

# Jewish Living

## Preventing Teen Drop-Outs: A Matter of Attitude

By Rabbi Abraham J. Twerski, M.D.

Renowned psychiatrist **Rabbi Abraham J. Twerski, M.D.** offers his observations on the problem of teens who are at risk of leaving Orthodoxy

A great deal of attention is being directed toward increasing incidence of young men and women leaving Orthodoxy and deviating into other lifestyles, some of which are frankly self-destructive. Rabbis, educators and psychologists are investing their knowledge and energy to help these young people. While a great deal of emphasis is being placed on what the particular school can do, there is another important aspect to consider. What is there that *parents* can do? It is also of great importance to see whether there are any recommendations to parents that might help *prevent* such deviance.

It is clear that the majority of observant parents are doing everything they possibly can to maintain the strength of the traditional Jewish home. Shabbat, *kashrut* and Yomim Tovim are meticulously observed. Parents give *tzedakah* [charity] and are involved in acts of *chesed* [kindness]. They are virtually maxed-out in meeting the high cost of yeshivah or day school tuitions. What else is there that they could possibly do?

Let me share an observation. In the book *From Black Hat to Rainbow*, a parent describes an extended period of painful adjustment to their daughter's

becoming religiously observant. Their ultimate acceptance of their child's new lifestyle came at great emotional cost. I was privileged, however, to witness a markedly different case. The son of a world-famous scientist was attracted by a *kiruv* group, and at the age of 18 began to learn the Hebrew *alef-beit*. His brilliant mind quickly grasped Torah study, and within a relatively short time he was holding his own in Talmud study at a prominent yeshivah in Jerusalem.

On returning from a visit to Israel, I told the parents that their son was held in high regard at the yeshivah, and they were ecstatic with joy. They do not observe Shabbat and their home is not kosher. Their other children are not Torah observant. When "Baruch" visits home, his mother prepares a section of the kitchen where he can have his food. Their family unity is strong as ever. I could only wonder why this family's adjustment was so easy and smooth, in sharp contrast to that reported in the above book.

On one of my lecture tours, I was hosted by this family. The father said to me, "I'm so glad to be able to be here with you. I was supposed to be in China and Cairo this week to deliver lectures at scientific meetings. I had to cancel them because Alvin, who is in his senior year at high school, has one more football game this semester, and I know he wants me to be in the stands when he plays."

I was taken aback. A prominent scientist canceled international lectures because he knew his son would want him to be watching his performance in the football game! I asked myself,

"Would I have done that?" It was evident that this father's top priority was what he felt was good for his son.

I now understand why this family adjusted so easily to their son becoming Orthodox. They were not concerned that he was essentially rejecting their lifestyle and values. They did not care that their friends might say, "Has your son gone crazy? Why did you condone this? Didn't you want him to follow in your footsteps?" They felt that Baruch's choice was good for him, and that was all that mattered to them. Their own preference did not receive much consideration.

Let's look at a situation on the flip side. I know a young man who was expelled from a yeshivah at age 14 for "*shtick*." He was guilty of rather innocent, yet unacceptable mischief. This began a gradual deterioration which resulted in many years of drug addiction and street life. He eventually returned to a Torah life. He later told me that when his father learned that his yeshivah had expelled him, he was very angry with him. "Do you realize what you have done? You are bringing disgrace on our family! Your sisters will not be able to get good *shidduchim* [marriage offers] because of your irresponsible behavior."

Although this man was not blaming his parents, the sad fact was that his father's reaction to his being expelled was not, "Look at what you are doing to *yourself*. You are ruining *yourself* with such behavior." He did not feel that he was the prime concern. Rather, it was the family and the sisters' *shidduchim* that were obviously more important. This attitude was not conducive to cor-

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*The founder and medical director of Gateway Rehabilitation Center in Aliquippa, Pennsylvania, Dr. Twerski is one of the country's leading experts on alcohol and drug rehabilitation. He is the author of numerous books and his column is regularly featured in Jewish Action. His most recent book is Twerski on Spirituality (Mesorah Publications).*

recting his behavior.

My heart goes out to parents who consult me with the tragedy that their daughter has a romantic relationship with a non-Jewish man. I keenly feel their pain and I wish I could help them. But when they present the problem as, “How am I going to show my face in *shul*?” I am a bit peeved. This may be a valid complaint, but the first statement should have been, “She is blinded by passion. What can we do to save her from herself and to help her see that she is being self-destructive?”

Children need to know that they are important and they can sense their parents’ attitudes toward them. They may accept that their parents’ values may differ from their own. But they cannot accept that their welfare is not their parents’ top priority.

I had been scheduled for a year in advance as the keynote speaker at a major convention. One week prior to the lecture, my grandson called me with the good news of the birth of a baby boy. The *bris* would be on the day I was scheduled to lecture. In previous days, I

might have expressed my regret at not being able to attend the *bris*. How could I disappoint the people who had publicized my participation at the convention? However, I never gave it a second thought. If watching a son’s football performance warrants canceling two international lectures, then my great-grandson’s *bris* certainly does too.

We do not know all the reasons that contribute to children going astray. However, we must consider the significance of the parents’ attitude toward the child. We must become uncompromisingly frank and honest with ourselves. Is everything we do for our children primarily for their own good? Is everything we demand of them motivated primarily by their own welfare? Are we able to set aside our own preferences if a child disagrees with us, as long as the child’s choices are not harmful to him?

We must pray to Hashem to protect our children from going astray – and we must be aware that Hashem expects us to do the utmost in our capacity in order to warrant His help. **JA**