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Shabbat Schmooze at the Nursery School



Bo for Tots: The Importance of Keeping Our Promises

BO, EXODUS 10:1–13:16

Such disappointment! In the preceding *parashah*, seven of the ten plagues were brought upon Egypt. Here in *Parashat Bo*, the remaining three are carried out. Despite plague after plague, raising their hope of freedom, time after time the Israelites were disappointed, and each time they became more wary and less trusting. Who can blame them? Anyone who has had the experience of promises being made-promises that are ultimately dashed-knows just how dispiriting and awful it can be. In *Parashat Bo*, Pharaoh breaks his word time after time, promising freedom and then taking it back.

Parenting is all about keeping your word, both in positive and negative situations. Whether we promise a treat for something well done or a consequence for misbehavior, the way we follow through is an important lesson for our children. The value we place on keeping our own word contributes greatly to the way our children learn to value keeping their word. Imagine guiding your child repeatedly through a field of tall grass. Each time this experience is repeated, you take the same path. This is not unlike every time you make a promise. By keeping that promise, an important value you hold as a parent, your child will follow you through that field with confidence and trust. Over time, with repeated moments, a clear and easy path develops, just as your child's character develops.

Early childhood is a time when predictability is central to establishing feelings of safety and security. When things happen as children expect them to, they develop confidence in the workings of their environment. Another hallmark of this stage of life is that learning is relationship-based. The closest

relationships young children have are typically with their parents. At this time in life, the parent/child relationship is at the core of learning. Learning to trust ones' parents is the first and biggest step in learning to trust others and the world around them.

As with all things, disappointments will happen. Circumstances change and we can't always do what we say we will. When play dates are cancelled or grandparents can't visit after all, parents, as bearers of the bad news, can be accused of not keeping their word. If your children haven't yet exclaimed, "But you promised!", don't worry-they will! When this happens, share your own feelings about not being able to keep your word. It is helpful for kids to know that you, too, are disappointed, and although they might not believe it at this point, it doesn't hurt to let them know that not everything is under your control. As time goes along, the promises that are kept will far outweigh the disappointments and reveal the value you place on being trustworthy.

Keeping your word applies not only to things that your kids may be looking forward to but also to things they may want to avoid. As we mentioned earlier, it is just as important to keep your promises regarding consequences as it is to keep your promises regarding rewards. Thinking carefully about the reality of consequences that you set for your children *before* you announce them can go a long way toward maintaining their effectiveness. In *Parashat Bo*, Moses not only threatened Pharaoh with the plagues but also "held out his arm" to bring them forth. Plague after plague, the Egyptians and the Israelites see a threat made and a consequence carried out. This demonstration is part of the plan that God has in delivering the Israelites from bondage. In the beginning of the *parashah*, God tells Moses: "... I have hardened his heart and the hearts of his courtiers, in order that I may display these My signs among them... in order that you may know that I am the Eternal." (Exodus 10:1-2) In *Parashat Bo*, the Israelites experience both ends of the promise spectrum. Pharaoh repeatedly breaks his promise of letting them go while God fulfills the promise of liberating them from Egypt. Ultimately, the Israelites are free from Egypt (no longer slaves) and are therefore free to make their own decisions. They gathered everything and moved away from the known to the promised unknown, just as our children will certainly do. If we have shown our children the way through the grassy field of childhood, the path they will choose will be well worn and safe and comfortable.

Questions and Ideas for Parents:

1. Can you remember a childhood experience when an adult in your life didn't keep his/her word? Do you remember how you felt, and how do you feel as you think back on that experience?
2. Have you "threatened" your child/ren with a consequence and then wished you could take it back as soon as it came out of your mouth? What would you do (or did you do) differently the next time?
3. What are your thoughts on the idea of God "hardening" Pharaoh's heart as he faced the plagues?