
THE

Education Imperative

Guidance to Parents and Educators



From the
Teachings of the
Lubavitcher
Rebbe

Compiled and annotated by
Rabbi Nochem Kaplan

A central illustration of a stylized plant with a green stem and two large, light green leaves. The plant is held up by four hands: two purple hands at the top and two orange hands at the bottom. The background is dark blue with small yellow hearts scattered throughout.

בס"ד

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*From the Teachings of the
Lubavitcher Rebbe*

Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson זי"ע

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INTRODUCTION

After his arrival on American shores in 1941, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, was placed at the helm of several Chabad-Lubavitch educational institutions that had been founded by his father-in-law, the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn.

The Rebbe quickly set about expanding them. While most Jewish leaders took a defensive stance when it came to teaching youth about a Torah-observant lifestyle, the Rebbe sought to help Jews develop a fierce pride in their Judaism. Instead of fearing difference, young Jews, he hoped, would embrace it as a unique identity. This became a hallmark of his activism that spanned decades of leadership. Torah-observant Jews should not be in retreat, the Rebbe taught, but be proactive in their outreach to the unaffiliated.

Under his leadership, as early as the 1940s, Jewish youth marched proudly along Brooklyn's Eastern Parkway, a turn-of-the-century boulevard inspired by the Champs-Élysées in Paris. They carried banners and placards extoling the holiness of Shabbat and the importance of Jewish education, often leaving an indelible impression on passersby.

In 1951, a year after the passing of his father-in-law, the Rebbe publicly assumed leadership of the Chabad-Lubavitch movement. Within a few years, his reputation had spread to such an extent that people came to Crown Heights in ever-growing numbers to seek his blessing and advice. Among them were Torah giants, American politicians, Israeli prime ministers, educators, and students.

During the Rebbe's forty years of dynamic leadership, Chabad became the largest Jewish educational organization in the world, impacting the lives of millions. The Rebbe's emissaries set up shop in Jewish communities around the world with his message of pride and activism.

These emissaries founded thousands of educational institutions, from preschools to adult-education programs. Today, there are hundreds of thousands of alumni of Chabad schools. They represent a cross-section of Jewish religious and social life, and, inspired by the Rebbe's approach, they are invariably proud of their Judaism. While the Rebbe was not directly involved in the curriculum or administration of any particular institution, countless schools and youth groups bear the imprint of his educational philosophy.

From his published works and letters, public talks, and numerous private conversations, we learn a great

deal about the Rebbe's approach to education. However, little attempt has been made thus far to bring this wealth of material together in an organized fashion. Indeed, this is among the first efforts to make the Rebbe's teachings on education available to a broader public.

As in every other subject, the Rebbe looked to Torah to provide guidance about how best to educate the next generation. And just as he encouraged people to take pride in their Jewishness in other aspects of life, he sought to instill self-respect in the classroom and at home.

The word "education" may be understood as the formal process that takes place in a school setting, but the Rebbe saw education as encompassing all issues related to the rearing of children and their personal development. Children are impacted by all the adult behavior they observe. Thus, parents and teachers share responsibility for educating children, even if each has a distinct role.

Moreover, the Rebbe saw education as an ongoing process of self-refinement. Completing one's formal education does not mean that one should stop learning, growing, or improving.

The Rebbe spoke often about the spiritual dimension of a child's being and how home and school must

nurture it cooperatively. When he spoke to educators, he pointed out their awesome responsibility in offering guidance on a broad range of topics. To parents, he stressed that raising children is a privilege; G-d gives them the opportunity to raise a new generation, and they have a responsibility to do so properly. Parents are to nourish and shelter their children, and also to create an environment in which their children may develop, morally and spiritually.

The Almighty does not require us to do the impossible, or to carry a burden too great for us, the Rebbe said. Thus, it follows that G-d endows parents with the ability to deal with any inherent challenges.

Daily, the Rebbe received hundreds of letters and requests for advice, opening each one personally. To most, he responded with a written comment on the letter itself, and to others he wrote a personal note. To date, dozens of volumes containing hundreds of letters have been published, representing only a portion of letters he authored.

His answers were invariably tailored to the needs and circumstances of the individual, and similar questions from different people were often answered in an entirely different manner.

The Rebbe did not author a focused guide for educators and parents. This book does not present a di-

gest of the Rebbe's thinking; rather, it is a compilation of what the Rebbe wrote and said. Since the Rebbe spoke in Yiddish and wrote in a number of languages (primarily Hebrew), this book is a free translation and adaptation. For the sake of coherency, the text was amended to follow a streamlined pronoun. In addition, to maintain the flow, we made efforts to condense duplicate concepts.

To provide context to the teachings, each chapter begins with a brief introduction to the subject matter at hand, followed by the Rebbe's actual words, with the sources identified in endnotes.

It is my hope and prayer that the lessons in this book will inspire parents and teachers to raise children proud of their heritage and devoted to passing it on to generations that follow.

Rabbi Nochem Kaplan

Principles in Education

The basic psychology of Chasidism as taught by Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, 18th century founder of the Chabad movement and author of the *Tanya*, is that human nature is driven by rival influences. The corporeal being is comprised of a person's inclination toward self-indulgence, ego, personal desires, the *yetzer hara*, and an opposing inclination toward spiritual fulfillment and selflessness, the *yetzer tov*. This tug-of-war continues throughout life.

Education is the process by which children are taught what is right and what will help them develop into moral, compassionate human beings. Merely teaching dry concepts, or helping them learn by trial and error, may lead to a struggle for self-fulfillment through indulgence and personal gain, at the expense of what truly matters. Therefore, the greatest responsibility of a Torah educator is to imbue all subjects with lessons that children comprehend and that aim to refine their character.

More specifically, at all times, a Torah teacher must bear in mind the ultimate objective of the education process. The lessons need to provide both direct and subconscious messages so children can extract inherent moral and ethical cues.

Against this backdrop, we may understand the up-

coming selections. The Rebbe cautioned teachers to concentrate less on what to avoid and not do, and more on what is appropriate and why it is desirable. He wanted the student to feel uplifted and inspired, not brow-beaten.

In a telling moment, the Rebbe encapsulated much of this. Following every festival, the Rebbe would distribute wine from his own goblet to the thousands who were present. He stood for hours as every individual passed by. He looked each person in the eye as he poured a small amount of wine into their cup. A newly-minted teacher passed the Rebbe and asked for a blessing as he embarked upon his career. Without missing a beat, the Rebbe said, “Build self-confidence.”

The Rebbe wanted educators to imbue their students with an understanding of what is right so they would pay no heed to teasers or scoffers. He charged Jewish educators with the mission to develop and strengthen their students’ spiritual inclination toward good, and imbue them with pride in their Jewish identity.

Character First

Education is not about the amount of knowledge a student will amass, but rather the development of positive character traits. This means that the student should strive to become the best version of themselves and behave good-naturedly in day-to-day life. This includes using their knowledge for righteous, honest, and peaceful purposes.

In other words, the student needs to first be shaped into a person with a moral character, while the acquisition of knowledge is secondary. When taught in this manner, the student will develop desirable traits that will then be apparent in their conduct.¹

Beauty Centered

Students should be spoken to about the greatness of G-d, His creation, and the preciousness of the human being.

There should be more emphasis on the beauty of Judaism than on criticizing worldly materialism. That is to say, focus and dwell on bolstering positive behavior, and less on refraining from negative behaviors.²

No Shame

When educating youth, it is important to emphasize the opening of the Jewish code of law, “One should not be embarrassed by the people who scoff at one’s service of G-d...” In addition, it should be emphasized that even if they don’t grasp why mitzvahs are kept in a certain manner, the child follows the directives of their parents and teachers, who source their belief in Torah.³

Focus On Kindness

The fundamental and underlying obligation of each educator is to teach that G-d is the essence of goodness and kindness, and following this path leads us to a life of fulfillment.⁴

Teaching Kindness

To learn kindness, every student should have their own charity box and give charity, ideally every weekday morning.

Additionally, students should establish and run a loan society, wherein a child can donate their own money from time to time. The children should be encouraged to run it themselves, utilizing their time, energy and talents for a worthy cause. They should choose a manager and treasurer from among themselves, and rotate these positions among the students at regular intervals.

This will increase their sense of responsibility, connection – and inevitably, their enthusiasm – for an act of charity.⁵

1. *Torat Menachem* 5742, vol. 3, p. 1197.

2. *Sichot Kodesh* 5728, vol. 1, p. 506

3. *Ibid*, p. 506.

4. *Igrot Kodesh*, vol. 13, pp. 332-333.

5. *Likkutei Sichot*, vol. 16, p. 625.

The School's Role

While the Rebbe understood the need for discipline, he suggested that self-regulation is ideal. He said numerous times that the greatest weakness of American Jewish youth is that they question the very idea of Divine authority, *kabbalat ol*, and find difficulty in following any guidelines.

The Rebbe saw *kabbalat ol* as the foundation of Jewish life and successful education. Children should not be free to challenge their teachers regarding why they need to learn one thing or another. They should learn to appreciate the dictates of their parents and teachers and accept the fact that their elders generally know what is in their best interest.

Educators and, broadly speaking, all adults within a child's sphere of influence should have high expectations, use personal encouragement, and utilize positive measures as much as possible. Any reprimand, the Rebbe said, must be accompanied by actions that can positively influence a child's behavior in the long-term. Additionally, he expected adults to help children practice self-discipline, but not to create a controlled or frightening environment where children cannot be themselves.

The Middle Ground

In the United States, many psychologists support indulging children. Since it is necessary to work with a professional, it is necessary to consider their opinions. With that – especially since some have already disagreed with this approach – one should explain to them that there is a middle-of-the-road approach.¹²⁰

The Foundation

It is commonly acknowledged that discipline is the foundation for success in learning and conduct.¹²¹ The goal of education is to lay foundations that the child can refer to for the rest of his life. When a child is taught about righteousness, honesty, Torah and mitzvahs, and the Thirteen Principles of Faith, they should understand: “This Torah will not be changed.”¹²² Then, when they have a desire for something negative, they can refer back to their unwavering foundation.¹²³

Focus on Positive

One should refrain from lengthy descriptions of evil. Rather one's main focus should be the virtue of true goodness. The best way to accomplish this is through informal gatherings on topics appropriate to the children's level of understanding, and include storytelling, singing, dancing, and so on.¹²⁴

Mealtime

Mealtimes can foster emotional closeness, so they should be utilized to instill manners in accordance with Jewish customs and observances.¹²⁵

Hitting

Hitting a child is more destructive than productive. Other methods – like temporary suspension, expulsion, or preventing the child from participating in certain activities – might also be employed, but the best option is to increase supervision over the students. This should minimize undesirable behaviors until they stop altogether.¹²⁶

Not Just the Classroom

A good educator cares not only for their students' acquisition of information. They also teach their students to be refined in conduct: eating, sleeping and behaving appropriately outside their immediate environment.¹²⁷

Embrace the Right

It is necessary to protect a child from negative influences. When pointing out undesirable influences, the reproach should be, as the sages say, “[the] left hand rebuffs.”¹²⁸ They metaphorically emphasized that rebuke should be done with the less dominant “hand” and not with the same force as the measure used for “the right” and stronger hand, which should be used to embrace them.¹²⁹

120. *Igrot Kodesh*, vol. 19, p. 298.

121. *Ibid.*, vol. 10, p. 86.

122. Ninth of Maimonides’ “Thirteen Principles of Faith.”

123. *Torat Menachem 5744*, vol. 1, p. 105.

124. *Igrot Kodesh*, vol. 12, p. 378.

125. *Igrot Kodesh*, vol. 14, p. 409.

126. *Ibid.*, vol. 21, p. 195.

127. *Sichot Kodesh 5736*, vol. 2, p. 149

128. The Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 107b.

129. *Igrot Melech*, vol. 2, pp. 143-144.

**Twelve
Essential
Verses**

Our sages taught millennia ago that what is committed to memory at an early age is not easily forgotten. The Rebbe introduced the idea of having children frequently recite, ponder, and memorize twelve Torah passages that express the core of Jewish belief and practice. Moreover, they represent the basic commitment and personal connection to G-d, which is the spiritual lifeline of every person.

Introducing the idea of reciting the passages in the spring of 1976, the Rebbe said that education is not only about wisdom and knowledge. It is also about teaching about daily life, even while eating, sleeping, and traveling.²²⁹ Therefore, the good teacher's instruction is recognizable in their students at any time of day. The Rebbe said he would choose these verses, teaching the child to understand them well enough to be able to explain the ideas to a friend.

When instructed at their level, the Rebbe said, the child would recall the verses while playing and be able to conduct themselves appropriately.

Learning the verses would also encourage the child's natural enthusiasm in these areas. Because of this outward expression beyond their normal natural conduct, "it will not depart them," when they are older (Proverbs

22:6), and they will be able to go beyond their perceived limitations in their service to G-d.²³⁰

Presented here are the twelve verses explained by the Rebbe with introductions by my son, Rabbi Mendel Kaplan.

229. See Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilchot Deiot* 5:1.

230. *Sichot Kodesh* 5736, vol. 2, pp. 145 and 148ff.

בְּרֵאשִׁית בְּרֵא
אֶ-לֹהִים אֶת
הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ

The world seems a dysfunctional mess. War, poverty, crime, terrorism and hatred are rampant. Can we ever know peace?

The Torah opens with a Divine act; all creation has a sacred purpose. The world was created broken but we can repair and perfect it. We have the capacity to be partners in making it a place of spiritual peace and perfection – a dwelling place for the Divine – releasing the world’s potential for goodness.

Knowing this magnificent plan can lift our spirits even when we feel overwhelmed. It can make us realize that the world is predisposed to goodness for us all. But the specific task of discovering and accomplishing the world’s holy potential is *our* duty and responsibility.

Overcoming Shock

Filled with chaos and negativity, our sages refer to the world as “desolate.”²⁴⁶ One can be shocked by all around them. Thus, the verse tells us that the heavens and all that are in them, and the land and all that is on it, were created by G-d. There is a Master of the world who gave us the Torah so that we can lead the world and bring blessing and success.²⁴⁷

Daily Recognition

When the child recognizes that G-d created the world, the daily blessings at mealtime become a mission of revealing light, seeing G-dliness in the everyday. In this way they bring more light into their surroundings.²⁴⁸

Refraining Tool

When the child has knowledge of the Creator, it is easier to follow G-d's wishes. If evil urges them to forgo a blessing over their food, they can easily tell themselves that it is the voice of a fool. "Don't you know that G-d created this food," they will now think, "and I need to thank Him for it." The same is true when a friend tells them to do something wrong; they now have the means to answer them.²⁴⁹

Activities United

Both Torah study and prayers, "heaven," and our activities on "earth" are created by G-d. Thus, the mundane should be imbued with the spiritual light from our study and prayer.²⁵⁰

246. The Talmud, *Yevamot* 62b.

247. *Der Rebbe Redt Tzu Kinder*, vol. 1, p. 262.

248. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

249. *Ibid.*, p. 291.

250. *Ibid.*, p. 295.