

# Disconnected Parents

- Basil Herring.

A study concluded that the reason school reform has failed is to be found not in the schools but in the homes from which the kids come. Parents have become disengaged and disconnected from their children.

This past May, Susan and Anthony Provenzano were found guilty, and fined, on charges of a criminal misdemeanor. Their crime? Failing to control their 16 year old son Alex, who was known to have smoked marijuana, drank hard liquor, cursed his mother, attacked his father with a golf club, committed burglary with stolen guns and knives, and stealing \$3500 from the Church his family attends. Why, you may ask, were these parents punished for the sins of their child? The answer is that the prosecution showed to the satisfaction of the jury, that the Provenzano parents had failed to discipline their son, cared little about his daily activities, and did not even know what his school grades were. And so they were found guilty in accordance with new laws enacted in many towns and cities across the country in recent years, by which states and municipalities have attempted to control the explosive growth of criminal activity among the young. How? By holding parents fully responsible for their children's juvenile delinquency, if it is judged to be the result of parents' failing to impose the necessary discipline on their kids, or simply because they are too distant or "disconnected" from their children's lives.

And as if to back up that jury on the subject of parental influence and responsibility, just 3 weeks ago prominent researchers announced the findings of a massive 10 year study, involving 20,000 high school students, that sought to understand why school reform in this country has largely failed, and why so many teenagers have such poor academic records, together with such negative attitudes toward learning, in spite of the billions of dollars spent in recent years in attempts to improve the nation's schools, curricula, and teachers. The real problem, and its likely solution, they concluded, are not to be found in the schools, but in the homes from which the kids come. As Dr. Lawrence Steinberg of Temple University put it, "parents have become seriously disengaged, or disconnected, from their children's lives." For instance, half the teens said that they could bring home grades of C or worse without upsetting their parents, one third said their parents had no idea how they were doing in school, 40% said their parents never attended school programs, and only 1 in 3 students reported having daily conversations with their parents, on any subject whatsoever. Not surprisingly, interviews with the parents themselves revealed that half did not know their children's friends, what their children did after school, or where they went at night.

Why is this so? Even if it is true that not all families are like the Provenzano's and their son, why are so many parents these days so apparently out of the picture of their teenage children's lives, with such debilitating effect on the kids in the first place, but on society at large as well? One answer, at least to my mind, is that this is but another manifestation of the larger problem, namely, the shrinking scope, as well as impact, of family life, and its ongoing decline as the fundamental, and indispensable, building block of our society. When the family fabric is vitiated, when, as so often happens, parents and children no longer eat together on a daily basis, nor talk to each other, share their problems, know what the other doing, or engage in shared activities,

inevitably there are incalculable consequences not just for that family, but for the community and society. The Democrats will forgive me, and I do not wish, or mean, to endorse a candidate or a party, but on this score the Republicans are correct: to raise a child, it does not a village take, but rather a family. And no amount of government intervention, no level of communal support, or expanded social services, can make up for strong parental involvement, by a caring, involved, father and mother, at every step of the way, in nurturing and shepherding a child from the cradle to adulthood. When parents think, as apparently so many do, for whatever reason, that once a child leaves elementary school the responsibility for managing their child's education shifts to the schools, it is no wonder that the schools cannot begin to cope with the consequences of such parental abdication, and no surprise that instead of parental priorities, it is those of the kids' peers and friends, not to speak of the street values, those that they pick up from Steinfeld or Hollywood, rock music or the likes of Calvin Klein, that become the key influences, that mold and define a negative attitude towards academic excellence and social responsibility.

Now it is precisely such a scenario that can be found in a fascinating passage in this morning's parshah, buried deep within the Torah's litany of woe that will befall the Jewish people in exile: Banecha u-venotecha netunim le'am acher, ve'einecha ro'ot, ve'chalot aleihem kol hayom, ve'ein la'el yadecha.

Your sons and daughters will be given over to another people, and your eyes will constantly seek them out to bring them back, but to no avail. Deut. 28:32

The usual explanation of these words, conjures up the image of young Jewish men and women carted off to slavery and foreign domination, pitiful victims of the invading barbarians who will attack the Jewish commonwealth, depose its leadership, plunder its wealth, and wreak havoc on its citizenry, as in those scenes engraved since 70 C.E. on the Arch of Titus in Rome. But that is not how Rabbi Menachem Benzion Sachs interprets the verse. For, as he points out, a few verses later, the Torah states that "you will bear children, but they will not be yours, for they will go into captivity." It does not say that they will be "taken (yukchu) into slavery," but they will "go (yelchu) into slavery," i.e., they will choose to subject themselves to the control of others, by way of conformity to the values and priorities of strangers. That result, says Rabbi Sachs, is the consequence of the parental abdication described in our verse, whereby parents "give over" to others the responsibility for molding and shaping the contours of their children's behavior patterns. But when in due course the children turn out to engage in behavior that brings shame or distress to their parents, and parental eyes, to their chagrin, behold what time and tide have wrought, it's too late to turn back the clock. For by then, those kids are under other auspices, gladly submitting to the peer pressure, group conformity, and the ever-growing expectations, and demands, of the contemporary youth culture. In other words, the verse teaches us that kids don't just go off on their own by default; their parents must first give them over to others, by distancing or disengaging themselves from the lives and loves of their offspring.

Which brings me in turn, on a personal note, to the happy occasion of David's Barmitzvah, as he officially becomes a teenager today! For even though some may be under the impression that when a boy becomes a Bar Mitzvah, and is halakhically an adult, his parents are somehow no longer responsible for his further Jewish education—nothing could be further from the truth. All of the sources, be it the Gemara Kiddush, the Rambam, the Shulchan Arukh, or the various poskim, are unanimous on one point: throughout the teenage years, a parent retains the

responsibility to continue a teenager's Torah education, and character development. Indeed, according to the Turei Even, the Torah obligation to teach one's offspring Torah only begins after their Barmitzvah! And beyond Torah per se, the Mishnah Berurah and others make it clear that there remains a clear parental duty to maintain discipline and provide effective guidance, up to the age of 24, as it says in Proverbs 22:6, *chanoch la'na'ar al pi darko*, "initiate a young man, in accordance with his path."

As a parent of teenagers, how well do I know the seduction of being able to say "David, from here on you are the master of your own fate, you make your own decisions, and we'll support you because we love you so much." But that is not the Torah's way, not the Jewish way. And so, for better or for worse— poor kid—our responsibility for you, now that you are a teenager, will, if anything, be the greater, not the lesser, and notwithstanding the "baruch she-ptarani" that I recited this morning.

In conclusion then, such are the lessons that are to be learnt, not just by ourselves as parents, but by society at large, in facing up to the enormous challenges involved in raising a new generation of youngsters to assume their proper place in our families and social structures, to maintain our cherished traditions, to be true to our fondest aspirations, and to bring nothing but credit and honor upon us and our heritage, as Americans, as Jews, and, hopefully as true Bnei Torah, them and us, committed to the continuity of Jewish life, and the sanctification of God's name. It is surely not an easy task, and the demands and stresses of child-rearing seem to grow, not to diminish, with every passing year. But it is a duty that it is our privilege to embrace, charged as we are with the glorious responsibility to hand over the torch of Torah and *Derekh Eretz*, that we were vouchsafed by our own parents, to our children in turn, to reach that day, in the words of Isaiah in our Haftarah, as read by our Barmitzvah teenager today, that "our sons will come home from far away places, and our daughters to be borne aloft, even as our hearts will throb" with joy and pleasure, and the generations are reunited in a glorious embrace of blessing and peace, for us, for Israel, and for all mankind