

# Frum and Frumer:

## When Children Become More Religious than their Parents

*A noted psychologist speaks candidly about the “year in Israel.”*

By Norman N. Blumenthal

A few phenomenon in our community is children who become more stringently observant than their parents. This occurs often, though not necessarily, after the year or years of post-high school study in Israel. Parents' responses range from pride to confusion to censure. Some worry about their children foregoing a college education or other means of

tion of the values they have imparted to their children. What are the possible reasons for this new development? How should parents respond?

### Normal Individuation

*“Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother...” Genesis 2:24*

The scene is set. In the course of the ongoing process of Creation, the

ing more valued than one's children, the goal is to instill in them security and confidence so that one day they will leave their parents' home and raise families of their own.

This process, which mental health professionals call “separation/individuation,” is a two-prong progression during which the child physically moves away while simultaneously developing her

respects, individuation is the central developmental task of these years. While the need to be different may take extreme forms during adolescence, it ultimately becomes tempered, usually resulting in offspring who resemble their parents while remaining unique in a number of areas.

One of the ways a child may express the need for distinction is through religious observance. No parent can reasonably expect his child to be a clone of himself and to adopt his every thought and belief. Thus, for some teens, altered observance is not so much a rebellion against, or rejection of, their parents but a normal developmental need.

### A Parental Critique

*“A clear conscience is usually a sign of a bad memory,” Steven Wright*

Painful as it may be, we have to consider the possibility that our children perceive some of our religious inconsistencies. There are no better mirrors, especially of our souls, than our children. Living in our homes and scrutinizing us for years, our children are our most perceptive critics.

Bearing this in mind, we must consider the possibility that this phenomenon of children becoming more religious than their parents has been spawned by such questionable, but all-too-common, practices of talking during *davening*, recklessly indulging in *lashon hara*, attending *kiddush* clubs and maintaining different religious standards at work or on vacation. Our children may pick up on these subtle hypocrisies and look for a more rigorous and meticulous kind of observance. Rather than berating the rabbis and bemoaning the year in Israel, parents may need to engage in some self-scrutiny.

### An Unspoken Endorsement

*“To be good is noble; but to show others how to be good is nobler and no trouble,” Mark Twain*

Comparably and conversely, the flight to more lofty religious standards may be an expression of one or both of the parents' own unfulfilled yearnings. It is no secret that spirituality and religiousi-

ty often grow with the temperance of age and the perspective of life experience. While drawn to a more strictly observant or *yeshivish* lifestyle, a couple may feel too strong a link to its community or friends to “take the leap.” A religious metamorphosis may occur within both spouses simultaneously, or one spouse may undergo changes while the other remains steadfastly where he is.

With an acute awareness of his parents' unspoken wishes, a child may veer to the right as a fulfillment of his mother's and/or his father's dream to do the same. Just as the parent may need to explore his religious deficiencies, he should consider the endorsements and encouragement that he may have subtly conveyed to his child.

### Planned Penitence

*“He who says, ‘I will sin and then repent ...’” Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah 4:1*

Most clinicians or family therapists who have Modern Orthodox clients have witnessed the following scene: Parents meet with a therapist over escalating con-

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cerns about their child. Whether it be the child's more modish hairstyle and type of dress, over-involvement with girls/boys or interest in decadent music, the parents express their dread and premonitions. The child casually responds, “What are you worried about? I'll have a good time now and then go to Israel and ‘flip out!’”

Since so many youth experience a religious transformation in Israel, both parents and their offspring expect such a change to happen. There is almost a cavalier attitude towards the marginal behavior of teens, since there is the expectation that this behavior will change in Israel. Moreover, many parents, educators and mental health professionals look

towards Israel as the *yeshuah* (salvation), sending miscreant children there for rehabilitation (not uncommonly with just the opposite outcome).

As I discuss in detail later on, one of the problems with the “year in Israel” experience is that it exists in its own orbit as a distinct experience. It is rarely integrated into the thinking or life of the teen before high school graduation. It is this evisceration of the Israel experience that may account for the radical transformation that often takes place there.

### Religion with a Vengeance

*“It is hard to be frum. It is easy to be frumer,” Rav Yoel Teitelbaum, the Satmar Rebbe*

A high school *rebbe* I knew used to say: “If you hit someone over the head with a *sefer Torah* and kill him, you're still *chayav mitah* [deserving of the death penalty].” In families where there is divisiveness, religion can become a weapon; in such cases, religious fervor and intolerance may be more a means of expressing anger and retaliation than spiritual yearning. It is in such instances that the differences between natural, genuine religious change and fanaticism become distinct. The former occurs in gradual increments with the adherent at ease with her observance, regardless of others. While cognizant of the dictum of *tochachah* (remediation of others), there is no caustic imposition of her lifestyle on family members and friends.

In contrast, angry and fanatical observance is characterized by intolerance and demands, as if the child's religious conviction is dependent upon the conformity of others. Her condemnation of others is often way disproportionate to the supposed shortcoming or transgression. It's as if the “transgressor” *must*, rather than *should*, change. Rarely is such fanaticism truly based on pure religious belief. Instead, it is rooted in an enraged need to either perceive oneself in exalted terms or to condemn others. Lacking genuine faith and sincerity, such religious practice is often fraught with inconsistencies and mercurial shifts.

### What to Do?



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assuring a sufficient income. Others perceive the religious shift as a condemna-

woman is formed, and the first family created. The Torah pauses for an editorial comment and, in a few choice words, sums up the paradox of childrearing. It is human nature to cling to that which is cherished. Someone who owns a precious piece of art or a priceless heirloom will likely secure it and keep it in his possession for generations. For the parent it is quite the opposite. While there is noth-

unique identity. Thus, individuation involves not just relocating but also an internal process during which the child asserts her individuality. Therefore, it is not unexpected that a child will develop her own belief system and outlook. Indeed, doing so helps fulfill a basic human need.

This process reaches a feverish pitch during adolescence. In many

*"I used to have an open mind, but my brains kept falling out."*

—Steven Wright

There is no more sure-fire way to encourage religious fanaticism and radicalism than to argue with the devout. A frontal assault on passionate beliefs only fosters a more ingrained and fervent response. When a child appears headed towards change or even zealous observance, the parent should engage in a dialogue rather than try to argue and persuade.

If the transformation appears more natural and in the context of the need to individuate, the parent should let it run its course. Especially upon return from the "year in Israel," the teenager may need time to temper his enthusiasm and weave his newfound spirituality into the more prosaic realities of college, career choice and dating. If, instead, there is a radicalism that is camouflaging anger and rejection, the relationship or past gripes should be the focus of the family rather than the type of head coverings worn or amount of time spent in religious prayer or Talmudic study. Introspection and seeking elements of oneself in one's children may be the most productive and growth-inducing response a parent can

have.

The Israel experience needs to become more integrated into the schema of our children's education. There is no reason why there can't be a more natural build-up and descent. If the year in yeshivah or seminary becomes an integral part of our children's educational lives, the changes that take place can be more paced and less extreme.

Throughout the high school years, parents and teachers need to discuss the Israel experience and how it fits into the child's general growth and achievements. In this sense, the Israel experience should

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be no different from college and marriage, which are (hopefully) more regular topics of conversation throughout these years. Our schools and summer programs should at least try to inspire students in

the manner that Israel programs do during the year or years spent abroad. We need more "mini-Israel experiences" for students during their high school years, such as NCSY's (National Conference of Synagogue Youth) Israel Summer Kollel or Michlelet NCSY. Both programs, which are under the auspices of the Orthodox Union and are for boys and girls respectively, offer teens the opportunity to learn in Israel in an intensive way during the summer months. These kinds of programs help lessen the gap between the students' high school and post-high school education.

Furthermore, when students are in seminary or yeshivah in Israel, parents should maintain contact with the *roshei yeshivah* or teachers who are both educating and inculcating values and aspirations during that special year. In this fashion, the changes that take place during the year in Israel will potentially be more in tandem with the family's lifestyle. If we can better integrate that time in Israel into the broader vision of those impressionable high school and college years, we may witness shared growth by both generations that is not only thought out and processed but also mutually inspirational. JA