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*Dvar Torah for Parshat Bo*

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# Parshat Bo: Raising Resilient Teens

Abigail Hirsch '89 | BronfmanTorah | Parshat Bo 2017

Thank you to all of our AmericanTorah contributors. We are now resuming alumni divrei torah, bringing commentary on the torah that draws on the lives, skills, and insights of our community.

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When on the brink of freedom, after 400 years of slavery, where does Moses focus his first big pep talk to the people? On social justice? On the sweet taste of victory? On the challenges that are still ahead? Nope, nope, more nope.

Rabbi Sacks (whom, BTW, if anyone hasn't tried reading, he's a must\*) points out

Moses's thrice repeated chorus is about talking to your children -- educating them to take the values you care about, the values we as a people care about, into their souls, out to the world, and then on to the next generation as well.

As a clinical psychologist who just finished building an online resiliency program for college students, and perhaps even more as a mother of four boys (ages 16, 14, 12 and 4) who has been blessed to watch what's worked better and not as well over a decent chunk of time, and perhaps even more than that, as the daughter of a wonderful mother (who is Grandma to 14 and the best psychologist in the business), I'd like to share some observations about parenting.

Following are a few tips about how to parent big kids. It's not that these tips aren't perfectly great for little guys, they are great for younger kids too. However, I wanted to focus on sharing my observations on raising teenagers because I feel our general culture has drifted towards a style of over-protective, risk-averse, results obsessed, and adult-driven parenting. And, to be frank, this kind of parenting hurts kids.

So, without further ado, a few parenting themes and some stories from the trenches at Chez Hirsch.

### **Encourage independence.**

It's easy to think that the best way to keep a child safe is to set strict limits – no riding your bike across the street till you're 12 for example. I've found the opposite is true. In the big picture of life, the best way to raise a child who is safe and sensible in the real world, is to place that child in situations that are a bit of a stretch. Find things your child can do that may feel a bit scary. Step back and allow a child a few iotas more independence than you otherwise might give. For example, we sent our anxiety prone 12-year-old for a summer to live with cousins he'd never met and go to a squash camp that involved taking a bus alone through urban Philadelphia. Yes, he had moments that felt scary to him. And, he emerged able to make first rate safety judgment calls on his own. Talking with him about how he sorted out which characters were and which were not wise to sit next to on

the bus was fascinating. Added bonus, the reality of how independent he became that summer fostered deep, genuine confidence.

### **Notice what they do right.**

A fundamental principle in most parenting courses is that you get more of what you pay attention to. So, when I comment on the trash that did go out, it's more likely to go out again. When I praise the way the 12-year-old plays with the 4-year-old, he's more likely to be found horsing around with his brother the next day. Certainly there's a time and place for pointing out a problem. It's the overall ratio of noticing right to wrong that matters. For both the boys, and for their parents, a house with parents who notice all the wonderful things, big and little, about their children becomes a house filled with wonderful children and positive, upbeat parents.

"The Hirsch Family looking far more observant than most of us actually are in front of our new home in Ra'anana Erev Yom Kippur."

### **Set high expectations, or clear rules but only about 1 or 2 things you REALLY care about.**

We have two rules for our high school kids. Rule #1 – you are responsible for getting some flavor of A in every class. Rule #2 – one boy takes out the trash and the other the recycling. We rarely enforce rule #2, and even rule #1 has occasionally been broken – with no consequences except for a long discussion to all learn about what happened and strategize together about how to do better in the future. What is the upshot of such a short and malleable rule list? We don't have to punish our kids. We do get to share meaningful discussion about how come Rule #1 is important to us. By limiting the rules one can maximize the transmission of core values. Too many rules, or rules too autocratically enforced, the core values may get lost. And, as an added benefit to this approach, occasionally we come home and discover the trash has actually been taken out. Whoo hoo!

### **Make sure they exercise**

In the age of gizmo's and screens everywhere, it's pretty easy for any of us, to get sedentary. While this is bad for my waistline, sigh, I think it's fundamentally neglectful to not set up a lifestyle that gets growing bodies moving. Exercise generates healthy, happiness-creating endorphins. Tushies in chairs don't. Exercise lets a growing body develop into a form that is one a kid can be proud of. And, kids who spend 5 or more hours a week really, really moving seem to settle down and focus in everywhere else. There's no need to be "good" at the activity. What matters is that active kids are much more likely to be happy, healthy kids too (and same goes for us parents, sigh again).

**Help them pursue what they love, not what will get them into Harvard.**

Last year our family came to Israel on sabbatical. In a crazy unexpected turn, our eldest two announced that we'd better stay here, because they weren't going back to America. Of course, there were many, many factors that have been positive for them here. However, I think the most fundamental is that Israel allowed them and us to step off the college freak-out treadmill. They all still do a dizzyingly full calendar of this and that, it's just that the reason for doing activities has shifted. In the US, underlying everything, was some vague sense this was headed onto a college application or that was so you'd be good enough to get a college scholarship. Here, with the whole mandatory army service thing, there's virtually no "do this to get that." Instead the general feeling is do this because you love it. Practice hard because it's satisfying. Try something new because it's fascinating. Live life because it's awesome.

*\*And, if you love a good bit of Torah, you might take a peek at Rabbi Fohrman's site <https://www.alephbeta.org> as well. Just can't help sharing.*

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