

My parent, my teacher

Simple living, **LIVING SIMPLY**

A timeless recipe for weathering the storms of life, without breaking

BY RABBI ZE'EV KRAINES



THERE ONCE WAS A BOY WHO BELIEVED HE WAS a pane of glass. He was always anxious not to fall because he was afraid that he would break. No one could talk him out of it, not his parents, not his friends, not even the best psychologists and psychiatrists. One day, a friend came up with a cunning plan. He decided to push the boy to the ground to show him that nothing would happen to him, as he was not made of glass.

He pushed the boy down... and he broke.

I heard this parable from my teacher, Rabbi Moshe Shapiro, who used it to dramatise how our entrenched lifestyle choices, beliefs and fantasies become our realities. We can laugh at its absurdity, but the joke is on us. Are we creating new high-maintenance – and un-maintainable – needs in our children that are making them more anxious and dangerously fragile?

THE BARE NECESSITIES

We all know that luxuries are the things we can live without, right? Well, yes. The

luxuries we haven't lived with can be lived without. But those that we have lived with very quickly become 'the bare necessities' and we too shatter when we have to go cold turkey without them.

It's an irresistible spiral. Yesterday's luxuries become today's minimum standards that will soon become tomorrow's hardships. This is not a new process; lifestyle standards have been ratcheting up slowly over decades and centuries. We would find it hard to cope with bringing up pails of water from the well or rubbing two sticks together to get a fire going (though the way things are going in South Africa...). But, in our time, this process is accelerating at a frightening speed and is a major contributing factor to what is becoming an Age of Anxiety for our children.

Remember when you were willing to wait a few seconds for a computer to respond to a click on a website or a tap on a keyboard? These days, even 400 milliseconds – literally the blink of an eye – is too long. According to Google researchers, cited in the *New York Times*,¹

that barely perceptible delay causes people to search less.

In 2009, a study by Forrester Research found online shoppers in the US expected pages to load in two seconds or less – and that at three seconds, a large share of these shoppers abandon the site. Only three years earlier, a similar Forrester study found the average expectation for page load times was four seconds.²

THE HORSEY SET

Our Sages understood this dynamic well when they ruled that a person who has become accustomed to luxury may legitimately receive public tzedakah money to restore him to his status. They base this insight on the Torah's commandment regarding the poor: "Open your hand generously, and extend to him any credit he requires to take care of his need."³

The Torah's emphasis on 'his' particular need implies that we must be sensitive to his subjectively perceived privations, which have become his realities. Our Sages accordingly authorise a community to provide a rich man who has fallen on hard times with a horse to ride on and a slave to run before him. On one occasion, the famous Hillel could not find a slave, so he himself ran before a previously wealthy man's carriage for three miles!⁴ Hillel obviously understood that if 'the boy would fall, he would break'.

Just like that rich man, children born into a high-level service delivery perceive all of their wants as survival basics. That's why their withdrawal symptoms can be acutely dramatic when they don't get their 'fix' on time. It's hard enough as parents dealing with their unrealistic expectations and their constant need for stimulus. Imagine the spouses that will have to put up with their sense of entitlement. Worse than that, let us not imagine the divorces that might result from our culture of immediate obsolescence and, worse yet, the marriages that may never come about.

KEEP IT SIMPLE, SMARTY

The good news is that we have powerful tools to raise happy children, even

while surrounded by this maelstrom. The strategy is simple; in fact, it is simplicity itself – literally. Dr Tal Ben-Shahar, professor of psychology at Harvard, in his book, *Choose the Life You Want: The Mindful Way to Happiness* speaks about savouring life itself. Even the most delicious food in the world can give no enjoyment if we devour it without appreciation. Our children must hear us expressing our gratitude for the simple blessings of life, and not hear us moan about its inescapable tribulations and frustrations.

Drawing on a decade's worth of empirical data, Ben-Shahar concludes that happiness comes not from possessing material things, but from pursuing positive experiences as simple as playing ball with our children or enjoying a family meal. The price tag of these moments is low, yet they are truly priceless.

The greatest gift we can give our children is to introduce them to the inexhaustible fountainhead of their own re-

sourcefulness. The wellspring of the self never runs dry. Our children are being conditioned by society to become dependent on external stimuli and entertainments to save them from the dread of a moment's boredom. When we encourage them to discover and develop their intrinsic talents and skills, they will find an ever renewable free source of energy.

The late Rabbi Avrohom Pam, z"l, suggests that children should be made aware that life has unexpected changes and that the blessings they have become accustomed to are not guaranteed. Better yet, he advises, even in good times, one should accustom them to a simple lifestyle.⁵ It's easy to climb

up, but very hard to climb down. And if they fall, they might break.

Children who are raised with the values of self-sufficiency and low expectations will be gifted with the resilience they will require to weather the storms of life. **■**

¹Steve Lohr, "For Impatient Web Users, an Eye Blink Is Just Too Long to Wait", *NY Times*, Feb 29, 2012 <http://tinyurl.com/o9q63ys>

²Ibid.

³Devarim 15:8

⁴Talmud Kesubos 67b

⁵Rabbi Shalom Smith, *Successful Parenting: Practical Insights and Timely Advice from Rav Pam zt"l on the topic of Chinuch Habonim*, pg. 7 (Brooklyn: Shuvu Pub., 2009)



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The Yomtovim are here and the end of year is near and we are looking forward to our holidays, especially the kids, grandchildren, nieces and nephews; but sadly there are many kids whose parents cannot afford a holiday, or who desperately need a break.

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