Educating Michael

By Rabbanit Coty Bitton

On Friday nights, when we are privileged to have our grandson Michael with us, our family looks forward to watching him play one of his favorite games. After my husband finishes reciting Kiddush, Michael runs around the table, stops by each person, taps their head with his tiny hands, and mumbles a few words.

This is one of the sweetest moments of our Shabbat, watching Michael imitating us – his parents and grandparents – by reciting the blessing of Birkat Kohanim, the Priestly blessing.

And while the sweetness of this moment always warms my heart, lately, I have thought that parents can learn a profound and critical message from the beautiful Shabbat ritual in which we bless our children.

Let me explain. One of the most challenging aspects of 21st-century parenting is finding the balance between expressing our love to our children and establishing a relationship with them in which they respect us as authorities deserving of obedience. Part of our struggle is that our culture emphasizes the value of a loving ("friendly") relationship between parents and children and does not idealize the importance of discipline and obedience from children to parents.

This leads to a reality in which, as parents, we try to act in a way that appeals to our children – trying to convince them that our way is correct. This often contrasts with our desire to convey to our children that we are the authority in our families and that they need to listen to and obey us, whether they like it or not. Deep inside, we know that we do not need to explain the reasoning behind our decisions or requests, as our children do not always have the maturity to understand or agree with our choices.

Consider the healthy development of children: a two-year-old toddler, for example, must accept that her dinner cannot be lollipops and candies because “dad says so,” no other reasons needed; an adolescent fourteen-year-old will have to respect the “unfair” curfew that his parents decided on. We know that it is for the benefit of our children to have parents and adults in their lives that will protect them from making bad decisions. It is precisely here – in the attempt to have our children feel both love and respect for their parents – that Jewish tradition can be especially precious for our modern times.

Our rituals and Mitzvoth all direct us towards a style of parenting that conveys this delicate balance of parenting. Every time we say the Shema with our children, we verbalize our obligation to see our children as our students. The words “Veshinantam lebanecha vedibarta bam” literally mean, “You shall teach them [that is, the words of Torah] thoroughly to your children, and you shall speak of them”.

By assigning parents the role of educators, Jewish tradition demands that parents see themselves as role models worthy of their children’s respect; our children should see us as authorities from whom they can and must learn proper values and behavior. Education requires chemistry and mutual understanding between teacher and student, but it also requires a certain distance. To be able to teach our children, we need them to have respect for us.

We should work hard to parent in a way that conveys love and warmth, but not without teaching our children that our relationship with them is not horizontal. The benefits of raising obedient children are lifelong and affect the entire family.

As psychologist John Rosemond writes, “Obedient children are happy children, and the parents of obedient children are happy parents.” According to Rosemond the most critical thing needed

to raise obedient children is not some expert knowledge of parenting methods. Instead, the success of developing a vertical (and a the same time loving!) relationship between parents and children derives from parents having a confident attitude that they should encourage their children to obey them.

This brings us back to Birkat Kohanim – the blessing parents give their children on Shabbat. This tradition is not only gorgeous and heartwarming for our children, but it is also compelling for the parents' state of mind. Consider how this ritual is enacted: a parent places his hands on his child's head and pronounces the blessings that the Kohanim were commanded to convey to the people of Israel. When parents bless their children, they reaffirm their unlimited and unconditional love for their children. But they are also reminding themselves – and their children – that the child is a recipient of her parent's blessing. It is as if through this blessing, the mother is saying: "I can give you this blessing because I have more experience than you. My life experiences have given me more wisdom and knowledge. And I am commanded by HaShem to teach and educate you in the ways of the Torah".

This one blessing we give our children on Shabbat conveys a beautiful formulation of how we should approach our most important role, parenting our children. My grandson Michael, who is only two years old, does not yet understand the real meaning of getting a blessing from his parents and grandparents. For now, he is enjoying the special attention he gets from his game! But as he grows older, I hope that this beautiful moment on Shabbatot – when his parents and grandparents hold him while repeating the Biblical words of blessings – will make him feel supremely loved and help him see us as his role models.