

REVIVING

RESPECT
DR. SORA
YAROSLAWITZ
ON PROPER
PARENTING

Large, honking, yellow school buses and minivans line up at angles to each other, squaring off to find a place at the curb in front of the large school building. It is early morning, minutes before the school day starts. A car pulls up to the curb and a neatly uniformed girl hops out, ponytail waving, backpack draped precisely over the shoulder. The mother leans out, waving. “Goodbye, sweetie, have a wonderful day!” she trills. “And make sure to have chicken cutlets ready for me when I come home!” snaps the girl as she joins the rushing crowd.

It is getting dark and the children are still outside, on the block, playing ball as the shadows deepen and the streetlights turn on one by one. A neighbor opens her front door, positions herself on the porch, and calls to her sons, “Time to come in!” After ten minutes of repeated shouts, the sweaty, disheveled boys disgruntledly collect the

ball and come home. As they approach their mother, the older of the two says, sarcastically, “Thanks for ruining my fun, Ma. I can always count on you to be the mother who breaks up the game.”

My friend walks into a family *kiddush*. She looks around and then approaches her married daughters and daughters-in-law. “Do you see what I see?” she asks. “Every adult in the room is standing and every child is sitting! Why is that?” Actually, we didn’t notice. Or think anything of it.

Dr. Sora Yaroslawitz, an occupational therapist who lives in Monsey, New York, feels that the relationship between parents and children has changed. When she was a child, parents were viewed as the ultimate authority and



role model in a child’s life, and children were expected to obey them.

Today, she feels, too many mothers stand by the bus stop in the afternoon, terrified about what the next five hours will bring. “Let’s bring back *kibbud av va’eim!*” she declares.

Parenting is Sora’s passion. She has studied parents and children extensively, earned a DSc (doctor of science), with a specialty in family health, and completed a study on family health in *chareidi* second- and third-generation survivors of the Holocaust.

Through her private practice, teleconferences, mp3s, CDs and, most recently, in a new book, Sora has helped thousands of families parent successfully using scientific principles of behavior that parallel the Torah approach, particularly *kibbud av va’eim*. She is a compelling personality with a compelling mission.

But most of all, she is a parent. She smiles gently as she reflects, “It all started with my daughter, Rochi...”

In the Beginning

At age twenty-three, Sora was a young wife, with a toddler and an almost completed degree in accounting. Then, after a complicated pregnancy, Rochi was born, legally blind, profoundly hearing impaired, and with little muscle function.

“You have to understand,” Sora leans forward, “in 1983, there was no Early Intervention, no agencies, no support system, nothing. We were completely on our own.”

“In her first year of life, Rochi hardly developed at all. She exhibited autistic-like behaviors, and was very self-occupied. We took her from doctor to doctor. They told us that she would never know us, never be able to learn, and there was not much anyone could do for her. Wherever I went, I heard the

same story. They told us to give her up. Those were black years for us.”

When Rochi was eighteen months old, Sora took her to a speech therapist named Adele Markowitz, of blessed memory, yet another name on the endless merry-go-round of visits to professionals who might — just might — do something for Rochi. Since Rochi was hearing impaired and had no language skills, Sora hoped Adele would help them find a way to communicate with her.

“Rochi was not sitting, not looking at her, drooling... Adele tried to put her in a chair, tried to get her to engage, make eye contact, and Rochi was just screaming and yelling. At the end of forty minutes of this, Adele looked at me and said, ‘Your daughter is spoiled.’ I was absolutely shocked! I’d been told a lot of things about Rochi, but never that she was spoiled! I took it very personally. I’d been running all over the place for appointments with Rochi for eighteen months, and here she was saying that I wasn’t a good mother?”

Adele looked at the young, distraught mother, and said, “Well, does she sleep through the night? I can’t work with her until you teach her to sleep through the night.” And then she added, “If you don’t spoil her, I think she’s a smart little girl!”

Sora couldn’t believe what she had heard. “This was the first time anyone had offered us any hope for her.”

“We took her home, and let her cry on and off for fourteen nights, making sure she was fed and dry, but did not pick her up until the morning. On the fifteenth night, she slept all the way

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through. On the sixteenth morning, I called Adele and said, ‘It took me fourteen nights, but she slept last night!’

“I will never forget the next words she said: ‘Oh! The doctors were wrong!’ I said, ‘But she still can’t hear, see, talk, walk, or even move.’ Adele retorted, ‘Well, the doctors said she’ll never learn anything... but she just learned the difference between day and night!’

“You see, learning to sleep through the night is one of the first things that a baby learns. But Rochi couldn’t learn by recognizing noise and light, since she couldn’t see or hear. She had to learn by touch, by experience.” And she did!

“It was as if an entire brick wall that was crushing me had been lifted. The brick wall was called ‘never,’ and from that moment on, I decided that no human would ever say ‘never’ to me again.”

And no one ever did.

After that first meeting with Adele, the Yaroslawitzes took Rochi to her for therapy every single day for eleven

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years. Adele also referred them to a full repertoire of other therapies, where a firm approach produced the desired results, and Rochi began walking normally. Along the way, she had three eye surgeries, enabling her to see, and she received cochlear implants, dramatically improving her hearing. And, as Adele had predicted, Rochi was discovered to be remarkably intelligent; “wacky smart,” says Sora. “She just inhales information!”

When Rochi was ready for school, the Yaroslawitzes chose a mainstream Bais Yaakov. They went to speak to the principal, to ask her to allow Rochi, who was still quite delayed, to attend her school. After much persuasion — “the principal couldn’t go to sleep without seeing my face” — Rochi was enrolled.

Rochi went to this school, accompanied by a para (paraprofessional teacher’s assistant) for twelve years. Today, Rochi is married, the independent mother of three healthy children, and has a degree in computer graphics.

Observing and Learning

Sora did not become an occupational therapist or teach parenting right away. She stayed home for nine years — “accounting went down the drain”

— to care for Rochi and her three other children. Then, to help pay for all of Rochi’s services, she worked as a para, eventually deciding to go back to school. She chose occupational therapy as a career for a very specific reason. All of the therapists whom she chose to work with Rochi managed Rochi’s behavior in a very structured, yet loving manner, always pushing her, even when she protested. This approach was incredibly successful.

Though Sora easily found physical therapists and speech therapists who used this approach, she had not been able to find an occupational therapist who knew how to do this. Characteristically, she chose to do it herself.

As parents brought their children to Sora’s occupational therapy practice, she began teaching them how to parent successfully, using the principles of behavior management that she had seen Adele use with Rochi. “I sat in that office,” remembers Sora, “and I learned and learned and learned. In eleven years of graduate and doctoral work, I didn’t learn as much as I did from this woman. She taught me this consistent approach and I swallowed it hook, line, and sinker — because it yielded results.”

A Book is Born

Twelve years ago, a client asked Sora to give a series of classes teaching this approach for other women in the community. “I spent 18 months developing a course and creating a workbook focusing on behavior management of the typically developing child, ages zero to ten. There is also a sequel for ages ten to eighteen. At that time I taught many classes in Monsey, Monroe, Lakewood, Five Towns and Brooklyn, to groups of mothers, twenty women in each group. I babysat these mothers as they learned

the strategies, because I worried about them making mistakes with their children. This approach is not an easy one to teach and it is a major *acharayus*.

“Five years ago, I was approached by the coordinators of Akeres Habayis, an educational hotline in Monroe. As terrified as I was about losing control over how people were using these techniques, I knew that this was a real opportunity to spread the program, so I put hours of lectures into thirty-minute weekly increments, spanning September to June of that year. I also answered questions on the air. The classes were so successful that thousands of people called! Finally, we took thirty-seven sessions and made two CDs out of them. When you buy the CDs, you register your email address to ask me questions. I don’t go to sleep at night until every email is answered.”

People loved the CDs and asked,

“Why don’t you write a book?” But Sora was commuting to Brooklyn, Lakewood and Monroe, teaching parents, seeing clients, providing support, parenting her own children and grandparenting theirs. “Until,” she laughs, “the day of Hurricane Sandy. I couldn’t do anything else, and I was stuck inside. So I sat down to begin writing a book! It takes a hurricane, sometimes, to get a book started!”

True to Sora’s style and standards, the book that resulted, titled *Are Your Hands Full*, is self-published. It is a collaboration between Sora and her daughter-in-law, Miriam Leah, who took the written material and added diagrams, graphics, poems and creative, whimsical details that bring the book to a whole new level.

“We wanted it to be both sophisticated and friendly,” Sora adds. Sora’s mother, Mrs. Deborah Schechter, a professional editor, did the editing. “She

understood that this method was in my veins and she didn’t touch it, she just made sure I didn’t fall on my face with the grammar and vocabulary.” Sora hired an artist to do the cartoon illustrations, making sure each detail, such as the expression on each face, is exactly right. “I drove her up the creek,” she confesses. “If she could survive me, she can survive anything!”

In whatever medium her principles are taught, Sara is unabashedly clear about what her program — and all parenting — is about.

“We can’t deviate from what the Torah says in the *Aseres Hadibros*. It exists and will exist forever... no matter how drastically times change. There is no such thing as *kibbud ben* or *kibbud bas*, *yiras haben* or *yiras habas*. That is a direct negation of Har Sinai. The relationship has to be what Hashem intended, a solid combination of *ahavah* and *yirah*.”

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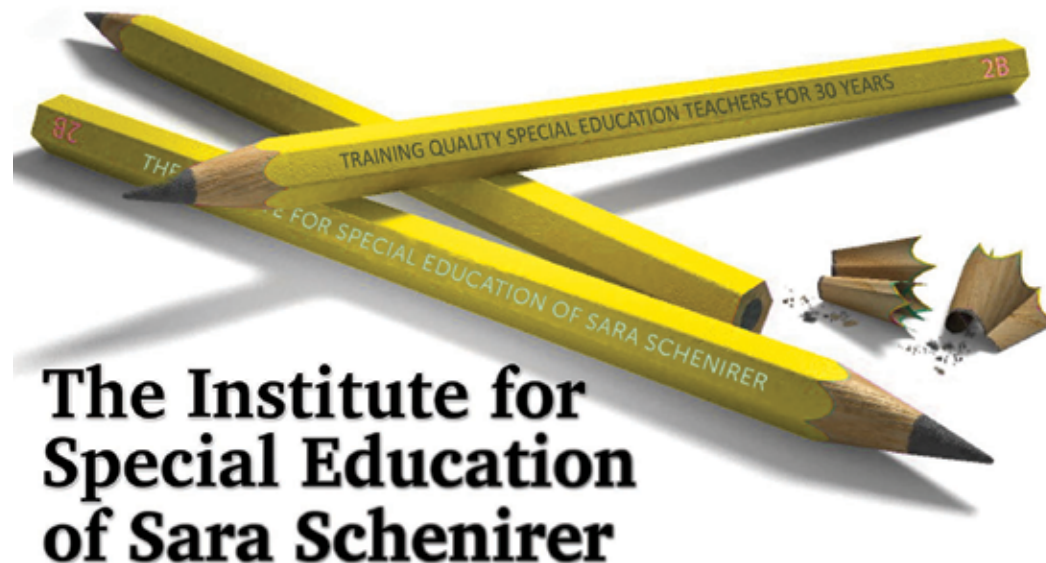
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Ahavah and Yirah

Can a child both love and fear his parents? The word “fear” makes us think of a vindictive parent, strictly disciplining, punishing and correcting. That’s an image that many parents do not feel comfortable with. Born into a democratic culture that values freedom and choice, many parents instinctively shy away from making any demands on their children, for fear that they will lose their love.

According to Sora, though, *ahavah* and *yirah* can and should be combined, similar to the way Hashem combines them when He takes care of us. “Children actually crave your consistency,” she explains. “They want to know you have a spine, that they can trust you.” The first time that this is taught is during the “terrible twos.”

“If a parent allows a child to tantrum without giving in,” she says, “the child will learn to accept that life doesn’t always deliver what we want. This lesson, if taught early, can shape an individual’s coping abilities throughout adult life.”

When each negative behavior is dealt with consistently (*yirah*) and with a pleasant face (*ahavah*), the child learns to accept boundaries, and feels safe and secure. The parent, having sent the mes-

sage she wished to send, does not carry anger and resentment, and is free to enjoy the positive moments of a warm, happy relationship with her child.

Rather than focusing on punishment, the entire program is based on staying calm and unaffected by the child’s behavior. “There is no justification for anger; they’re not serial murderers,” teaches Sora. The goal is emotional equilibrium — no anger and no negativity. “There’s hardly any punishment,” Sora confirms. “There’s no docking, no taking away things. There is a mild timeout in phase three, but that is hardly necessary if parents follow phase I and phase II correctly.”

Without punishment or anger, how do parents get children to behave? Parents are taught to be consistent and to communicate with authority, no matter what the child does. Sora describes this character trait as *middas hishtavus*, as discussed in the *sefer Chovos Halevavos*. *Hishtavus* is from the root “*shaveh*,” meaning equal or equivalent. This refers to an individual’s ability to remain balanced when faced with unpredictable or difficult events. Depending on the situation, and the particular phase of the program, parents are taught to ignore the child’s behavior, separate the child from the situation without comment,

and other techniques.

These techniques allow for a measured, thought-out response to negative behavior, as opposed to yelling or threatening. When appropriate, parents are taught to speak to their child about their behavior as late as 72 hours after it happens! “There’s plenty of time,” Sora chuckles. “They’re not getting married tomorrow!”

Although today’s parents often have a more informal relationship with their children than their parents had with them, Sora warns that “children are not on equal standing with their parents. Parents shouldn’t have to explain things because their children demand an explanation. They may choose to do so, when appropriate, but they must also withhold explanation at times, simply to show the child that life doesn’t always offer explanations.” She characterizes the correct relationship as one of “warm authority,” and she acknowledges that the balance can be tricky and hard to achieve.

However challenging it may be, Sora’s work is achieving her goal of restoring parents and children to the roles clearly delineated by the Torah. She has plans for forthcoming projects, such as a book on parenting teenagers, teaching parents how to parent their married

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children, and translating her books into Yiddish and Hebrew.

Although her approach utilizes the scientific principles of behavior management, it is rooted in Torah *hashkafah*, drawing from the *Chumash*, *Shulchan Aruch*, *Midrash*, *Gemara* and *Pirkei Avos*. The goal in establishing a loving and respectful relationship between parent and child is to enable children to ultimately become *ovdei Hashem*, feeling both love and awe in their relationship with Him.

Sora ends her book with the following perspective, from a mother’s point of view:

We’ve learned both together
My children and I
That obeying comes first,
Not contingent on “Why.”
And I’ve learned how to teach this
With tried, true technique
Merging firmness with love

In a blend that’s unique.

But mostly I’ve learned
How to keep a perspective.
When observing behaviors,
I’m much more reflective.
I realize that *middos*
Take time to perfect;
And instant perfection’s
Not what I expect.

My eyes on the *chuppah*
That’s waiting ahead
I’m not getting nervous;
I’m patient instead.
I’ll teach each behavior
One stage at a time,
While a positive *kesher*
Stays locked in my mind.

So now looking back,
I must humbly concede
That the perfect home dream
Is no longer my need.
'Cuz instead of “correcting”
The others you see
I have changed one person —
And that person’s — ME! **B**

Dr. Sora Yaroslavitz can be contacted via Binah.



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