 2005).
[3] Bosk, C. L. *Forgive and Remember*, second edition (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 2003).
[4] Sutton, R. Forgive and Remember: How a Good Boss Responds to Mistakes, *Harvard Business Review*, August 19, 2010.
[5] Adam Grant, *Originals: How Non-conformists Move the World. (*New York, New York: Viking Press, 2016), 163.
[6] Brown, P., Roediger, H. & McDaniel, M, *Make it Stick: The Science of Successful Learning* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014).
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[11] Schwarzchild, M. (2000) Alienated youth: Help from families and schools. *Professional Psychology – Research & Practice.* Vol 31(1) 95–96.
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