

Child-Careering: *Thoughts from a Professional Mom*

By Sara Malka Poupko Reichman

“**H**ashem made the trees, right?” asked my wide-eyed, not-yet-three-year-old. “Yes,” I said.

“And the sky and all of the animals?”

“Yes, everything.”

“Mommy, did Hashem make Mommy and Abba?” he persisted.

“Yes, He did.”

“So Mommy, who made Hashem?”

A few months later, while walking on the avenue with my son in what felt like single-digit-degree weather, we passed by a shivering, poorly clothed man, who was begging for money. After I gave my son a dollar bill for the man, my little boy turned to me and asked, “Why doesn’t the man have

gloves?” I spent the next few minutes trying to keep up with my son’s enthusiasm as we ran into a store to buy the man a pair of gloves.

These and so many other less dramatic conversations with my child constantly reinforce my confidence in a very difficult decision I made this past September. I decided to stop teaching hundreds of children to educate two very precious ones: my own.

It would have been easy to leave a job that was unfulfilling or unstimulating. Had my profession been different, it would have been simpler to decide that my time and energies would be better spent at home with my kids. But I taught in the honors program in a *kiruv* high school where stimulation and fulfillment were never lacking. For many years this was not simply a job for me, but a 24-hour preoccupation that permeated almost all aspects of my life. While working as an educator, I never once doubted the value of how

my time and energies were being spent. Today, as an educator of my own children, I still have no doubt.

Every home has a tone and a mood. Who sets the tone when a child comes home to a babysitter? When I was growing up, my mother’s constant optimism seemed to enable her to accomplish virtually anything. Her influence instilled in me the ability to relentlessly pursue whatever I want to accomplish. My father, as well, always treated us like intelligent individuals whose opinions were worth hearing; he constantly asked us thought-provoking questions, imbuing in us a love of probing and seeking the truth. I still remember the conversations inspired by his questions: If you could meet anyone from the *Chumash*, who would it be? If you became president, what is the first thing you would change?

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It's not the great monologues that we give our children that shape their views of the world, affect their character and develop the core of who they will be. For the most part, it's the tone we set in the home, it's our responses to their sweet little questions, our reactions to their comments and actions. If someone else is answering our children's questions and responding to their actions during most of their waking hours, then it's not just Mommy (or Daddy) who is shaping their personalities.

In the professional arena, there is constant kudos. For a mommy, however, while the inner sense of fulfillment is there, the pats on the back are less frequent. The confidence that a full-time mother must foster within herself is profound. This is especially so when the world out there—even the Orthodox world out there—often shows little appreciation for, or understanding of, the immeasurable value of raising children.

How often do you hear someone say, "How do you do it all? You must be a superwoman!" This accolade is almost always offered to a mother who works outside of the home. "You cook dinner too?!" usually follows the remark. Let's shatter the myth. Superwoman is not "doing it all." Someone else is raising her children and if she walks in at 5:00 PM and starts cooking dinner, she's not tending to her children's need for deeper nourishment while rushing to get the chicken on the table.

The true superwoman is someone who has painstakingly weighed her choices and made her decisions with intellectual honesty. She is someone who labors to find a sense of gratification within her own walls and is content with her very meaningful accomplishments at home—albeit they are not visible to the outside world. In the face of voices praising only professional accomplishments, she is able to live by her principles with a strong sense of who she is.

In an article in *U.S. News and World Report* entitled "Lies Parents Tell Themselves About Why They Work" (May 12, 1997), sociologist Arlie Hochschild observed that among female employees "home had become a place filled with incessant demands from noisy children, endless piles of laundry, few tangible rewards and little time to relax. At work, in contrast, people felt in control and their hard work was appreciated by colleagues and supervisors." Hochschild concluded that the reason most women who work full time do so is not because they absolutely have to but "mostly for the same reason men do. Increasingly the identification between occupational success and self-worth is as strong

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for women as it is for men."

But do women really have to seek a sense of esteem and self-worth outside the home? The Talmud tells us that God endowed women with intellectual abilities specifically geared to enable us to raise children wisely, "*Binah yeteirah nitnah laishah.*" Indeed, in an uneventful half hour during a typical day, a mother can build confidence and teach sharing, consideration, belief in God, and respect for the property of others. (And that's all before breakfast.) Mothers need to call upon this *binah yeteirah*, extra wisdom, rather frequently. We need it to effectively

intercede between two fighting children in a way that leaves neither feeling that Mommy loves the other more; we need it to intuit what is really bothering our child when her inability to tie her shoelaces one morning nearly brings her to tears; we need it so that we can nurture our child's self-esteem when he is unable to complete a puzzle. Can someone else do all that?

As the woman nurtures her home, the home tends to nurture the character of the woman. In what arena other than parenting can an individual so completely fulfill the dictum of emulating Hashem's ways—*v'halachta b'derachav*? A mother is called upon to give and give without much consideration of herself. She punishes and is saddened by the sadness that she must cause for the sake of teaching. She must deny the child what is harmful to him over the din of desperate protest. She builds character, trying to expose her children only to that which will foster their growth even when they beg for the contrary.

Recently I read an essay by the RaN which shed light on something that had always perplexed me. The Torah contrasts Eisav and Yaakov by describing them respectively as a "man of the field" and a "wholesome man who sits in his tent." Of all the vast character differences between these two individuals, why does the Torah choose to emphasize where they preferred to spend their time—indoors or outdoors? The RaN (*Derashot HaRaN, derush 2*) explains: "Eisav was a man of the fields who sought out movement; when in his home his feet did not rest, and Yaakov sits in the tents; his glory is to sit in the home." According to the RaN, this is much deeper than indoor or outdoor preferences. Eisav was unable to find tranquility in his home and had to constantly search the outside world for "thrills." Yaakov, on the other hand, never suffered from restlessness and discontent; he knew that everything meaningful could be achieved within himself and found within his home.

This crucial characteristic of Yaakov, which he transmitted to the Jewish people—that of recognizing what is real and sorting the temporal from the enduring—was entrusted to the Jewish woman. Thus, several generations later, when God gives us that source of all truth at *Matan Torah*, He refers to the women by their identifying characteristic, using the term *Beit Yaakov*—those who build the *home* of Yaakov.

The women's success in instilling this crucial quality in the Jewish people is evident soon after when *Bnei Yisrael* receive the accolade, "How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, *Mah tovu ohalecha Yaakov.*"

Staying home to raise one's children helps keep one's focus on the meaningful, substantive things in life. By contributing to the building of someone's character, instilling ethics and nurturing spirituality, an individual keeps in touch with all that is real.

Of course, staying home may not always be possible. Some people simply need the income. Other times, an individual may possess a God-given talent which needs to find expression. Others may want to make meaningful contributions to society in

addition to motherhood.

While there are certainly valid reasons for women to work outside the home, it is critical that society begin to view full-time mothering as an ideal

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and that everyone—mothers, fathers and the community at large—help more women have the option of staying home. To that end, our community must make changes—it must de-emphasize materialism and hold full-time mothering in greater esteem. Women who cannot be at home all day, should try to choose careers with flexible hours so that they can, at least, be home when their children leave to and return from school.

Learning is critical. Communities should provide classes (during evenings or other convenient times) to fulfill

women's intellectual and spiritual needs. As imparters of *Torat emecha*, women must have the opportunity to acquire Torah. Finally and perhaps most importantly, are the husbands and fathers. Without their genuine encouragement and support, full-time mothering becomes nearly impossible. It is especially important that they express their appreciation for their wives' efforts, for this can greatly contribute to a woman's own perspective about the holy work in which she is engaged.

Just as this essay was going to press, I developed a medical condition which—with God's help temporarily—has rendered me unable to walk.

By far the most excruciating pain of my condition is my being unable to really take care of my children. Relegated to my couch, I spend the day watching someone else feed my children, dress them, walk them to their ride to school and bid them farewell. I am no longer the person who is privy to that exciting and special moment of the day—the welcome home from school. When my two-year-old is crying, I cannot pick her up and comfort her. When she needs a drink or her crayons, I must call the babysitter. But I would never willingly choose to have someone else care for my children, and I am truly amazed by those women who do. **JA**