

Books

To Kindle a Soul: Ancient Wisdom for Modern Parents and Teachers

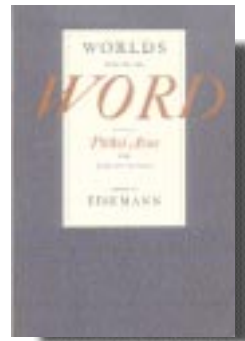
By Lawrence Kelemen



Targum Press/Leviathan Press
Michigan, 2001
255 pages

Worlds Beneath the Word: Mining Pirkei Avos for Chinuch Insights

By Moshe M. Eisemann



Maryland, 2001
194 pages

Reviewed by Yitzchok Adlerstein

It's all in there, we are told. "Delve into it, and continue to delve into it,

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for all is in it" (*Avot* 5:26). In some form or another, all knowledge is contained in the Torah. How readily we can extract that knowledge is another matter. This review will consider two works—quite different in approach and style—that successfully extract new insights from the words of our sages.

To Kindle a Soul stands on a central premise, an *idée fixe* offered by perhaps the most important interpreter of the *musar* school of our generation, Rav Shlomo Wolbe. Rabbi Kelemen, long a student and devotee of Rav Wolbe, helped him with Hebrew and English versions of a short work on *chinuch*. That work became the foundation of the larger book, written by Rabbi Kelemen, which we here review.

Rav Wolbe finds a model for two complementary methods of Torah *chinuch*—building and planting—in two adjoining blessings of the Amidah. The blessings begin with the words "*Et tzemach David*" (David's sprouting) and "*Uvene Yerushalayim*" (build up Jerusalem). Rav Wolbe, confident that the architects of the Amidah had much more in mind than a clever contrast of poetic images, sees an allusion in the blessings to two radically different methods of bringing about change.

Neither method alone suffices to raise a child into a well-integrated adult. Planting ideas in a young child and watching him grow and blossom cannot always work, unless the proper structure and discipline is simultaneously built into his schedule. On the other hand, managing the affairs of a child like a construction manager may provide a parent with the behavior he wants but will produce robotic compliance and a good likelihood of later rebellion. Good *chinuch* requires the artful application of both nurtured planting and rigorously controlled building.

Many *Jewish Action* readers will

remember Rabbi Kelemen for his previous books, *Permission to Believe* and *Permission to Receive*. The first explored four approaches to making belief in God the preferred position to the intelligent skeptic; the latter did the same for the integrity of the Oral Law and its transmission. Both fulfilled the author's promise to deliver avalanches of evidence from expert sources. Rabbi Kelemen never fails to offer a host of current and readable studies from investigators of note. He impresses as a strong and effective researcher, who backs up his assertions with state-of-the-art published findings.

To illustrate the effectiveness of "planting," Rabbi Kelemen cites the example of a small child who was affectionately called Kadosh—holy—by his family. When faced with the need to use the restroom in a sleazy-looking bar, the child demurred, although no one had ever explained to him why such an establishment was somewhat objectionable. Why did he refuse to walk in? "Because I am Kadosh," he replied. A seed planted—almost without intention—had sprouted and borne fruit.

It is probably in the area of "building," where rigor and routine jointly provide firm boundaries for behavior, that the reader will be jolted from complacency. Here is where Rabbi Kelemen considers far-flung issues such as sleep, exercise, affection (kids need more), sugar and food additives (kids need a whole lot less), routine discipline and temper tantrums and the effects of television viewing, all set within a matrix of Torah thought.

Rabbi Kelemen's discussion of the role of inadequate sleep in producing ADD-like behavior in children initially raised the eyebrows of this reviewer. This treatment segues from a brief consideration of the importance of the "laws of nature." Do we really need a reminder—couched in the language of Torah sources—that nature's demands are largely beyond debate and that we must be heedful of her requirements? Are there really Torah-specified policies regarding bedtime procedures or Torah strategies for dealing with sweets? Is this pious overkill?

After a bit of ruminating, Rabbi Kelemen's logic prevailed. Focusing on a Torah perspective does make a difference. There is certainly no shortage of competing and conflicting advice on all facets of childrearing. How does the Torah community choose between opposing positions, all voiced with conviction? It is helpful to examine the competing frameworks behind them. What is the fundamental perspective of the author? Where is he or she coming from? This is where a Torah background and framework make all the difference.

None of us doubts that Hakadosh Baruch Hu created the laws of nature. Nonetheless, sometimes we are more prone to ignoring the fine details of these laws than those of another God-given system—the requirements of *halachah*. Errors regarding both, however, exact a price.

Rav Avigdor Miller, *z"l*, once took aim at the practice of pediatricians years ago to routinely remove tonsils and adenoids at the first sign of inflammation. Rav Miller showed that it was *au courant* at the time to treat such body parts as "vestigial," and thus they were easily sacrificed. "Imagine driving a new Buick home," argued Rav Miller, "and finding unfamiliar wires and devices. Would you argue that your last car did fine without them? Would it be reasonable to conclude they are nothing more than dead weight, reducing fuel efficiency? Would you rip them out? Or would you suppose that the engineers at GM didn't put anything under the hood that isn't needed? Not a single nut or bolt!" The practice of labeling a body part vestigial grew out of a belief that human evolution was random and blind, yielding occasional dead ends. Those who believe in design and a Designer would think twice before deciding that part of the body was useless dead weight. They would wager that some important purpose would later be discovered, and resist removing the tissue unless absolutely necessary. It was only a matter of time, Rabbi Miller pointed out, before physicians reversed themselves, having discovered that tonsils and adenoids had probable roles in immune system function.

A Torah perspective influences us to

Justifying Harshness (excerpt from *To Kindle a Soul*)

Today, those most enthusiastic about corporal punishment often cite the Bible as their authority: "He who spares the rod hates his child." They argue that this verse demands that we hit our children. However, traditional Jewish scholars never accept verses just at face value. Every verse must be understood in context, taking into account every other Biblical passage and the entire corpus of Judaism's ancient oral tradition.

Elsewhere we find a verse, "And I took for myself two rods. One I called 'pleasantness' and the other I called 'beating.' And I herded the flock." We see that there are two different types of rods—one pleasant and one punitive. This is confusing to us. How can there be a rod of "pleasantness"?

The answer is hidden in the word "rod." For traditional Jews, what constitutes a rod? Rabbinical writings from the second century CE say that an angel sits on every blade of grass, hits it and cries, "Grow!" According to my guides from the traditional community, this does not mean that a little pinked-cheeked, white-winged creature armed with a baton sits on every blade of grass. "Hit" is the word their tradition uses for the force that produces growth; and "rod" is the word their tradition uses for the source

of this growth force. When we offer encouragement, this is also a rod. If a child behaves and we give him a special treat, that is a rod—a rod of pleasantness.

Today, some parents try to avoid using corporal punishment because of the long-term damage it can cause. If parents choose to abandon this rod, they must be careful to use the other rod—the rod of pleasantness. If we don't spank and we don't provide our children with legitimate and appropriately timed encouragement—a well-deserved compliment or something yummy to eat—then we are treating them as if we hate them. I was advised to remember this when reading, "He who spares the rod hates his child."

The reality is that few (if any) people who use harsh punishments today are ideologically motivated. The Biblical verse is an excuse. We yell because we lose our temper, and we hit because we do not know what else to do. When our children do not do what we want—when we feel we are losing control—we exert powerful, unpleasant and sometimes dangerous force to regain mastery over them. If there were a plan that worked without harshness, we would use it (142).

be a tad more respectful of phenomena that are hardwired into the grand scheme of things by Hashem. Thus, if some of those phenomena happen to demonstrate (as Rabbi Kelemen thinks they do) that we are making some innocent mistakes in raising our children, we should not shrug off the evidence and hope that we are the happy exceptions.

Think of this book, then, as a nexus of common and uncommon sense, with our rich tradition of Torah wisdom contributing the less obvious stuff.

The book enriches in an entirely different way as well. On the one hand, it is a highly useful compendium of parenting advice on many practical topics, neatly assembled for one-stop shopping. Orthodox households will want the book for this reason alone. It is obvious, however, that Rabbi Kelemen did not write the book only for us. He

meant it as a vehicle for *kiruv*.

Many stereotypes hamper the interest or progress of Jews who know little about their heritage. One of the most onerous stereotypes is that Torah has nothing to contribute to the modern sophisticate, other than some antiquated rituals and tired legalisms. *To Kindle a Soul*, I suspect, is a double entendre. Rabbi Kelemen wishes to ignite the souls, not only of children but also of adult readers. The book gently clobbers (if there is such a thing!) the secular reader with the notion that Torah is intensely involved with real-life issues that directly contribute to the quality of his life.

Consider this example: Rabbi Kelemen musters opinions as well as studies that show that yelling at children may be a more severe form of punishment than spanking. Most of

the evidence comes from studies of verbal abuse. But Rabbi Kelemen succeeds in extending the argument to non-abusive yelling as well. He marshals Torah support for this on three levels: practical, theoretical and spiritual. Practically, a Torah luminary showed him, the child will first react to the anger in the yelling and will then anticipate a severe thrashing. The anticipation may be more painful than a mild spanking (which the author, by the way, does not recommend). Rabbi Kelemen reminds us, as well, that the sages tell us that directives to family members be given “pleasantly, so they will be accepted” (*Shabbat* 34a). Yelling is ineffective communication in the long run. Finally, he shows us that traditional sources view speaking as a deeply spiritual experience, with speech being the “invisible conduit linking one soul to another. Because speech flows from deep within the speaker...verbal attacks tear at the child’s heart.”

The book captured approbations from Dr. Abraham Twerski, Senator Joseph Lieberman and talk-show host Dennis Prager.

Buy the book. Consider its evidence carefully. You will most likely find ways to better your parental skills. When you finish it, pass it along to a secular friend. You may find that you will succeed in kindling his soul as well.

Worlds Beneath the Word occupies a position at the other end of the continuum of Torah insight. While *To Kindle a Soul* tantalizes the neophyte with the notion that the Torah may have something to offer, *Worlds Beneath the Word* challenges the Torah veteran with the realization that he may have heard some of the notes while losing most of the music.

Rav Moshe Eisemann serves as a *rebbe* at Ner Israel Rabbinical College in Baltimore, Maryland. His works on *Iyov* and *Divrei Hayamim* are extraordinary in their completeness, depth and insight.

Words, lubricating the flow of sophisticated Torah thought, are the stock of Rav Eisemann’s trade. His ability to convey their meaning with clarity

and elegance matches his Torah erudition. His richness of expression is seldom seen in modern Torah literature.

Mining is scarcely a verb most of us would apply to the study of the familiar passages of *Pirkei Avot*. Yet Rav Eisemann turns the study of these passages into a walk through a mineral vein, where the gems are available for the price of stopping to pick them up, once you recognize their presence.

Most of us realize that words can be delicately nuanced. Rav Eisemann helps us understand the meaning of words by sorting through the competing alternatives, but he goes much further. We can ordinarily derive meaning through context. But what are we to do when no context exists? Is the *kapdan* of *Avot* 2:5, the teacher who will not be successful, “someone prone to anger...or is it a finicky person, shackled by his own predilection for order and conformity...or is it both?” Moreover, what assurance do we have that the meaning of words is stable and unchanging? Do we have any way of knowing what the words meant to the authors?

Yes, writes Rav Eisemann. It is not unreasonable to assume that the rabbi’s choice of words was influenced, in large measure, by their usage in the most important Jewish work: the Bible. Taken together with parallel usage in rabbinic texts of the authors’ day, this comparative method is a powerful tool. It takes a world-class *talmid chacham* to find the texts and cull the meaning, a task for which Rav Eisemann is most eminently qualified.

How many times have we glossed over *Avot* 3:10, with its statement that the wisdom of someone whose fear of sin precedes his *chachmah* will endure—*mitkayemet*? The grammatical form (*hitpael*) of this root verb does not exist anywhere in Tanach. The author is able to draw on his vast experience and produce a comment of the Gra on I *Divrei Hayamim* 28:2, which differentiates between two verbs, both of which relate to the idea of rising up: *amidah* and *kimah*. The latter does not convey the idea of standing on one’s feet but “a state of reorientation, of

striking out upon a new path.” The sense of the Mishnah, concludes Rav Eisemann, is that:

If the terror of a misdirected life [what “fear of sin” morphs into following the author’s analysis] precedes and therefore motivates the search for wisdom, then the promise hidden within is that wisdom will turn from a mere potential into a fruitful life, wisely and correctly lived.... But what if the quest for wisdom becomes self-validating, spurred on by a sterile curiosity that cherishes the hunt for ever-elusive truth for the sheer exhilaration of discovery? Then, all dressed up with nowhere to go, wisdom cheapens into cleverness.

This is a message well worth the ride.

Familiar phrases come back, resplendent in their new garb. This indeed is *Pirkei Avot* for lovers of words, of their latent meaning and of the power of their expression.

Ironically, the single feature of the work that is unattractive makes it even more endearing. The typography is cluttered, the choice of fonts inelegant; the layout just doesn’t work. Had a mainstream publishing house published the work, one would have expected much better. Rav Eisemann chose self-publication, because he wished to maximize the proceeds from the book, all of which go to support a remarkable *tzedakah* that provides Torah *chinuch* to children from the former Soviet Union. Rav Eisemann, who has established schools for boys and girls in Kishinev, which he runs with great personal sacrifice, has assumed personal responsibility for funding the schools. Most of the selections from *Pirkei Avot* that Rav Eisemann chooses do, in fact, deal with issues of *chinuch*, such as teaching, studying and mentoring. The book thus directly impacts on three audiences: the reader, his charges and the Jewish children of Kishinev. It is an irresistible proposition. **JA**

(*Worlds Beneath the Word* is available for a minimum ten-dollar donation to Stam Gemilas Chesed Fund, which can be sent to the author at 401 Yeshiva Lane #3A, Baltimore, MD 21208.)