



Rabbi Weinreb's Weekly Column:

EIKEV

## Discipline and Suffering

As a parent, grandparent, and psychologist, I am often considered to be something of an expert on parenting and child-rearing. In that capacity, I have frequently been asked to review or give an opinion about any of the plethora of books on the subject of raising one's children.

Like in any genre, there are better books and worse books in this category. What I have noticed is that many of them fail to include a chapter on one of the most important components of child rearing: discipline. With few exceptions, the most that these books contain on the subject of discipline is a chapter on "setting limits".

In my opinion, and certainly in my experience, discipline is an essential component of all parenting and teaching relationships. And discipline is not just about "setting limits". It is also about "setting goals".

My reading on the subject of dealing with children, whether as a parent or as a teacher, has taught me of the importance of setting clear and achievable goals and objectives for children to reach, and then to show recognition of the achievement of those goals.

My experience as a parent myself, as a teacher for many years, and as a psychotherapist for much of my adult life, has borne out the wisdom of these two steps: Firstly, lay out the expectations that you have of the child and clearly define the nature of the task at hand. Secondly, when the child has accomplished the task, even if not totally successfully, give him or her feedback and recognition, whether in the form of a verbal compliment or a nonverbal gesture.

Discipline does not just involve "setting limits". Indeed, saying "no" and issuing restrictive commands may not at all be what discipline is about. Rather, it involves "setting goals". It is about extending a challenge, with the implicit confidence that sends that child the message, "You can do it!"

This, to me, is the essence of discipline. It is not synonymous with punishment. It is synonymous with learning and personal growth.

And this is what I think is meant by the passage in this week's Torah reading, Eikev, "Bear in mind that

**the Lord your God disciplines you just as a man disciplines his son."**  
(D'varim 8:5)

The Torah has much to say, even if the parenting books don't, about discipline. It takes for granted that parents will discipline their children, and that teachers will discipline their students. After all, that is why students are called disciples.

The Torah insists, moreover, that the Almighty, too, disciplines us. And He does so in much the same way as successful parents do. He sets clear expectations for us, and He shows us His favor when we meet those expectations and His disfavor when we fail to do so. The Lord really is a Father in this sense.

It is no wonder then, that the book of Mishlei cautions us to "heed the discipline of your father, and do not forsake the instruction of your mother." Notice: first discipline, and then instruction. First mussar, and Torah only afterwards.

As usual, there is an even deeper message in the word that the Torah uses for discipline. The root containing the Hebrew letters YUD SAMACH REISH is the root of both "discipline" and "suffering".

Judaism teaches us that there is a meaning to our suffering. Sometimes that meaning is obvious to us; more typically though, the meaning eludes us, and we desperately search for it.

But one thing is clear. We learn through discipline, and we also learn through suffering.

The words of Victor Frankl, the psychologist and Auschwitz survivor, who certainly knew a thing or two about suffering, are very instructive here:

"...On the biological plane, as we know, pain is a meaningful watcher and warder. In the psycho-spiritual realm it has a similar function. Suffering is intended to guard man from apathy, from psychic rigor mortis. As long as we suffer we remain psychically alive. In fact, we mature in suffering, grow because of it - it makes us richer and stronger."

It is through the processes of discipline and suffering that we develop and are transformed. Both processes are painful, sometimes profoundly so. But through both, we widen our horizons, enhance our spirits, and attain a deeper understanding of our life's purpose.

Discipline and suffering: important to us all as individuals, as part of the Jewish people, and as mortal humans, struggling to cope and, ultimately, to grow. 📌