

Helping Your Talmidim Love Mitzvos, Part 1

Every Jew's relationship to mitzvos exists somewhere on a spectrum of meaning. On one end is the view of mitzvos as a long list of rules, devoid of any profound significance. On the other end of the spectrum is the view of mitzvos as infinitely precious opportunities to connect to our Creator. Children's entire lives are circumscribed by rules. Without guidance, it is natural for children to relate to mitzvos as nothing more than rules, rather than as opportunities for growth. Children have little control over their lives and are conditioned to follow rules regardless of whether they appreciate or understand their function.

There are four main keys to getting your talmidim to love and appreciate mitzvos: teaching the context of the mitzvos, explaining the benefits of mitzvos, showing that you love mitzvos, and making mitzvos pleasurable.

Teach the Context to Mitzvos

One of the most critical ways to give your talmidim an appreciation for the mitzvos is to teach them the significance and context of their actions. Teach them - on whatever level they can understand - the meaning of the mitzvos they perform. Bring up mitzvos that are performed daily and try to give your talmidim a broader sense of the importance of their actions. They should understand that every mitzvah is meaningful, and is a vital part of a cosmic mission. Explore the reasons and benefits of each mitzvah in as much detail as they can understand. Once someone understands the reasons behind their actions, those actions are automatically imbued with far more significance than an act performed without comprehension.

Show the Benefits of Mitzvos

One of the keys to making your talmidim appreciate mitzvos is to demonstrate their benefits. Talmidim must feel that performing mitzvos is advantageous to them in the "here and now." Yiddishkeit can feel like a burden to some talmidim, and a promise of reward far in the future is just not enough to motivate them to act.

Rabbi Shaya Cohen writes: "When I was a child, a pressure cooker exploded in my grandparent's kitchen, intensely burning my grandmother. I was a small child, but I will never forget my grandmother's reaction. She spent several weeks in bed, recovering from her burns.

Whenever the pain would bite into her, she would repeat to herself, "in yeneh velt svet zein gliklalch (it will all be good/happy in the next world.)" It was that phrase that comforted her through her pain, and in my young mind I understood that she looked at life from a unique perspective. To my grandmother, life was transient and fleeting, no matter the pain - all that really mattered was what will happen in yeneh velt. I remember being struck by that worldview. I was not interested in waiting for my entire lifetime to finally reap the benefits of Yiddishkeit in the next world. While my grandmother is, of course, correct - what really matters is The Next World - it was a difficult concept for me to comprehend. As I grew older, I realized that what had bothered my younger self about her approach represented a fundamental psychological truth about children: Children value the present. A child will resist Yiddishkeit if it is presented as an investment that only pays dividends in the next world. For children to appreciate our heritage, they must feel that the joy and happiness of Yiddishkeit are readily accessible in this world."

To address this present-oriented mindset, teachers should continuously point out to their talmidim the ability for each of them to develop a relationship with Hashem in this world. As this relationship develops, they will begin to realize all the amazing acts of hashgacha pratit that occur during their daily lives. Continuously stress the chesed of Hashem and how it impacts our lives. Every week, ask your talmidim to relate events from their lives for which they are grateful to Hashem. We all want to experience happiness in this world, and if you want your talmidim to be passionate about Yiddishkeit, you must inculcate them with the sense that Hashem loves them and is actively and positively involved in their lives.

Adapted from "Impassioned Chinuch"
by Rabbi Shaya Cohen