

# Shabbat Schmooze At the Nursery School



## B'shalach for Tots: Nurturing faith and spirituality in your child's life

B'SHALACH, EXODUS 13:17-17:16

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*And the Eternal One said to Moses, "I will rain down bread for you from the sky, and the people shall go out and gather each day that day's portion-that I may thus test them, to see whether they will follow My instructions or not. But on the sixth day, when they apportion what they have brought in, it shall prove to be double the amount they gather each day."*

(Exodus 16:4-5)

### Questions and Ideas for Parents:

1. To whom do you look to for advice when it comes to disciplining your children?
2. What is your definition of faith?
3. Do you feel it is a parent's responsibility to nurture faith in their children?

Although no doubt challenging at times, disciplining your children is part of the job of parenting. In order to function in society, children (and adults) must learn to play by the rules. Well-known pediatrician T. Barry Brazelton speaks of discipline as teaching. Ideally, we are helping children learn self-discipline.

A lot of learning is involved in the process of discipline, both on the part of the parents and the children. There are experiments, testing, trials (in many ways!) and errors. As these experiences accumulate, mutual understandings are built and roles are clarified.

On the surface, it seems very clear that *Parashat B'shalach* has something to say to us about discipline. God sets up a test for the Israelites to see if they will follow directions. (You'll have to read the rest of the parashah to see what discipline is applied when they don't!) Suffice it to say, the

Israelites are learning about the new relationship they have with God through their experiences in this *parashah*. But digging a little deeper, maybe there is something else that this chapter of the Torah says to us. Perhaps this verse also could (or alternatively) be about faith. It is clear that discipline is a key component of parenting, but what about the development of faith? Is it part of your job as a parent to help your children have faith? What if this is a tough subject for you as an individual to think about? How then do you help your children negotiate this journey? Consider this upon rereading the quoted verse from *Parashat B'shalach*: Perhaps God was in fact NOT testing the Israelites to determine whether they would follow his instructions like obedient children. Instead, perhaps it was part of God's plan to nurture faith in the Israelites, to help them believe that God would provide all they needed.

Let's take a look at a children's literary classic for further guidance and inspiration. One of the most beloved books for young children is called *The Velveteen Rabbit* by Margery Williams, published in 1922 by Doubleday and Company. This is a sweet story about a little boy's stuffed rabbit. Feeling inferior to all the fancier toys in the nursery, toys with moving parts and things that go beep and buzz, the rabbit feels sad and dejected. His only friend is the old, raggedy Skin Horse. Speaking to his friend...

*"What is REAL?" asked the Rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender, before Nana came to tidy the room. "Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?"*

*"Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real."*

There is much more to the story, of course. But one key thing that this book teaches us is that "real" has everything to do with what you believe. When the little boy's caretaker (Nana) grumbles about having to fetch his rabbit, this is what the little boy says:

*"Give me my Bunny!" he said. "You mustn't say that. He isn't a toy. He's REAL!"*

*When the little Rabbit heard that, he was happy, for he knew that what the Skin Horse had said was true at last. The nursery magic had happened to him, and he was a toy no longer. He was Real. The Boy himself had said it.*

Children have an enormous capacity for believing in things that cannot necessarily be seen. Their fertile imaginations are the perfect laboratory for developing and nurturing faith. As parents of young Jewish children, we propose that it is important for parents to help their children develop faith. By doing so, you will give them a spiritual gift that can stay with them throughout their lives, in good

times and in not so good times. And you will help them internalize the central credo of Judaism, a belief in one God.

***Sh'ma Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai echad. Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One.***

Easier said than done, eh? Certainly this could be a subject for a parenting book in its own right, but there are some basic, simple things that you can apply to this subject that you probably are doing already. First, listen to your children's ideas. You don't always have to have an answer; sometimes just a reassuring presence and an ear for their ideas is all they need. Also, do some learning together: Read books, talk to a rabbi or an educator, ask friends about their ideas. Finally, give your children other avenues for expressing their ideas, such as visual art, dance or music. You don't have to be an expert to be a guide. If you are willing to listen, learn and explore with them, then you are well on your way to helping them begin their journey.