

Spiritual Investment- Capital Gain



Ask most parents how much financial capital they possess and they will think you are on the verge of making an appeal for more tuition dollars. Ask parents how much *spiritual* capital they have and they will probably look at you in bewilderment.

“Spiritual capital” can best be explained by drawing upon a concept from sociology called “social capital.”¹ In the diamond business, huge deals can be sealed with a handshake. A handshake reflects the social capital within that community—the unwritten understandings and ties that bind dealers together and allow for informal business dealings to have the force of law.

Another example: A woman who moves from suburban Detroit to Jerusalem allows her eight-year-old child to take her six-year-old sibling to school on a city bus unaccompanied by an adult—something she would never have permitted in Detroit. That sense of ease, the understanding that adults look out for other people’s children, is part of the social capital of Jerusalem society. Where did that understanding come from if not from the way that people have acted toward one another in the past? Certain experiences and interactions, based upon a series of

shared values, become so ingrained in a society that they ultimately become the accepted, but often unstated, norm.

In a similar vein, researchers involved in religious education have taken to speaking about *spiritual* capital.² Spiritual capital is the outcome of the religious interactions between parent and child. It is not about role modeling (though that too is important), nor is it about how religious the parents themselves are; rather, it is about the spiritual *interactions* between parent and child that take place over a period of time. In other words, spiritual capital speaks to the extent that parents and children share in a religious experience.

Spiritual capital consists of the unwritten and unstated ties that bind the religious home, that give it its character and power. This is the stuff that memories are made of—the overall religious atmosphere of our homes and our childhoods, the emotions, smells and songs with which we will be flooded when we recall growing up. These ties are formed by experiences that create an atmosphere of expectation, belief and commitment within the home. It follows that the more a parent and a child share spiritual experiences, the more open the child will be to drawing upon those experiences in the future in order to enhance his own spiritual growth. Sharing in Torah study, singing *zemirot*, going to shul and speaking

about issues of faith or belief (or anything Jewish, for that matter) thus become essential building blocks for the child’s spiritual life as an adult.

What is key is the *sharing* in the religious activity, rather than the activity itself. The very fact that *frum* families insist that everyone have a meal together on Shabbat and that no one is permitted to miss it except in the most unusual circumstances leaves a profound imprint on an individual’s spiritual memory and on the spiritual capital upon which he will draw later in life. A parent may claim that he or she is ill equipped to give a *devar Torah* or to discuss a topic from a Torah point of view at the Shabbat table. What this parent fails to realize is that what matters most is not the quality of the *devar Torah* but that there consistently be *divrei Torah* at the meal. The commitment to having consistent *divrei Torah* at a Shabbat meal says to a child: Torah plays a central role in our family life.

Children often have questions about religion, be they about practical issues of halachah or about matters of theology and belief. We lose a teachable moment when we fail to address those questions. Granted, a parent may not always be equipped to answer them, but rather than say, “I don’t know” or “Why don’t you ask your teacher or the shul rabbi?” a better response would be “I don’t know;

Rabbi Goldmintz is the headmaster of the Ramaz Upper School in New York. He has published articles on various facets of Jewish education, most recently on the religious and spiritual development of children and adolescents.

let's call the rabbi and ask together." Doing otherwise conveys the impression that the question isn't that important. While the question may, in fact, be a relatively minor one, the very act of dedicating time to answering it together will make an impression on the child long after the details are forgotten.

Religious discussions need not be restricted to explicitly religious occasions. Social issues, moral issues and current events can be viewed as potential material for teachable moments where a parent's religious worldview may be interjected. General discussions are thus transformed into religious and spiritual ones. Again, while a halachic discussion about racial profiling, corruption, ethnic cleansing or immigration policies may be beyond the ken of most parents, merely speaking about these issues in whatever Jewish terms a parent can muster suffices to convey the sense that he does have a Jewish worldview.

Responding religiously to life circumstances also lays the spiritual groundwork that leaves its mark upon

of clothing tested before I wear it" or "I would really love to put cream in my coffee but it's not yet six hours since I ate meat and the *Shulchan Aruch* prohibits my doing so."⁴ These statements certainly model behavior, but they also serve as powerful statements about one's internal world, the world of faith and spirituality, which children will hopefully come to internalize.⁵

Such spiritual capital is not only created at home; it is important that we go to shul together with our children. Obviously, the more qualitative this experience the better, but there may well be gains to be had by simply going together. Parents who believe that missing shul on Shabbat is no big deal or who insist that children go to shul ahead of them or even who prefer that their children go to junior congregation may be denying their children a huge amount of spiritual capital. Similarly, it would make sense to find or create other religious activities in which parents and children can share. *Bikkur cholim* (visiting the sick), saying *berachot*, visiting a *sofer*, cleaning the car before Pesach or building a sukkah

is so young, what reward could there possibly be for the parents? Why bring a child to an adult ceremony? Perhaps because even if the child understands nothing of the proceedings, the very fact that he shared in this experience with his parents leaves an impression that will ultimately shape his identity later in life. This was the reward that was promised to the adults; namely, that their children would grow up to be God-fearing Jews because of the spiritual capital they had invested in their families.

Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk, in *Meshech Chachmah*, his commentary on the Torah, points out that it is instructive that Rabbi Yehoshua was the one who was so cheered by this interpretation. For it is none other than Rabbi Yehoshua about whom it is said that his mother used to take him in his crib to the *beit kneset* "so that his ears would grow accustomed to hearing the words of Torah."⁸

As we make investments in our children's education, let us not forget that the success of that education lies not only in the financial capital we set aside but also in the spiritual capital we create in our homes and in our children's lives on a daily basis. ■

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a child's religious development. When tragedy strikes, do we respond in a humanistic way or a Jewish way? Do we express our surprise or disappointments, our fears or sense of wonder in specifically Jewish terms? "It is in God's hands"; "It's *hashgachah*"; "I am so thankful to God for this moment." The vocabulary we use on a regular basis reflects our values in ways that explicit teachings may not. To be sure, some of these statements entail spiritual modeling as well. Noted psychiatrist Rabbi Abraham Twerski has argued that just as the *midrash* suggests that a person should say "I wish I could eat pork, but the Torah has forbidden it,"³ so, too, should one model one's submission to God's will in other ways. For example, he asserts, a person should say "I don't understand why I must do this, but Hashem has forbidden *shatnez* so I must have this article

are all activities that, when done together as a religious pursuit, can leave more of an impact than any day school class on these commandments.

Jewish tradition has always recognized the significance and value of spiritual capital. At the end of the *shemittah* year, for example, the Torah commands everyone—man, woman and child—to go to the *Beit Hamikdash* for the *Hakel* ceremony, which consists of a public recitation of parts of the Torah.⁶ Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah raises the question of why young children below the age of *mitzvot* should be required to go, given that they are too young to understand the proceedings. To which he answers, "In order to bring reward to the parents who brought them."⁷ It is said that Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananya was overjoyed when he heard this explanation. Yet, if a child

Notes

1. James S. Coleman, "Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital," *The American Journal of Sociology* (1988): S95-S120
2. Pamela King and Ross Mueller, "Parental Influence on Adolescent Religiousness: Exploring the Roles of Spiritual Modeling and Spiritual Capital," *Marriage and Family: A Christian Journal* 6, no. 3 (2003): 401-413
3. See Rashi on Vayikra 20:26.
4. "Chinuch at its Best," *The Jewish Observer* (January/February 2008)
5. See *Iggerot Moshe*, YD 3:71.
6. "Assemble the people—the men, the women and the children—and your stranger in your cities, in order that they hear, and in order that they learn, and fear the Lord, your God, and they will observe to do all the words of this Torah" (Devarim 31:12).
7. *Chaggigah* 3a
8. *Talmud Yerushalmi*, Yevamot 8b