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# Teach Your Children Well

Prepping for the Big Day at home.

By Hillel Kuttler

As we have each week for the past year and a half, my 12-year-old son Yossi and I don our kipot and settle on to the couch. I fluff up a green throw pillow and tilt toward it. Yossi, sitting on the other side of the coffee table, adjusts his eye-glasses, leans forward and lifts the brown strand pressed between the pages of his tikkun to

familiar with the notes and with the need to invest time to do it right. That allowed us to quickly review the notes he knew, study the ones he did not and then jump right into his bar mitzvah portion.

The moment the first phrase of the first verse, *V'haya ki tavo el ha'aretz*, floated from Yossi's lips, I found myself transported



find his place. I open my tikkun, too, taking care that the back cover, holding on for dear life by two threads, doesn't rip off completely.

"Where are we?" I ask.

"On *pasuk chaf-heh* [verse 25]," Yossi responds.

"Okay, let's review the last five *psukim* [verses] and then move ahead."

Variations of this scene occur both regularly and sporadically as we prepare for September 20, when Yossi will celebrate his bar mitzvah. Regularly, because we remind each other that a lesson is about due, whether on a Sunday evening, a Thursday before Little League or a Shabbat afternoon; sporadically, because the days and times are loose, a luxury of our having begun preparing so far in advance.

When we began preparing, Yossi was in sixth grade. His teacher the previous year had taught the boys and girls the rudiments of Torah trop, the notes that guide the reader in properly chanting the parshah (weekly portion) in services.

Knowing most of the trop basics, and having observed my preparations for holiday readings in our synagogue, Yossi was fa-

back to early 1974. My father and I sat side by side on his black leather couch, studying the same parshah from the tall tikkun I still use: the right column, as in every book, consisting of the printed version of the Torah; the left column a facsimile of a scribe's quill-pen rendition of those very verses as they appear in Torah scrolls, minus all vowels, notes and punctuation.

Often, I ponder a just-completed lesson and marvel at Yossi's capacity to absorb new material and to undertake this challenge in the first place. At such moments, and when we recite Shema at bedtime or in the synagogue, I focus intently on the prayer's words, *v'shinantam l'vanecha* (and you shall teach to your sons), and take to heart the enormity—and the preciousness—of what we share.

I realize then that, beyond conveying the lessons of behavior and of morality that are part and parcel of childrearing, I am teaching in the classroom sense of instructing with a book and a voice. How many other parents are privileged to experience that? I feel grateful to my father for equipping me with the capability to chant from the Torah.

# Teach Your Children Well

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That skill is fulfilling intellectually, too, because it opens paths to a deeper understanding of the Torah, both in its content and in appreciating the role of the notes as literary and grammatical devices. Some notes, like the *et-nachta* and *sof pasuk*, serve as essential, yet drab, commas and periods. Others, like *pazeir* or the *darga-tvir* combination, can jolt a congregant with their highs and lows and by building tension, as in a musical piece. The *shal-shelet* even provoked rabbinical commentary due to its exceedingly rare occurrences.

Studying the trop can also encourage readers to follow trails that can deepen their Biblical repertoire. Because I had studied the Torah trop and enjoyed the experience, I welcomed the chance, as a teenager, to learn from our youth minyan's rabbi the other distinct trop that are applied to the holiday readings of the Scrolls of Esther, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs and Ruth. From there, I listened carefully and eventually taught myself the trop that are used for each Haftorah and the even more beautiful one that's heard only on the High Holy Days.

Yossi and I have not discussed such matters yet. Likely, that is because our study is a work in progress and I don't want to overwhelm him now with extra layers of meaning. I recognize, too, that this experience is not for everyone. Many parents hire tutors because they are stretched too thin as is, with work, home and children's school obligations. Others lack the knowledge to impart or, if they have it, they've gotten rusty. Several friends who read Torah well opted to hire tutors to avoid the conflicts that arise anyway when parents ask teenagers to do something. "Pick up your voice on that *revi'i*" could come across like "Pick up your socks" to the sensitive adolescent ear.

Yossi and I have had our moments, to be sure. When he goofs off sometimes, my fuse gets short. Even while delivering tips in ways meant to be gentle and constructive, I understand that he feels criticized—who wouldn't take personally their dad's incessant correcting of notes, pronunciations and accents?

A few Sunday evenings ago, walking to the pool, Yossi's frustration bubbled over. He confessed to feeling pressured by the pace and by my demands. Perhaps the approach of his bar mitzvah also weighed on him.

He suggested a change. Instead of my leading him in the preparation of several *psukim* at a time, he wanted to study them on his own and report back to me for review. I soon consented, proud that he was asserting himself on a meaningful and serious matter.

Now, we sometimes do it his way, sometimes mine. The other night, he said, "I'm in charge!" The third time he proclaimed that in a five-minute period, we laughed simultaneously. It is becoming his favorite tongue-in-cheek retort in other contexts, too.

We've got a few weeks left to complete our study. Then, we'll review every aliyah. As we approach the date, I'll take him to the empty shul a few times so he can practice from the bimah while I listen for whether his voice carries to the farthest reaches (no point doing all that studying just to have people turn to each other and whisper, "what did he say?").

In the meantime, there's overlap: my younger son Gil, 11, approached me two weeks ago. Rather than read his nature or World Series books before bed, he held a photocopy behind his back. It came from my tikkun. It was the chart of all the Torah notes.

"Can we start learning for my bar mitzvah?" Gil asked.

I smiled, and we headed to the couch. I placed Gil's finger on some common Torah notes.

"*Mahpach, pashta, zakef-katon*," I intoned

"*Mahpach, pashta, zakef-katon*," Gil repeated.

April 2010 is approaching fast.

*Hillel Kuttler is a frequent contributor to both Special Sections and Inside.*

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