

Developing *Middos*: Learned or Experienced?

By Benzion Sorotzkin, Psy.D.

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When Hillel was asked to summarize the Torah in one sentence, he proclaimed: "*Di'lach sani, lechavrach lo savid* ---- What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor; the rest is commentary."¹ This is the minimum level of *chessed*: do not harm others. A higher level is expounded by Rav Akiva in his famous statement: " '*Ve'ahavta lere'acha kamocho, zeh klal gadol baTorah* - Love your neighbor as yourself'; this is the great principle of the Torah."² It is clear from this that violations of *mitzvos bein adam lechaveiro* (*mitzvos* that govern interpersonal relationships) are at least as objectionable, as those *bein adam laMakom* (between man and *Hashem*). Parents who are sensitive to this point put in a great deal of effort to teach their children *middos* (ethical character traits). It is the purpose of this essay to determine the most effective means by which we can develop positive character traits in our children.

How are *Middos* Taught?

Clearly, the importance of *middos* has to be stressed as part of formal instruction both at home and at school. The deleterious effect of living in surroundings where "everything goes," and a culture that fails to uphold even minimal standards of moral behavior, can be observed in contemporary Western society. At the same time, by stressing formal instruction, we run the risk of overlooking other avenues of indirect influence that often have a stronger and more lasting impact than direct instruction.

The most powerful form of indirect influence is the example parents set by their own behavior, especially in their conduct toward their children. "Children learn by example" has become a cliché as unassailable as motherhood and apple pie. In practice, however, few parents or teachers are truly comfortable relying on this "indirect" method of instruction.

Recently, a young father came over to me at a simcha and asked, "At what age should you start disciplining a child?" "Discipline starts when a child understands the words 'yes' and 'no'," I responded.

Realizing that this was not likely to be a purely academic question, I asked him how old his child was. "Four," he answered. "What is your specific need for disciplining him?" I asked. "I need to teach him to say 'please' and 'thank you'," he explained. "Then it is a matter of instilling middos, rather than disciplining," I answered. "And in that case, I would ask: Do you say 'please' and 'thank you' to your son?"

He was taken aback by this question, but gave it some thought. "I'm not sure, but probably not," was his honest response.

Although he seemed to understand my point, he could not fully accept the idea of forgoing the use of direct instruction or any degree of pressure, and to have faith in the power of setting an example.

Learning by Living

It is difficult to have faith in the indirect influence of setting an example. Many parents feel they are being derelict in their duty of being *mechanech* (educating) their children if they are not actively and forcefully instructing (or perhaps they are not confident in the example they are setting). From the words of *Chazal*, however, we see that indirect influence is the most effective means of educational influence.³

The *Midrash* states that Moshe had ten names: "*Yered*" because he brought down the Torah to the world; "*Chever*" because he united the children with their Father, etc. *Hashem* told Moshe that He will call him only by the name given to him by Basya, the daughter of Pharaoh, i.e. Moshe".⁴

Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz asks: Why did *Hashem* choose to call Moshe by the one name that seems to least reflect his greatness? In fact, this name does not even reflect something that Moshe did. Rather, it relates only to what Pharaoh's daughter did, "*Ki min hamayim mishisihu*-For I drew him from the water."

Rav Chaim explains that since Pharaoh's daughter saved Moshe with *mesiras nefesh* (at the risk of her life), this character trait of being devoted to others became part of Moshe's personality.⁵ It does not say that Moshe received lessons in self-sacrifice, nor is there evidence that he won first prize in a "devotion to others" contest.⁶ The major contributing factor was that he himself was raised with self-sacrifice.

Likewise, Rav Chaim continues, the *Talmud Yerushalmi* states that we learn that *Yidden* have the character trait of compassion for others from "*Veshamar Hashem Elokecha lecha es habris ve'es hachessed*- (Hashem will safeguard for you the covenant and kindness that He swore to your forefathers.)"⁷ The *Torah Temimah* asks the obvious question: How can you learn about a characteristic of the *Yidden* from a verse describing how *Hashem* treats them? Here, too, Rav Chaim explains that since *Hashem* treats the *Yidden* with kindness, this virtue becomes absorbed in their national character. By treating His children with kindness, Hashem is, in effect, presenting them with this character trait as a gift.⁸

We also see from *Chazal* that people (and even nations!) develop negative traits by being treated negatively. The apathy of *Amalek* is attributed to the coldness with which *Timna*, the "mother" of *Amalek*, was rejected by the *Avos*.⁹

From this we can conclude that the primary means of instilling the attribute of kindness in children is not by training them to say "thank you," etc.! Rather, one **treats them** with kindness (perhaps by saying "thank you" to them, etc.), and that instills this trait into their essence.¹⁰ In a recent business article, the successful owner of a chain of restaurants describes his version of a trickle-down "*middos*" program: "My goal is to perfect a model of hospitality that starts with the way I treat my staff."

Teaching by Example

Some schools (and parents) pride themselves in "teaching" *middos* by using contests, essays, prizes and even punitive measures (!) to promote and encourage polite behavior. How effective are such tools if a teacher in one of these schools is not sufficiently careful to exemplify *middos* when he or she speaks to a student? If he or she insults, "puts down" or embarrasses a student in front of others? Or if he or she "just" fails to treat his students with respect? Here again, while everyone knows the cliché that "Do as I say and not as I do" is an ineffective means of instruction, this knowledge is not always internalized.¹¹ One reason for this may be the fact that some adults are convinced that the *halochos* regulating interpersonal relationships do not apply to how an adult treats a child (especially their own child, or student). This idea is clearly contrary to *halacha*.¹²

Rav Pam spoke for the Chofetz Chaim Heritage Foundation on the subject of *onaas devarim* (hurtful speech). Making it clear that this Torah prohibition also applies to teachers and parents, Rav Pam said: "Many children can be turned off from *Yiddishkeit* because of verbal mistreatment, either from parents or from teachers if they use sarcasm or public insults in class.... This is all included in the prohibition of *ona'as devarim*, which is part of the same negative prohibition as *lashon hara* (gossip, slander)."

Similarly, Rav Moshe Feinstein was asked if a teacher is permitted to ask his students to identify the student who misbehaved (to "snitch" in the vernacular). Rav Moshe responded that for a teacher to do so would be abhorrent, since it teaches the students to take lightly the prohibition of speaking *lashon hara*.¹³

Some educators were not comfortable giving up this well-used, direct "educational" tool. They wrote to Rav Moshe questioning his ruling based on their contention that the teacher's intention is to influence the student to stop transgressing. It seems that they could not understand how an educator could forgo a direct and "certain" educational tool (exposing and punishing the culprit) for the sake of what they perhaps saw as a dubious gain, i.e., setting an example of not encouraging *lashon hara*.

Rav Moshe responded in no uncertain terms that the concern of setting a negative example outweighs any other "educational" consideration.¹⁴ Rav Moshe makes it clear that setting the right example takes precedence over the teacher's desire to "instruct" or reprimand the student. Unfortunately, due to the zeal with which some teachers and parents approach their task of teaching an offending child to behave properly, they become oblivious to the damage they are causing by the example they are setting. Telling a child to speak *lashon hara* will **inevitably** cause the child to become insensitive to this *aveirah*. The teacher's intentions and justifications have no mitigating effect on this negative influence.

Similarly, Rav Moshe¹⁵ comments on the *Midrash* that is critical of *Avraham Avinu* for sending his son to get water for his guests instead of getting it himself. Asks Rav Moshe; perhaps *Avraham* was trying to train his son in the *mitzvah* of *hachnassas orchim* (hospitality)? To this Rav Moshe answers, that if someone wants to educate his son in a *mitzvah*, the most effective method is for the son to observe his father performing the *mitzvah*, rather than having the father instruct his son to perform the *mitzvah*!

Teaching Children to Daven

Another arena where the conflict between setting an example and direct instruction is often played out is in parents' attempts to teach children to *daven*. An all too common sight in many *shuls* is a father raising his voice, reprimanding, or even hitting his son to get him to *daven*, or perhaps "only" directing his head toward the *Siddur*, in an effort to be *mechanech* him in the importance of *davening*.

This approach has been severely criticized by many *gedolim*. Rabbi Hillel Goldberg relates an incident involving Rav Yitzchok Hutner. He had observed a father disciplining his son to *daven*. Every time the child would get up or divert his attention, the father sternly redirected him. It was a battle.

"What are you doing?" Rav Hutner asked the father.

"I'm teaching my son to *daven*!" answered the father.

"No, you're not," said Rav Hutner. "You're teaching your son to grow up to tell his own son to be quiet, to sit down, to pay attention,... If you want to teach your son to *daven*, then *daven*!"¹⁶

Similarly, Rav Shlomo Wolbe is critical of parents who force a child to *daven*, thus inducing a superficial form of devotion devoid of any emotional connection. "These parents will be held responsible for making *davening* a burden for their child," cautions Rav Wolbe.¹⁷

In spite of this criticism - and notwithstanding that anyone who bothers to investigate the matter can clearly see that this approach is counterproductive - it remains widely practiced. Why? I would suggest the following reasons.

1) Parents who use this approach tend to be poor *daveners* themselves.¹⁸ They are therefore, paradoxically but predictably, more intolerant of normal deficiencies in their children's *davening* (*kol haposel be'mumo posel*).

I was in a shul during Kabolos Shabbos. A man behind me was loudly discussing the stock market with his neighbor. This man noticed his eleven-year-old son, who was sitting a few rows ahead, quietly exchanging a few words with his friend. The father

emitted a shout, demanding that his son sit next to him so he (the father) could make sure that his son davens properly! What is even more amazing, is that after the son took the seat next to his father, and the father made sure that his son had his eyes on his Siddur, the father resumed his conversation with his neighbor!... I am fairly certain that if the father reads this article, he would have no idea that I am describing his behavior.

2) People who tend to see things superficially think that as long as they get their child to act properly (e.g. to *daven* or to act politely), then it does not really matter how the child feels about the matter.¹⁹ They are also unable to appreciate the indirect and subtle influence of setting an example.

3) The lack of appreciation of the process of natural development causes some parents to overreact to what is essentially normal (mis)behavior for the child's age.²⁰ Some parents are not cognizant that a happy, well-adjusted child who is not pressured, and who sees his father *davening* solemnly, will in due time also develop the ability and inclination to *daven* seriously. Instead, they fear "If I don't put a stop to it (e.g. not davening properly) now, he'll *daven* this way when he's an adult!"

4) Another factor is the lack of appreciation for the damage being caused by their own punitive behavior toward their children. They are unaware that they are inculcating in their children negative attitudes toward *davening*, and that they are harming their relationship with their child, which is the basis of all *chinuch*.²¹

In addition, they are setting an example of embarrassing someone (in this case, their children) in public, and other harmful *middos*. Even if there was some benefit to this method of discipline, it would certainly be a case of *yatza secharo behefseido* (losing more than one gains). This problem is exacerbated by the belief of some parents that, when dealing with their own children, their proprietorship rights exempt them from the usual obligations of *middos* that apply to their interactions with others. It is as if they say to themselves, "It is only my own wishes, interests and needs that matter. My children must subordinate their needs to mine without resentment. In fact, it must be their pleasure to do so."²²

5) Even when there is a need for direct intervention and direction, they are unaware of, or not willing to avail themselves of, more effective means of instruction. One can use a glance, a gentle comment, or a friendly pat on the cheek to redirect a child's attention to his *Siddur* without creating negative feelings.

Middos or Politeness?

A related problem is when we evaluate a child's level of *middos* development by external criteria - e.g., politeness.

A young man related how he proudly told his *Rosh Yeshiva* about the efforts he invested in teaching his children to be polite. To his dismay, the *Rosh Yeshiva* was not impressed. "The Nazis *y"ms* were also polite," he reminded the father.

When we try to develop *middos* in our children (or in ourselves, for that matter), we need to have a clear understanding of the essence of the *middos* and not focus merely on its external manifestations.²³

For example, some people agree to do extraordinary acts of *chessed* even when they strongly resent having to do it. They feel compelled to do so in order to gain approval in the eyes of others. This compulsion is especially strong in those with poor self-esteem. This can cause them to resent the person they are doing *chessed* for, which undermines the whole purpose of doing *chessed*.²⁴ True *chessed*, on the other hand, comes from the expansion of a satisfied self to include others,²⁵ as we see by the *Ribbono Shel Olam*, who is a *tov*, *virotzeh leheiteiv* - the essence of good, and wants to do good.

A person who feels deprived, either for emotional reasons or because his environment is under the influence of *middas*

hadin, will find it difficult to attain true *chessed*.²⁶ A child who has difficulty sharing, in spite of being raised in an environment where sharing is an important value, is, most likely, an unhappy child.²⁷ Conversely, if we treat children with kindness, we make it easier for them to treat others with proper *middos*. When parents set an example of respectful interpersonal behavior in their relationship with their children, the positive impact of their formal instructions in *middos* is tremendously enhanced.

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1) *Shabbos* 31a.

2) *Yerushalmi Nedarim* 89:4, See *Michtav MeEliyahu* Vol. 3 p. 88.

3) See also Rabbi Matis Roberts, "Whisper Above the Roar: Making the Case for Subtlety," *Jewish Observer*, April 1998.

4) Midrash Rabbah, reish Vayikra

5) See *Sichos Musser (Siman 60 - 5732:25)*: "Whenever one person endows another with a *middah*, the recipient becomes enriched beyond any reckoning."

6) It is not my intention to question the usefulness of these teaching tools; rather, it is to emphasize the importance of setting an example in addition to direct instruction.

7) *Devarim* 7:12; *Yerushalmi Sanhedrin* 6:7.

8) Since, as Rav Chaim points out, attributes such as feelings of love can be instilled even into inanimate objects, it is obvious that this process is of a *ruchniyus* nature rather than a cognitive one.

9) *Sichos Musser (Siman 96 - 5731:31)*. A well-known Rosh Yeshiva was once asked at a meeting for parents and educators in regard to rebellious youngsters: "How can these youngsters have no consideration for the pain they are causing their parents?" He responded, "Apparently, these parents showed little consideration for the pain they caused their children."

10) These words of *Chazal*, as explained by Rav Chaim, should reassure those parents who become excessively worried that being "too nice" to their children will cause them to become spoiled.

11) See *Orchas Ish (Chazon Ish)* p. 142 regarding how students absorb more from their *Rebbi's* actions than from his lectures; and p. 143 for comments regarding the harmful effect of punitive demotion. Also: According to Rav S. R. Hirsch, "Demanding honor and obedience from our children without granting them respect and dignity in return, is doomed to failure" *Yesodoch Hachinuch*, Vol. 1 (cited by C. Juravel "Reclaiming Aspiration" in, *Timeless Parenting*, (Rabbi N. Wolpin Ed.) Mesorah Pub., Brooklyn, NY, 2000, pp. 221-222).

12) See *Choshen Mishpat* 420:37; *Minchas Chinuch, Mitzvah* 338; *Sefer Chassidim* #565. and footnote 22.

13) *Igros Moshe* Y.D. II 103.

14) *Igros Moshe* Y.D. IV 30. In a personal conversation (Shevat 5759) with the author, Rav Dovid Feinstein indicated that there are situations where Rav Moshe would have permitted asking students to inform on their peers, (e.g., to find out which child has been playing with matches). Even in such a situation, however, every effort should be made to minimize the damage of asking children to speak *lashon hara*. He suggested having the *Rebbi* speak to the whole class about the problem without asking for the name of the culprit, or asking the *talmidim* to try to convince the perpetrator to come over on his own to the *Rebbi* to discuss his problem (perhaps by promising not to punish him). These suggestions obviously work best when the *Rebbi* establishes a close, non-threatening, warm relationship with his *talmidim*.

15) *Dorash Moshe, Vayerah* 18:4.

16) *The Jewish Parent Connection*, Vol. 3, No. 5, 1995, p. 14.

17) See Rav Wolbe's *Zeriah Ubinyan Bechinuch*, p. 46: "Tefillah should be a Jew's *neshamah*. If one forces a child to daven in a superficially habitual manner, perhaps striking the child if he doesn't *daven*, he makes him despise *tefillah*. Ultimately, he will feel no inner connection with *tefillah*, and the fault will lie with his parents who forced him to *daven* before he was ready."

18) See *ibid*, p. 30.

19) This approach is often defended by quoting the *Sefer Hachinuch*: "A person is influenced by his actions." However, it is clear that this is effective primarily when the gap between the behavior and the person's true level is not too wide (See the *Sifsei Chaim, Moadim*, Vol. 2, p. 346, also quoted in the "Shidduchim" article, in the "Prevention" section). Another frequent objection to the "indirect" approach is from the *pasuk* in *Mishlei - Chosech shivto sonei b'no* - he who spares the rod hates the child. An extensive and very enlightening explanation of the true meaning of this *pasuk* can be found in the *Alei Shur* (Vol. 1, p. 261) and in *Zeriah Ubinyan Bechinuch* (pp. 23-27) from Rav Shlomo Wolbe. From this discussion it is clear that the *pasuk* is criticizing those who refrain from disciplining their children due to neglect or lack of interest. The *pasuk* is not recommending a specific form of punishment, which would depend on the infraction, and the age and temperament of the child. Rav Wolbe states that, in this generation, one is not permitted to hit a child over the age of three. (See also *Pardes Yosef, Beshalach*, p. 120, and *Atara L'melech* from Rav Pam, p. 176). In *Shimusha Shel Torah*, Rav Shach states that success in *chinuch* is primarily due to a positive relationship between a student and teacher. The *mechanech* must exert himself to find the way to be loved by his students, says Rav Shach (p. 148). The point of the *pasuk* is to find the most effective means for achieving our *chinuch* goals.

20) [I heard quoted in the name of Rav Yaacov Kaminetzky that there is no need to be *mechanech* a child in regard to behaviors that are normal for his age and that children naturally grow out of]. Rav Wolbe (*ibid*, p. 16) criticizes parents who demand that their young children sit at the *Shabbos* table throughout the long meal. "This is impossible for a young child," declares Rav Wolbe. Some parents, however, interpret their child's resistance to remaining at the table as a sign of rebelliousness. Recent studies (e.g., Z. Strassberg, *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, 1997 [25], 209-215) indicate that aggressive children tend to have parents who are excessively punitive. This behavior on the part of the parents is often prompted by inaccurate and overly harsh judgments as to how non-compliant their child actually is. If a parent tells a playing child to prepare for bed and the child merely politely requests additional playing time, the parent will interpret this request as reflective of *chutzpah* and non-compliance. But an even stronger factor influencing their reaction is their tendency to attribute negative intent to the child's behavior. So the child's request for additional play time is attributed to defiant intentions ("He wants to be in control, he's being manipulative") and/or to

retaliatory intentions ("He's trying to get even with me").

[21](#)) See Rav Wolbe's *Alei Shur*, Vol. 1, p. 260: "It is parents who establish the bond between their children and *Torah*. Only the deep connection between parents and children directs children onto the *derech Hashem*."

[22](#)) See *Zeriah Ubinyan Bechinuch*, by Rav Shlomo Wolbe, p. 28: "We frequently find parents who take actions toward their children, ostensibly for educational purpose, when in fact, the true motivation is purely egoistic. At times, the parents act toward their children with totally unacceptable *middos*, behavior that would be considered reprehensible in any other interpersonal context. i.e., jealousy, hate, anger, pride and especially the need for power. [The parent feels] 'My child is my possession and I am entitled to rule over him in an absolute manner. He is my 'object' and his mission in life is to serve my needs.' " Likewise, the *Sefer Habris*, (Section II, 13:16) states: "There are people who are careful not to hurt anyone's feelings; in fact, they treat everyone with love. Yet they hurt their own children's feelings. They say that 'this behavior isn't sinful since *Hashem* put them in my hands and He compelled them to accept my discipline - as it says 'Honor your father....,' and my intention is to discipline them in the ways of the Torah.' But, in truth, their words are neither logical nor according to the Torah, for why should their children not be included in the commandment of 'love your neighbor as yourself?'. The truth is that . one is punished more severely for hurting a relative, and therefore one who unjustly causes pain to his own child will be punished more harshly."

[23](#)) See *Ohr Gedalyahu (Moadim)*, pp. 28-31) from Rav Gedalia Schorr. Both *Shem* and *Yeffes* did the same compassionate, respectful deed of covering *Noach*. Yet *Shem* was rewarded with the promise of *Hashem's* Presence, while *Yeffes* was only rewarded with the external beauty of art and culture. This is because *Yeffes* was motivated to cover his father by external factors, e.g., "What will the neighbors say!" and so his reward was external. *Shem*, by contrast, was motivated by intrinsic reasons and so he was rewarded with the gift of intrinsic value. Rav Schorr emphasizes the destructiveness of beauty that is only external. In a similar vein, Rabbi Yissocher Frand (in his insightful tape on the root causes of *lashon hara*) quotes the *Shem MeShmuel* that if you criticize someone because of an "external" fault, it shows where you yourself are holding, i.e., in a status of superficiality.

[24](#)) See *Peninay Rabbeinu HaKehilos Yaacov*, p. 38, wherein the Steipler Rav cautions us not to be [overly] impressed with external manifestations of *chessed*, since it may not reflect true inner feelings of *chessed*. (In fact, extreme examples of "*chessed*" behavior, as in the incident the Steipler referred to, may mask underlying negative feelings.)

[25](#)) *Sichos Musser* (Siman 41 - 5731:23); *Alei Shur*, Vol. 1, p. 255; *Michtav MeEliyahu*, Vol. 1, p. 37, and Vol. 2, p. 89.

[26](#)) *Michtav MeEliyahu*, Vol. 1 p. 236.

[27](#)) Rabbi Frand (in the tape cited above) points out that the main victim of *lashon hara* is the speaker, since it makes him into a negative person who always sees the bad in others and in events. Such a person, Rabbi Frand continues, is also likely to be very critical of his children, since he also only sees the negative in them. I would add that this phenomenon of being critical of children is not only the result of being a negative person, but also the cause. As Rabbi Frand points out, the reason there is such a *yetzer hara* to speak *lashon hara* is because it helps insecure people with low self-esteem temporarily feel better about themselves. A child who is always being criticized by a negative parent will become insecure and develop poor self-esteem and will, therefore, also grow up with a strong *yetzer hara* to speak *lashon hara*

Email comments to Dr. Sorotzkin at comments@drsorotzkin.com

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