

Naso 5773 Parenting on a Bicycle

Shabbat Shalom.

Over the last few months, I have been spending many Sunday afternoons with my son, Matan, who is six-years-old and our youngest. I have been trying to teach him to ride a bicycle.



The truth is we did a fair amount of learning last year. But after the winter hiatus, we had to begin anew.

He was pretty reluctant to get on the bike without the training wheels.



He sort-of forgot that he had done a little riding before without them, but now he was adamant he wasn't going to ride without them.

I tried negotiation. "Come on Matan, let's just go a little bit!"

I tried bribery. "Come on Matan, if you ride down the block, I'll get you a treat!"

I tried compromise. "Come on Matan, how about if you ride to the fire hydrant? No, OK, how about to the next mailbox?"

I was starting to lose my patience which definitely did not help matters.

Finally, we were ready to start.

Matan told me, "OK, Abba (dad), I will ride to the mailbox (about 50 feet), but you cannot let go."

"Woah, woah, woah - what do you mean I can't let go? Then you are not really riding on your own. Then, I am just holding you!"

"Abba!"

"Fine. I'll hold you."

As a parent, I was trying to find my own balance of encouraging/forcing him and just holding him.

I was beginning to think I should have hired someone else to teach him, when he took off and, over time, he let me let go and, as I suspected, he could ride. While he forgot to stop the bike before jumping off - which was a bit of a problem, he could certainly ride.

But, he did not want to ride that long - so, he rode from house to house, mailbox to mailbox.



And after a couple of minutes, he was done.

I cannot say that I found this satisfactory, but like many things in life, it is what it is.

One Sunday I decided to push my luck

“OK, Matan, now that you are riding, let’s ride down the block.”

“No, Abba, I can't do that.”

“But, you can. I just saw you ride. You can just keep on going.”

He could have done more... but he couldn't.

So we stopped for that Sunday.

But then, after all that, we came out the next week and I said, “OK, let’s do what we did last week and ride!”

Matan looked at me quizzically.

I replied, “Let’s have you ride like you did last week - on your own!”

His eyes widened, “Abba, you mean letting go?”

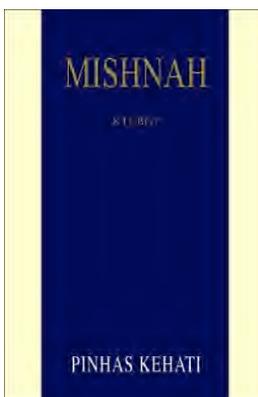
“Yes! I let go last week!”

“No way, I can't do that.”

I let out a big sigh.

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It can be tough being a parent. It can be tough being a kid. It can be tough being a kid learning how to ride a bike.



While the *Mishnah*,

written two thousand years ago, makes no mention of bike riding since it had not yet been invented, it does state that parents must teach their children to swim. Sharon and I wisely outsourced that.

But, bike riding is something that I love. Every Monday morning around 5:45 AM, a group of Emunah riders assembles at my house for an early morning ride, and we have rides during other days of the week as well.

There's nothing like being on a bike - the air whizzing by, the thrill of the speed, the exercise, and seeing everything from the right perspective. You can appreciate nature and your surroundings in a way that you simply can't from a car.

As a teen, I would head out with my best friend, Michael, and his dad on many a Sunday morning. We would bike up from our homes in Teaneck, NJ, up the Palisades along the Hudson River, stopping for brunch in the picturesque



waterside town of Piermont.

It was a beautiful ride and those rides helped make me a life-long lover of biking. In college, I did some racing and I still try to ride frequently. It certainly would make the world cleaner and all of us healthier to have more biking.

So, I thought that teaching my kids to ride would be a wonderful thing. And it has been, but it was much more challenging than I anticipated. While I thought of bike riding as a skill - one needs balance, some strength and hand-

eye coordination, I did not realize how much of it lies in the mind. Fear and doubt play a huge role - what Matan needed was not the physical ability, he had that.

He just needed confidence. And my telling him he could ride did not do the trick.

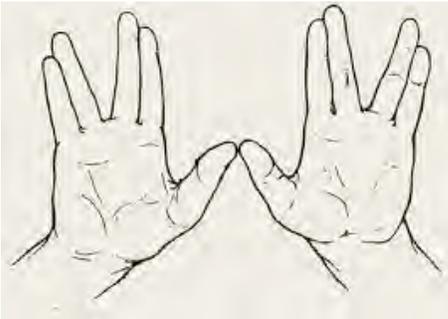
He needed time and patience. Some days more time and patience than I seemed to have.

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As Sarah told us in her thoughtful d'var Torah, we read from the longest parashah in the Torah: *Parashat Naso*. It has many parts: from the census, to making restitution, to coping with suspected adultery, the laws of the Nazirite, the Priestly Benediction and then the gifts of the chieftains.

This is a reading laden with the laws that strive to bring justice and love into the world.

From a parenting perspective, it contains the *Birkat Kohanim*,



the threefold blessing the *Kohanim* offered three millennia ago in the *Beit Hamikdash*, in the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. This

blessing is offered by parents to their children each and every Friday night.



But, it is in the manner of offering the words that presents us with an insight. I place my hands on my child's head and then conclude the words with a gentle kiss. The power of touch conveys the love that we want to express.

Similarly, holding Matan and his bike conveyed to him the very concrete feeling of security that he needed.

And this year, we reintroduced this ancient blessing to our community during the festivals; the *Kohanim* stand before the community and I invite everyone to come close and feel God's presence standing with or next to the family member or friend. There is something about the closeness that conveys that love.

But the larger lesson the *parashah* contains comes from the longest section - the twelve chieftains and their gifts.

These chieftains brought their offerings to consecrate the Tabernacle, every prince from each of the twelve tribes brought identical gifts. Yet, they brought their offerings not on 12 individual wagons, but instead on "six covered wagons...a wagon for every two of the princes..." (Numbers 7:3).

One commentator, S'forno, notes that they shared the wagons "as a sign of brotherhood between them." Rabbi Shalom Meir Volk (see *Ma'ayan Hashavua*

vol. 4 p. 86) adds that they specifically and intentionally shared the wagons to demonstrate that “together they bore the burden and sense of responsibility to the entire community.”

Similarly, I needed to convey to Matan the sense that he and I were in this together. I was asking him to take a leap and risk falling by rolling around balanced precariously on narrow wheels, and he needed to know that I would be there to catch him.

There is another idea from the repetition of the gifts. The Torah expends much ink on listing the same gifts over and over again to teach us that each chieftain was important and equal - so, too, are our children all valuable, deserving of the same treatment.

The Torah reminds us that parenting should be like that -- not like the parenting we find in the book of Genesis.

But, hearing the gifts over and over again - twelve times - is also an exercise for all of us. It requires some patience. Many of us - all right, I'll speak for me - get impatient. My brain races ahead to the next thing. If all these gifts are the same, then I understand that - let's move on.

But life does not always work that way or does not always work well that way. Sometimes, we need to give time to something. We need to take that time.

Children especially need that time. They need that extra holding of their seats. Sometimes, more than you might imagine. They need that patience - often more than we have.

The truth is - adults need it too. We just don't admit it as much...

The great Hasidic rabbi, the Menahem Mendel of Kotzk, also known as the Kotzker Rebbe who lived during the 19th century in Poland, offered a wonderful teaching based on a verse from the end of the book of Psalms.

“K’hitzim b’yad hagibor, kein bnei ha-neurim - like arrows in the hand of the warrior, so are the children of youth.” (127:4)

The Kotzker asked what is the connection between a warrior holding his



bow and arrow and childhood.

The Kotzker answered

by explaining that the closer an archer pulls his bow, the better the arrow will fly.

It will fly further and straighter. So, it is with children - the closer we hold them, the more time and patience and affection and blessing we offer them, the further and straighter they will go. (See *The Parenting Path*, p. 20)

Spending that time, really listening to our children and understanding what they need, that can make a big difference.

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Oh, and you may have been wondering what happened to Matan on the bike?

Well, he and I stuck at it. I cannot say that we didn't have our moments. Even a few less good moments, as frustration overwhelmed us.

And I ran up and down the block holding the back of his seat for far longer than I could have ever imagined was humanly possible.

But slowly, over time, he developed more confidence and then, he was ready.

He has been riding up and down the block ever since and then through the neighborhood, and just this week we took a 3-mile ride.

At the end of one of our rides, he asked to ride more and I said we had to go inside for dinner. He said, "I wish we could ride more, Abba; bike riding is so addictive."

Yes, it is.

Shabbat Shalom.