

Understanding the Misunderstood

Helping children with behavioral,
social, and autism spectrum challenges

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Avromi's Story: Yiddishkeit Challenges and Taking Responsibility

Avromi's father shared his concerns for his 13-year-old son, Avromi:

I am very worried about Avromi's spiritual development. My main goal is for him to be an ehrliche Yid. However, he is lacking in many areas. First of all, he barely davens. I don't just mean with a minyan—he often skips davening completely. In addition, he is not careful with brachos—he often skips brachos before or after eating. Finally, he isn't very careful with hilchos Shabbos. He might open packages and rip letters or do borer when he wants something.

I spoke to Avromi many times about the importance of davening and following halachah, but he just shrugs it off and continues doing what he wants. I am fearful about his future in ruchnigus, since he doesn't care about following any kind of rules or restrictions. He is insistent on living a carefree life and doing whatever he wants.

I used to be less concerned, thinking that when he becomes bar mitzvah, he will change. But now he is already bar mitzvah and is fully obligated in all the mitzvos, yet his attitude hasn't changed.

Avromi's father is voicing a concern that many parents face when raising a challenging child. One of our primary tasks in raising children is educating them in mitzvah observance. When a child isn't reaching the expected milestones in mitzvah observance,

we may fear for their future. We may also wonder if we have done what we were supposed to do for the child's *chinuch*. After a son becomes bar mitzvah, these fears may intensify, since he is now expected, according to the Torah, to keep all the mitzvos properly.

Avromi's father mentioned that he has spoken to Avromi many times about doing mitzvos but it hasn't helped. He wondered if he needed to take a stricter stance toward his son's failings in *Yiddishkeit*. Maybe he should institute some kind of consequence for not *davening* and this would get Avromi to take *davening* more seriously?

I asked Avromi's father, "Will taking a stricter approach lead to a power struggle with Avromi?"

After thinking for a moment, he said, "Whenever I try to get Avromi to do something he doesn't want to do, he gets even more resistant."

"Why would trying to enforce *Yiddishkeit* rules be any different?" I asked.

Avromi's father heard my point but countered, "Don't I need to do something as part of my *chinuch* obligation?"

"How about discussing with Avromi the meaning of *davening*

in a way that Avromi can relate to and appreciate? This would lead Avromi to want to *daven* on his own."

But Avromi's father didn't agree with me. "He is already bar mitzvah, and he needs to *daven* every

AVROMI DOESN'T ONLY HAVE TROUBLE FOLLOWING RULES IN YIDDISHKEIT. HE HAS TROUBLE FOLLOWING ANY RULES. HE HASN'T YET DEVELOPED THE PROPER UNDERSTANDING OF HOW FOLLOWING RULES WILL BENEFIT HIM

day. If he doesn't get into the habit of *davening* every day even when he isn't in the mood, he might just never *daven*. *Chinuch* means getting children into the habit of keeping mitzvos to ensure that they continue doing them even when they aren't in the mood."

Avromi's father was making a good point: an integral part of *chinuch* is to habituate our children in mitzvah observance, so that when they become obligated at bar/bas mitzvah, they will continue keeping the mitzvos on their own.

Nevertheless, I explained to Avromi's father, not all children develop at the same rate. Thirteen is the general age of maturity for a boy, the time when he can be expected to independently keep the mitzvos. But some children may not reach that maturity level until they are older. This doesn't mean that they aren't *halachically* considered bar mitzvah; it's just that from a developmental standpoint, they may not be up to what is typically expected of a 13-year-old.

Rather than focusing on their mitzvah observance, it may be more important to help them develop and mature properly. Avromi doesn't only have trouble following rules in *Yiddishkeit*. He has trouble following any rules. He hasn't yet developed the proper understanding of how following rules will benefit him. He may resist following traffic rules the same way he resists keeping mitzvah rules.

I also pointed out that being a rule challenger comes with a great benefit. Avromi doesn't follow rules and social norms unless he is convinced that he will gain from doing so. Despite Avromi's refusal to follow some aspects of *Yiddishkeit* now, when he does learn about their significance to his life, he will perform those mitzvos with greater enthusiasm and meaning.

Boys like Avromi challenge us to change our educational approach and compel us to place greater emphasis on internalizing and developing a real meaning in *Yiddishkeit* rather than doing mitzvos by rote.

Avromi's father was receptive to these ideas. However, he was hesitant. How could he simply accept his son's current level of mitzvah observance? He was also worried about what other people would think if his son didn't *daven* or go

to shul and how that would reflect on him, the father.

I had additional conversations with Avromi's father to encourage him in this approach. We discussed that confrontations and power struggles weren't going to help, and if anything, they would just make Avromi more resistant. I also mentioned that boys like Avromi need to learn to take responsibility for themselves. They like to shirk their own responsibilities and have everyone else worry about doing things for them. By constantly reminding Avromi to *daven* or *bentch*, he won't learn to take responsibility for himself; he will just continue to rely on others to remind him, and he may also blame everyone else for his failures. Letting go of trying to get Avromi to fulfill these mitzvos might lead him to think about taking responsibility for himself, which is a crucial goal for his development.

The next time Avromi's father called me, he said:

Something very interesting happened. I told Avromi, "You are bar mitzvah now and are capable of taking responsibility for yourself. I won't be able to keep reminding you to daven for the rest of your life. Let me know if there is anything I can do to help you with your davening, but from now on, it is in your hands." Avromi shocked me with his response: "Uh-oh, then I better do something about it." It seems that once I made it clear to Avromi that I wasn't going to be on top of him and take responsibility for his davening, he realized that he needed to start worrying about it himself.

I told Avromi's father that what he had done was powerful. By letting go and informing Avromi he was no longer taking responsibility for Avromi's *davening*, Avromi had immediately started to think about taking responsibility for himself. I was also impressed by how he still offered Avromi assistance to make it easier for him, but it would be Avromi's responsibility to ask for the help.

I noticed Avromi on his own going to a Minchah-Ma'ariv minyan this week, even though I hadn't said a word to remind him. It seems that giving over the responsibility to Avromi is the best way to help him.

Understanding a child's nature is important when educating them for mitzvos. Some children are rule resistant and find listening to authority aversive. Teaching them the meaning and value of mitzvos and how each mitzvah can relate to them in their lives will go a long way in helping them keep mitzvos. Understanding their unique nature and that their mitzvah development may follow a different timeline will help us educate them with calm and clear thinking. Letting go of enforcing their compliance with halachah can empower them to take responsibility for their own choices. ●

Important note: The purpose of this article is to bring awareness to the nature of some children and what may be a more effective approach to educating them. Individual challenges should be brought to one's rav's attention to ensure proper guidance.

Stories in this series are based on real accounts, but details have been altered to protect the subjects' privacy.



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Rob Bernstein has developed his cognitive-based approach for more than 30 years and is the author of the award-winning *Uniquely Normal: Tapping the Reservoir of Normalcy to Treat Autism and Uniquely Normal Manual: Using the Bernstein Cognitive Method for Autism*. He also runs the podcast "Uniquely Normal: A Rob Bernstein Podcast." Rob's mantra is "Let the child lead, and when they do, be ready to follow."