

The Parenting Rod¹

Susie and her four-year old daughter, Judy, were at the check-out line in the grocery store. The racks near the counter were laden with all sorts of tempting sweets. Judy noticed one particularly mouth-watering chocolate bar and begged for it.

Susie firmly refused, citing the many treats her daughter has already consumed that day and how it would spoil her appetite for dinner. Judy's wails began to grow louder. From past experience, young Judy has already determined that the louder and longer she cried, the greater the chance of her mother giving in to her demands.

Soon Susie capitulated and Judy was contently sucking her treat.

One row over, Susie noticed, the same scene was being played out with another mother and child. Yet, as that child's wails began to grow louder the mother simply said, "I'm sorry, honey, but that candy bar is not kosher and we may not eat it."

To Susie's amazement, the child's whimpering stopped. *From past experience, he understood that this was an unyielding rule, which neither tears nor screams would succeed in breaking.*

Are there "red" lines—certain rules and standards that our children realize cannot be broken? How do we establish these principles? And when we do, does this leave any room for spontaneity and flexibility?

The Torah refers to Israel's tribes either as *shevatim*, "branches" or *matot*, "rods." Both terms express the concept that **the twelve tribes of Israel are all branches or offshoots of the same root**. But there is a not-so-subtle distinction between the two terms. A *shevet* is a supple, pliant branch. In our case, the Torah chooses the term *mateh*, which connotes a firm, inflexible stick.

The basis of successful parenting is establishing *matot*—firm, unbending principles to guide our children. **Children thrive on consistency, uniformity, and stability in their lives.** They intuitively distinguish which standards and values we regard as essential and immutable and which can be challenged and negated.

Especially in today's world, **our children look to us for a set of morals and standards that don't yield to outside pressure.** If these are instilled in the earliest stages of their development, then, when unsuitable choices

tempt them, or when others taunt them for who they are, they will be able to draw strength from the fixed values of their upbringing. They will have the fortitude and firm determination of *matot*, unyielding rods.

King Solomon teaches in Proverbs, "*chosech shivto, soneh benoh*" (חֹשֶׁךְ שִׁבְטוֹ שׂוֹנֵה בְנוֹ [Pro 13:24]) which literally means, "he who withholds his rod, hates his child" (hence the popular adage, "spare the rod and spoil the child"). The message of this wisdom for our times is that a loving, caring parent must imbue his child with conceptual rods-firm and unyielding principles to guide him through the bewildering paths of life.

At the same time, there are moments in parenting when it is necessary, for the sake of our child's growth and progress, to stretch boundaries and overlook nuances or details.

Children are not static creatures; they are vibrant, emotional individuals with developing intelligences and needs. **Rules are meant to be constructive, not stifling and destructive, to create positive results while providing guidance to advance our children through life's journeys.**

Massei, means "journeys" and it chronicles the travels of the Jewish people in the Sinai desert to their destination in the Holy Land. Unlike the rod, a journey is, by definition, not fixed and unyielding, but represents fluid movement, a passage forward towards a goal.

On the face of it, these two principles of *Matot* and *Massei* seem contradictory. ***Matot* instructs us to establish a steadfastness and immobility, like the strong non-pliant rod, while *Massei* encourages us to move forward, change, and transform.** But in combining these two sections in a single reading, the Torah teaches us that both can, and should, be incorporated in our own approach to life.

First establish *Matot*, strong, uncompromising values as a basis. The Torah guides us with definite rules of right and wrong, the permitted and the forbidden.

But at the same time, the Torah provides a space and flexibility to accommodate unique needs. At times, small exceptions, detours, or a different approach must be explored for optimal growth, while still remaining true to essential principles.

In life we need the skill to navigate these two modes: to balance strength and compromise, immobility and flexibility.

Because at all times we must remember that the goal is to keep journeying forward.

1. *The Torah refers to Israel's tribes either as shevatim, "branches" or matot, "rods."*

1 Chana Weisberg, *Shabbat deLights, Vayikra/Bamidbar/Devarim*, (chabad.org), pp. 191-194.

a. *Parshat Mattot* is always read during the *three weeks of mourning* over the destruction of the Holy Temple—an event which plunged the Jewish people into a physical and spiritual exile from which they have not yet (completely) recovered ... **Scripture uses two terms to refer to the tribes of Israel—*mattot* and *shevatim*.**²

1) The difference between them is that “*mattot*” are branches that have become *detached* from the tree, and have *hardened* to form a staff or a rod—“*Shevatim*” on the other hand, **refers to branches that still remain attached to their trunk, and are thus soft and flexible.**

b. מַטֵּה—*staff, rod, shaft, branch, tribe.*

1) Exodus 4:17

But take this **staff (*ha-mateh*)** in your hand so you can perform miraculous signs with it.”

2) 2Chronicles 5:2

Then Solomon summoned to Jerusalem the elders of Israel, all the **heads of the tribes (*rashei ha-mattot*)** and the chiefs of the Israelite families, to bring up the ark of the LORD’s covenant from Zion, the City of David.

c. שֵׁבֶט—*rod, staff, club, scepter, tribe.*

1) Genesis 49:10

“The **scepter (*shevet*)** shall not depart from Judah, Nor the (Lawgiver) from between his feet, Until Shiloh comes, And to him *shall be* the obedience of the peoples.”

a) Targum Onkelos

*The Targum Onkelos is a literal translation of the Torah into Aramaic, intended to present a simple rendering of the Hebrew text that would be faithful to the original and yet transmit the spirit and context of the text.*³ *Onkelos (a proselyte) was a contemporary of Rabban Gamaliel of Yavneh, (c. 45–c. 115 ce). His relationship with Gamaliel was a close one, and when Gamaliel died Onkelos arranged a costly funeral for him, such as was usually reserved for royalty.*⁴

The transmission of dominion shall not cease from the house of Judah, nor the scribe from his children’s children, forever, **until the Messiah comes, to whom the Kingdom belongs, and whom nations shall obey.**

2) Genesis 49:28

All these are the twelve **tribes of Israel (*shivtei Yisrael*)**, and this is what their father (Jacob) said to them when he blessed them, giving each the blessing appropriate to him.

2. *Both terms (*mattot* and *shevatim*) express the concept that **the twelve tribes of Israel are all branches or offshoots of the same root.***

a. John 15:5 (CJB)

⁵“I am the vine and **you are the branches. Those who stay united with me, and I with them, are the ones who bear much fruit;** because apart from me you can’t do a thing.

b. Romans 11:11-24

¹¹Again I ask: Did (Israel) stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? **Not at all!** Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel (jealous). ¹²But if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, **how much greater riches will their full inclusion bring!** ...

¹⁷If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and **now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root**, ¹⁸do not consider yourself to be superior to those other branches. If you do, consider this: **You do not support the root, but the root supports you.**

¹⁹You will say then, “Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in.” ²⁰Granted. But they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but tremble. ²¹For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either. ²²Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off. ²³And if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for **God is able to graft them in again.** ²⁴After all, if you were cut out of an olive tree that is wild by nature, and contrary to nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much more readily will these, the natural branches, be grafted into **their own olive tree!**

1) Hosea 14:1-6

¹Return, Israel, to the LORD your God. Your sins have been your downfall! ²Take words with you and return to the LORD. Say to him: “Forgive all our sins and receive us graciously, that we may offer the fruit of our lips ... ⁴“I will heal their waywardness and love them freely, for my anger has turned away from them. ⁵I will be like the dew to Israel; he will blossom like a lily ... ⁶his young shoots will grow. **His splendor will be like an olive tree,** his fragrance like a cedar of Lebanon.

² Rabbi Chaim Miller, Ed., *The Gutnick Edition Chumash, The Book of Numbers*, (Kol Menachem, 2005), p. 243.

³ Noah Aminoah & Yosef Nitzan, *Torah, The Oral Tradition* (World Zionist Organization), p. 23.

⁴ Encyclopædia Judaica Research Foundation, *Encyclopædia Judaica* (Keter Publishing House Jerusalem Ltd), Vol. 12, p. 1406.

3. *Children thrive on consistency, uniformity, and stability in their lives. They intuitively distinguish which standards and values we regard as essential and immutable and which can be challenged and negated.*

- a. A team of landscape architects conducted a simple study⁵ to observe any physical and psychological influences of having a fence around a playground, and how its consequent effects would impact preschool children.⁶

By observing teachers and their students on a playground surrounded by a fence, and on a comparable playground with no fence, **the researchers found a striking difference in how the children interacted in the space.**

On playgrounds without fences, the children tended to gather around the teacher, and were reluctant to stray far from her view. On playgrounds that were fenced in, however, they ran all around the entire playground, feeling more free to explore.

The researchers concluded that with a boundary, in this case a fence, children felt more at ease to explore the space.

- b. Deuteronomy 6:24-25

²⁴The LORD commanded us to obey all these decrees and to fear the LORD our God, **so that we might always prosper and be kept alive**, as is the case today. ²⁵And if we are careful to obey all this law before the LORD our God, as he has commanded us, that will be our righteousness."

- c. Deuteronomy 17:18-20

¹⁸When he takes the throne of his kingdom, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the Levitical priests. ¹⁹It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life **so that he may learn to revere the LORD his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees** ²⁰and not consider himself better than his fellow Israelites and turn from the law to the right or to the left. **Then he and his descendants will reign a long time** over his kingdom in Israel.

- d. Deuteronomy 29:29

²⁹The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but **the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever**, that we may follow all the words of this law.

- e. Deuteronomy 31:12-13

¹²Assemble the people—**men, women and children, and the foreigners residing in your towns**—so they can listen and learn to fear the LORD your God and follow carefully all the words of this

law. ¹³Their children, who do not know this law, must hear it and learn to fear the LORD your God as long as you live in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess."

- 1) Ephesians 2:11-13

¹¹Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth ... ¹²remember that at that time **you were separate from Messiah, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world.** ¹³**But now in Messiah Yeshua you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Messiah.**

4. *Children are not static creatures; they are vibrant, emotional individuals with developing intelligences and needs. Rules are meant to be constructive, not stifling and destructive, to create positive results while providing guidance to advance our children through life's journeys.*

- a. Ephesians 6:1-4

¹Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ²"Honor your father and mother"—which is the first commandment with a promise—"so that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth" (Exo 20:12). ⁴Fathers, do not **exasperate (infuriate, frustrate, annoy, irritate)** your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.

- b. Colossians 3:20-21

²⁰Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. ²¹Fathers, **do not embitter your children**, or they will become discouraged.

CJB, NJB—don't **irritate** your children and make them **resentful** ...

KJV, NKJ, RSV—**provoke not** your children *to anger* ...

MIT, NAS—do not **exasperate** your children lest they lose heart.

NIRV—don't make your children **bitter**.

YLT Colossians 3:21 the fathers! **vex (rile)** not your children ...

5. These 7 Jewish parenting principles can help you go from bearish to bullish on your best long-term investment:⁷

- a. Parenting Is a Partnership

"There are three partners in the making of man: the father, the mother and G-d." (Kiddushin [Sanctification], 30b)

G-d is a partner in this parenting endeavor. We can, and dare I say, must, rely on Divine assistance because quite frankly, this

⁵ <https://www.asla.org/awards/2006/studentawards/282.html>

⁶ <https://uxdesign.cc/fenced-in-playgrounds-d5f9371f8414>

⁷ https://www.chabad.org/theJewishWoman/article_cdo/aid/4085869/jewish/7-Jewish-Parenting-Principles-Inspired-by-Experience.htm

task is at times (if not at *all* times) beyond our human capacity. But, as the Midrash attests, G-d does not make excessive demands of us. **If He gave us these children, it means that they are the perfect match for us and we for them—hard as it may be to believe at times!** But don't despair because this also means that it's not all up to us!

b. Capitalize on Core Competencies

“Educate the child according to his way and when he's old he will not depart from it ... ” (Pro 22:6)

G-d has given each of our children unique personalities, strengths and weaknesses. We must recognize and respect our children's individuality. The inherent way of a child—his or her G-d-given traits—**should not be suppressed by parents**. Rather, we should cultivate them to the fullest, bearing in mind that negative traits should be channeled positively.

In addition, the sages explain that children must be trained in self-discipline—to set boundaries and change their habitual natures until they attain sovereignty of mind over heart (*Tanya*,⁸ Chapter 12). Living a life that is guided by the framework of Torah law provides plenty of opportunities to exercise mindfulness over impulse and hone this ability.

c. Compliance Remains Key

“Honor your father and your mother, so that your days should be lengthened.” (Exo 20:12)

If your children exhibit chutzpah (audacity) sometimes, then you're in good company. **Children are not naturally inclined to treat their parents with respect**; hence, the need for the Fifth Commandment, which by the way, is about behavior, not feeling. It's inclusion as one of the “Big Ten” suggests that rude children are nothing new. But it also teaches us how to prevent them from turning into self-absorbed, thoughtless adults.

Jewish psychologist and parenting expert Wendy Mogel points out in *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee* that **children “will only accept your guidance and heed your advice if they respect you**. ... If you don't teach your children to honor you, you'll have a very hard time teaching them anything else.” By honoring their parents, children will be more likely to respect authority, the older generation, and in turn, make the leap from family to commu-

nity. Their reward will thus be length in days to contribute to this world.

d. Hedge With Love

“The right hand draws near and the left hand pushes away.” (Sanhedrin, 107b)

King Solomon warned “one who withholds his rod, despises his child,” (*Mishlei* 13:24). Yet as naturally loving parents, we often wonder: How much discipline and how to discipline? We do it with the less dominant hand—“the left hand.”

Our sages emphasize numerous times that “the left hand pushes away.” Discipline should be implemented rarely, and we can influence our children more if we approach them *b'darchei noam*—pleasantly and peacefully. The Rambam advises that it is best to take the middle path, and in his parting letter to his children heed them to always “consider what you are going to say before letting the words escape.” Yes, that does suggest that we parents should stop yelling (present company included).

Temper the discipline with a heavy dose of love.

e. Stick to the Fundamentals

“The soul of man is a candle of G-d.” (Pro 20:27)

A Jewish child has a soul that “is truly a part of G-d above” (*Tanya*, Chapter 2). Focus on this fundamental part of your child and see the good inherent in them. Moreover, just like when we hold a candle near a large flame it will be attracted to the larger flame, our souls are attracted to its Divine Source. When we train our children in the observance of *mitzvot*, we afford them the opportunity for their souls to shine overtly.

Many mothers add one Shabbat candle for each of their children. **Teach your children that the world is brighter because of their existence**. Imbue in them the understanding that they are a “light unto the nations.” (Isa 42:6)

f. Be a Mentor

“For I know him, that he will instruct his children and his household after him, so that they will keep the path of G-d, to do righteousness and justice.” (Gen 18:19)

We are our children's teachers of right and wrong, based on the Divine blueprint set for humankind: the Torah. Perhaps this is best seen in the connection between the Hebrew words: “parent” (*horim*), “teacher” (*moreh*), “instruction” (*horah*). **How we want them to live, we must first model.**

⁸ The *Tanya* is essentially a work on Jewish religious ethics. The author is primarily concerned with the forces of good and evil in human nature and in the surrounding world, and his objective ... is to pave a new way to one's highest good.

The Talmud lists religious teachings, as well as universal teachings of a very practical nature, which we must impart on our children. The obligation to find them a spouse also means educating them to become emotionally mature adults, equipped to maintain familial relationships. Teaching our children a profession means providing them with the practical skills necessary to survive and succeed in life. Aside from the life-saving component, the obligation to teach our children how to swim also means teaching them the skills necessary to swim amid the risks and challenges inherent in life's murky waters. But once we've taught them how, we can't swim for them!

g. Take Risks

"Lech Lecha" (Gen 12:1)

"Go forth!" G-d told Avraham when it was time for him to leave his father's land and venture out into the unknown. This phrase, which literally means "go to yourself," teaches us that the capabilities to go are precisely within ourselves. In order for our children to learn confidence in their abilities to triumph over life's challenges, **we must allow them to venture out into the world and work things out on their own.**

In the process, we must be mindful to praise and encourage their efforts over talents. "Man was created to toil" (*Job* 5:7). Toil, not produce. As Rabbi Tarfon says, "You are not required to complete the task, yet you are not free to withdraw from it" (*Ethics of Our Fathers* 2:21). When we encourage effort, we foster what Stanford University psychologist Carol Dweck refers to as a "growth mindset," which results in more patience, and a willingness to take risks and experiment with different tasks.

When our children are being rambunctious, we wish them to be angels. Yet angels are standing, stagnant beings—*omdim*, who don't grow or move (*Zec* 3:7). Humans (a.k.a. our rambunctiously active kids) are *holchim* ("movers"). Unlike the angels, they climb levels and can reach higher. They can fall and can get up again. Let them move, let them swim, let them grow!

Four kids and 13 years later, I run my home with the precision of a CEO, bake homemade challah and have a team of pleasantly behaved children ... some days. The other days, I rely on these parenting principles to stay the course on what I now bullishly believe to have been my best long-term investment.