

WITH ALL HER HEART

A MOTHER'S EARLY START TO
LONG LASTING EDUCATION

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THE CRIB: THE FIRST CLASSROOM

In¹ the corner of the local *beis midrash*, one student seemed out of place. Among elderly scholars with white beards lay a baby in his cradle.

The child, Yehoshua, would one day become the great Tanna, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananya, one of the most esteemed students of Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai and quoted throughout Shas.

But what was he doing in the *beis midrash* as an infant?

He was brought there by his mother, who knew that the most important thing she could do for her child was to nurture his love for Torah. She wanted his young, impressionable ears to absorb the sounds of Torah study from the very beginning of life. So, she personally brought him to be in the atmosphere of the *beis midrash*, to hear what he could not yet understand but would one day dedicate his life to teach.²

When Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai later praised his five most precious students, he described Rabbi Yehoshua with the words, “*Ashrei yoladto*—happy is she who bore him!” His greatness and lifelong devotion to Torah were credited to his mother’s dedication and the *chinuch* she instilled in him from birth.

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This story sets a precedent for Jewish mothers today. The custom of old—which ought not be left in the past—was for mothers to sing lullabies to their children that instilled a love for Torah. “There are raisins and almonds, but Torah is the *beste sechora* (best merchandise)!” goes the well-known bedtime song that lulled generations of *Yiddishe kinder* to sleep.

Already pre-preschool, the Jewish mother is entrusted with surrounding her children, sons and daughters alike, with holiness, Yiddishkeit, and a love for Torah that will stay with them forever. Rabbi Yehoshua’s mother did not send a *shliach* or hire an aide to bring him to the *beis midrash*; she personally brought him there, as part of her role in his *chinuch*.

A Jewish mother does not have to wait until her child goes to *cheder* to start their education. Her job of *chinuch* begins in the cradle, with words of Torah resonating in the child’s earliest memories that stay with them for a lifetime of Torah and *mitzvos*.

This is the “vital role of the Jewish woman, the ‘mother of the children,’” the Rebbe writes in an English letter to a N’shei Chabad convention. “For the *Chinuch* of the children begins in their most tender years, when they are entirely in the hands of the mother.”³

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MOTHER: A PERSON'S FIRST TEACHER

On⁴ the first day of a new job, you are handed control of a complex piece of machinery with many functions and hundreds of tiny parts, and you are at a loss as to how to operate it. When it functions properly, the machinery will bring success and help others, but where do you begin? The vastness of the operation overwhelms you.

Then, another individual walks into the room, puts a comforting hand on your shoulder, and says, “I am the inventor of this machine. Here, take this user manual. I wrote it carefully with you in mind. It has all the instructions you need to operate it and achieve success in your work.”

In a multifaceted universe, with conflicting influences pulling us in every direction, a Jew can easily feel overwhelmed. Knowing how to “operate” in the world and use it for good, the way Hashem intended, would be impossible without the guidebook given to us by the Creator—the Torah.

Competing forces vie for our attention; many claim to know the secret to success in life and offer alternative solutions or advice for navigating its complexities. With proper discipline and steadfast willpower, a Jew can learn to focus only on Torah for guidance, understanding that Torah is our *life* and Yiddishkeit is the guide for *daily living*.

This training begins in youth, through the mother’s *chinuch* of the children Hashem gave her. Every Jewish woman—married, as well as unmarried (even young girls!) preparing for the time when Hashem will bless them to build their own homes—has the role of *akeres habayis*, the central pillar of the home, and the primary educator of her child.

As much as a teacher, counselor, or instructor can accomplish with children, it cannot be compared, nor is the effect as deep, as the effect a mother can have when she puts her whole mind and heart into ensuring her child receives

the proper outlook on life. All that the mother, or the girl preparing to become a mother, instills in the child has a deep and lasting impact on the entire life of that child.

Particularly in the first years of life, the mother has a special and exclusive mission to care for the child’s upbringing and education. Even as the children grow older, fathers are often busy earning a livelihood or attending to other matters, leaving them unable to spend as much time as they’d wish guiding their children. The *akeres habayis*, the wife and mother, has more time, patience, and devotion to give herself to her children, guiding them in both the details of daily life and the fundamental principles, ensuring that from the outset the child understands the central purpose and foundation of their behavior, and how to conduct themselves according to Torah every day, month, and year of their life.

With this special mission, Hashem also gives women unique abilities to accomplish it, abilities that surpass what anyone else, even a man with great opportunities and talents in *chinuch*, could achieve. Hashem grants them as well the *bracha* to see the results of their labor, through true *nachas* from each of their children.

Even after the children grow up and marry, they remain connected to their parents, particularly to their mothers, who set them on the path of the Torah of Truth from childhood, the *living* Torah’s instructions for life. They carry gratitude for their mother’s guidance, expressed in many ways—foremost among them is the way they live their lives. The mother enjoys the primary delight and true pleasure that parents experience, for there is no greater joy than seeing children and grandchildren conduct themselves as a Yid should, and Hashem granting them all that they need—and even more—to continue on this path. **1**

ADDITIONAL INSIGHT

- » Women possess special soul strengths from Hashem that make them uniquely suited to be educators. They have the ability to teach with gentleness, yet at the same time with firmness, ensuring their young charges grow along the right path. They are also blessed with patience; if a child doesn't grasp a lesson the first time, the mother will explain it again and again if needed, until the child absorbs the importance and beauty of Yiddishkeit.⁵
- » The three defining characteristics of the Jewish people, *rachamanim*, *bayshanim*, and *gomlei chassadim*—being merciful, bashful, and kind—are seen much more profoundly among women. These qualities are of chief importance in the education of children, which is primarily, if not completely, entrusted to women, especially in a child's youngest years.⁶
- » Girls are not obligated to learn *Gemara*. This is not due to any lack of intellectual capacity, but rather because Hashem has given women a greater responsibility: preparing the next generation and educating children in Yiddishkeit. The Torah places this crucial task upon mothers, and to enable them to fulfill it, they are exempt from the obligation to learn Torah.⁷
- » The kitchen is one unique setting where mother-daughter education takes place. It is customary for a girl to help in preparing food for the home, thereby giving her the opportunity to be educated in the *halachos* of kashrus.⁸
- » “In Chinuch...the mother comes first, when the development of the newborn child in the first years after birth is exclusively in the hands of the mother, and only later, when the child begins to speak, the father begins to teach the child “the Torah which Moshe commanded us.” Indeed, even in later years, the mother has a greater influence on her children, the young and the older ones alike, due to her special, close, and loving relationship. We see this also in the Mitzva of *Kibbud Av v'Em* (“honoring father and mother”), where the Torah pointedly forewarns, “Everyone shall *fear* (respect) one's mother and father” — with emphasis on the mother (first).”⁹
- » “[T]he Jewish woman...is the *actual* candle-lighter, who was given the special Divine assignment, extraordinary privilege, and bright Mitzva of lighting the candles for the holy Shabbos and Yom Tov. And in a deeper spiritual sense:...in her role as *Eim habonim* (Mother of the children) she is the first to light up the young Neshomelach of the infants, until they begin to shine on their own.”¹⁰

1. Adapted from Yom Simchas Torah 5741; Sichos Kodesh 5741 vol. 1, pp. 246–247.

2. Yerushlami Yevamos 1:6.

3. English letter dated Erev Shabbos Parshas Achrei-Kedoshim, 5734.

4. Adapted from the *sicha* to the N'shei Chabad convention on 27 Iyar 5737; Sichos Kodesh 5737 vol. 2, pp. 4–6.

5. 13 Sivan 5741; Sichos Kodesh 5741 vol. 3, p. 691.

6. Letter to N'shei Chabad chapters, 15 Shevat 5721; Igros Kodesh vol. 20, p. 142.

7. The Rebbe's response to a group of college students in Yechidus. Toras Menachem vol. 3, p. 363. For a more comprehensive look on the topic of women learning Torah, see this column in Derher – Tishrei 5786.

8. *Sicha* to women, 27 Elul 5749; Hisva'aduyos 5749 vol. 4, p. 379.

9. Excerpt from an English free rendition of the Rebbe's letter to the N'shei Chabad Convention of 5737.

10. Excerpt from an English free rendition of the Rebbe's letter to the N'shei Chabad Convention of 5740.



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BEHIND EVERY GREAT
JEW, A GREAT MOTHER



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