

ברחם אב על בנים

A Message to Parents
Of Children With
Developmental Disabilities

Divrei Torah VeChizuk from
HaGaon HaGadol Rav Moshe Shapiro, *zatzal*

An English adaptation of a Yiddish speech given by
HaGaon HaGadol Rav Moshe Shapiro, *zatzal*
in May 1996, to parents of children with developmental disabilities

by Moshe Antebi

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∞ A World of Chessed

An exceedingly great man, one of the foremost *Gedolei Hador*, related the following story.

Once, when he was younger, and his house was full of unruly children, his uncle paid him a visit. His wife was not home at the time, and the house was in turmoil. The children were running all over the place, and two of them were yanking and shoving each other while sitting on his lap. Yet he handled each of them calmly and patiently.

His uncle, an older, dignified, individual from a prominent family, saw his absolute devotion and wondered aloud, “When will they repay you for all that you do for them?”

The question confounded him, and he paused for a moment.

Finally, he said, “I imagine they repay us by establishing future generations. They give us continuity. This *nachass* is my repayment. Nonetheless, in a few days,

I need to travel to Yerushalayim, and I will ask the Brisker Rav.”

He repeated the incident to the Brisker Rav ז”ל and related his thoughts about *nachass* as repayment.

The Brisker Rav said, “My son, this is close to kefirah. *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* created the world based on *chessed*—
עולם חסד יבנה. He created the world for giving without anticipating repayment—that is true *chessed*. With this *chessed*, He created the world, and with this *chessed*, the world continues to develop; true *chessed* is the world’s cornerstone.

“Thus, the very question is wrong. Our children will never repay us. What we do for them is pure *chessed*. Hashem established this pure *chessed* as the very nature of the world. Every new creation is founded on *chessed*.” The reaction of the Brisker Rav shook him to the core, and caused him to rethink his entire outlook.

עולם חסד יבנה. *Chessed* is the foundation of the world. Raising children is not an investment. Hashem did not give us this opportunity so we could receive *nachass* in return. *Nachass* is a separate reward that Hashem gives us, but that is not why He gives us children. He gives us children because the world is built on *chessed*. Our obligation is to raise them because the existence of the world depends on true *chessed*.

∞ *Tzelem Elokim*

We must always remember that Hashem created man as a *tzelem Elokim*. כי בצלם אלקים עשה את האדם. Every human being is born as a *tzelem Elokim*. Our *tzelem Elokim* needs to be expressed, and we express it primarily through our children. Our *tzelem Elokim* is our ability to create worlds based on *chessed* just as Hashem created the world based on *chessed*. R' Chaim Volozhiner notes that *tzelem "Elokim,"* uses the identical *Shem* as in creation, "אלקים" בראשית ברא, because Hashem created man essentially as a creator. Just as Hashem is the Creator, so also man is a creator.

Unequivocally, every single child who is born is a human being, and as such is a *tzelem Elokim*. Never is there any deficiency whatsoever in the *tzelem Elokim* of a child—whether he be the most disadvantaged, the most difficult, or the most limited. These imperfections are illnesses. As *Chazal* clearly tell us, when Hashem will bring the *ישועה*, the cure for these illnesses will also be revealed. These are merely illnesses, nothing more, and just as any illness does not *chalilah* annul the *tzelem Elokim*, so also, these illnesses do not affect the *tzelem Elokim* in any respect; it remains intact, completely. Every human child, every creation born of a father and mother, is a creation of *tzelem Elokim*. As long as it is a living creation, it is a *tzelem Elokim*—the form in which Hashem

created man—and the *tzelem Elokim* will always have a cure.

We are not the most beautiful *tzelem Elokim* ourselves. How much *nachass* do we imagine Hashem has from us? He created us, as we create our children. How can we even imagine that we have children so they can give us *nachass*? We think that we need to toil with their upbringing for a number of years, but afterwards we need to reap the reward. Afterwards?—we usually expect *nachass* immediately, after a few weeks or months.

Why should we deserve this? Is our appearance so rosy? What *nachass* do we bring? We do not look much better—guaranteed. We also are not the ideal *tzelem Elokim*; we can certainly be better. Yet despite this, Hakadosh Baruch Hu created us and He bestows upon us all goodness, with no expectation of tremendous *nachass*. But this is the foundation of the world, עולם חסד יבנה. He bestows *chessed* upon us without anticipating repayment.

Indeed, we do not repay even one billionth of what He gives to us. Of this, we say in *Nishmass*, אין אנחנו מספיקים להודות לך ה' אלקינו וגו' על אחת מאלף אלפי אלפים ורבי רבבות פעמים הטובות שעשית עם אבותינו ועמנו. We do not repay even the slightest fraction of all the good that He has done for us and for our ancestors. Despite all this, He creates us and bestows upon us, showering us with *chessed*, in infinite abundance.

∞ Parenting

In precisely the same manner, our relation to our children is a duty of *chessed*. Hashem gave us a task, a responsibility, a calling; our obligation is to carry it out. Every child is helpless, the most helpless creature in the world. No other living creature is as helpless as the human child. Humans require parents—some for a short while, some for much longer, and some never stand on their own two feet. These children were created in a manner that requires us to be more of a parent, and for an extended period. We need to raise them longer, and we need to bestow *chessed* upon them longer. But the extended *chessed* that we need to give to them is truly the greatest gift that Hashem could have given to us.

Our ability to bestow *chessed* upon them longer is direct compensation for the perceived deficiency in their *tzelem Elokim*. In truth, they do not lack any element of *tzelem Elokim*, and *Chazal* guarantee that they will all become healthy—either immediately, if we merit the *ישועה* במהרה בימינו, or in *Olam Habo*. We are *בני מאמינים*. We live here on This World for *Olam Habo*. Our life here is not for the few years that we wander around. We are *Yidden*, and we believe *באמונה שלימה* that Hashem placed us here to fulfill our task in the few years allotted to us but our ultimate purpose is for our subsequent state of being, our life in *Olam Habo*.

Hashem created man to live forever. But man sinned and brought death to the world, ביום אכלך ממנו מות תמות. Death was decreed upon Adam HaRishon and all his descendants, and it is inescapable. מי גבר יחי' ולא יראה מות, ימלט נפשו מיד שאול סלה. Each of us must pass from This World; when our time comes, our lives will end. The ending of life, is the true and terrible misfortune. Life is extremely limited; it only lasts a few years. When we are young, we imagine we will live forever, but as we age, we realize no one lives forever; our lives inevitably end.

Our life here is one of labor. We live here, but this is not the purpose of our creation. We were given a few years here to fulfill our obligation. *Nachass*, we receive only later. היום לעשותם ומחר לקבל שכרם. To expect reward at once, to wish for *nachass* instantly, to consume it immediately, is to forfeit true reward. If we devour it here, nothing will remain for us there.

∞ Real *Nachass*

Our existence here is not for reward; we were not created for the *nachass* of This World. The *nachass* that This World provides is infinitesimal and foolish. Woe to one who thinks that he was brought to This World for the measly *nachass* it offers. Everyone knows this. Every Yid knows and understands that we were not born for this. היום לעשותם, אדם לעמל יולד. We were created for toil,

The greatest fulfillment of לעשותם, the greatest manner of being a *tzelem Elokim*, a reflection of the One Above, is by bringing another human being into the world. We too create human beings, and we raise them. But once they stand on their own two feet, our work ends. If, however, Hashem gives us the opportunity to become parents and to continue being parents, to bestow continually and to raise our children always, and without anticipating any *nachass*—in this manner, we stand before our Creator as His ultimate reflection.

In *Selichos*, we repeatedly cry out, כרחם אב על בנים כן. תרחם ה' עלינו. We beseech Hakadosh Baruch Hu to have mercy on us precisely as fathers have mercy on their children. If the mercy of fathers—and mothers—were for a limited time, and they expected immediate *nachass* in return, how can we open our mouths and ask Hashem to have mercy on us as a father has mercy on his children? Where is His *nachass* from us?

The only parents who give us the ability to beseech Him in this manner are you—the fathers and mothers of these children—who remain parents for a very, very long time, and without any expectation of *nachass*. In truth, there is also tremendous *nachass*. Every hairsbreadth of progress that your child makes, every step forward that he takes, is great *nachass*—and this is true *nachass*. True *nachass* is seeing that our efforts were not completely in vain but they accomplished something. You give all of us

the ability to stand before Hashem and say to him, “*Ribono Shel Olam*—see how these parents have mercy on their children, without anticipating any *nachass*. כרחם אב על בנים כן תרחם ה' עלינו.

I speak from the depths of my heart. These children, regardless of their appearance, are *tzelem Elokim*, and it is certain that when we all rise together for *Techiyas HaMeisim*, they will appear much more magnificent than we will. When the time comes, the time of truth in the World of Truth, it is certain that those parents who are embarrassed of them will be an embarrassment to them, רחמנא ליצלק, and those parents who know what Hashem has given and who take pride in them will be a source of pride for them.

Only someone who raises a child and the child does something wrong *chalilah* has a reason to be ashamed. What have we done wrong here? Of what should we be ashamed? This is a wonderful gift from Hashem. He gave us the opportunity to be parents and to fulfill to perfection עולם חסד יבנה. We should not be ashamed, we should be proud. We should consider ourselves great because Hakadosh Baruch Hu holds of us and gave us such a task, a task upon which the entire universe stands. When we perceive this, then with the help of Hashem, when the time of truth arrives and the proper *tzelem Elokim* will be revealed, they will not be ashamed of us.

∞ Indescribable Joy

The tiniest hairsbreadth of progress, the slightest improvement, the smallest ray of light, brings untold joy. As all of you know, what an ordinary child accomplishes in a single day, these children accomplish in years. Their growth process, their ability to stand on their own two feet, is much, much longer, and much, much harder. But when you see growth, when your great and difficult effort results in a tiny, minute development, and the child improves slightly beyond his capabilities of a year ago, your joy is beyond words. Ordinary parents know nothing of this; they have no inkling of how this true *nachass* looks.

This true *nachass* is true repayment for your difficult work. It is but a hairsbreadth, but it is your hairsbreadth. רוצה אדם בקב שלו מתשעה קבים של חברו, man favors a single portion of his own more than nine portions of another. Ordinary children develop, but their development is not the קב שלו of the parents. Perhaps the growth of ordinary children is תשעה קבים של חברו, but it is תשעה קבים של חברו. It is not our toil, not what we put in. With these children, the more we put in, the greater the קב שלו. The joy of the slightest progress is therefore incomparable. It is but a hairsbreadth, but it is קב שלו, which is infinitely greater than תשעה קבים של חברו. When the child reaches the stage of dressing himself, the sensation is indescribable. For ordinary

parents, this is nothing new, no great accomplishment—if the child does not dress himself, he is rebuked. With these children, to accomplish this is difficult work, and the result is truly repayment.

Truthfully, there is nothing more to say. We cannot have any claims against Hakadosh Baruch Hu for giving us what appears to be a punishment. At first, it seems like a terrible punishment—life imprisonment, רחמנא ליצילך. But Hakadosh Baruch Hu gave us the opportunity to understand. He gave us the intelligence to think matters over, to delve into them more and more, and to recognize that He considers you great enough to be given this task. You were given the opportunity to be the ones because of whom all of Klal Yisrael has the ability to say to the One Above, כרחם אב על בנים כן תרחם ה' עלינו.

∞ Beyond This World

On a deeper level, these children are exalted, exceedingly precious individuals. The manner in which Hashem created the world is that these נשמות cannot express themselves here, except to a very, very limited degree. He therefore provided them with faculties that enable them to display only a fraction of their greatness.

Hashem created man with the ability to bring out his inner self, to express his נשמה in the world. Targum translates רוח ממללא as ויהי האדם לנפש חי' in other words, he

defines life as the ability to speak, to express one's inner self. These children were not given the full ability to express their inner self. This does not mean *chalilah* that they lack an inner self. To the contrary, their inner self is so elevated that it cannot be expressed in this limited world.

If we believe this and know this, if we see the world as Hakadosh Baruch Hu wants us to see it—not superficially but with the outlook of Torah, with the outlook of Emunah, we understand and see in these children something much higher than we can touch. Truly, we should take pride that Hashem gave us the opportunity to care for this elevated צורת אדם, to raise such an illustrious נשמה on This World.

These facts are recorded in the words of *Chazal* in the clearest terms, and despite the difficulty of explaining the concept at length because of its depth, we need to believe and to understand that the deficiency of these children is only in their visible aspect; inside, they are no less than anyone else.

The point I wish to emphasize is that they are truly much, much greater than everyone else.

For this reason, they lack coordination. Their extremely elevated נשמה and their גוף are incompatible; their inner and outer selves do not mesh. Their outer self cannot reveal their inner self, and this inability expresses itself in their appearance.

Their lack of coordination, their inability to reveal their true inner self, the incompatibility of what is known in פנימיות התורה as the אורות and the כלים, is due not to any inferiority but to their superiority, which prevents the bond, the coordination, the unity, of their inner and outer selves.

∞ Summation

Hakadosh Baruch Hu gave us this task. He gave us the incredible opportunity to perform true and pure *chessed*, the cornerstone of creation. עולם חסד יבנה. This *chessed* is the truest form of *chessed*. For this, we must be very thankful to Him.

Moreover, if we live with the Torah mindset and see the world with the perspective we received at סיני and not with the perspective we have gleaned from the outside world, we know that we were granted a child who because of his greatness has very little to accomplish here. He needs to be here, to exist in This World, but he has virtually no obligations, virtually no עבודה. This alone is the greatest indication of how great he truly is.

His small amount of עבודת ה', his lack of coordination, his inability to express his inner self—are all because of his greatness. *Halevai* that we were so great as to tell the *Ribono Shel Olam*, “Thank You. Thank You for the opportunity to care for such a truly great נשמה.”

Words cannot sufficiently express how my heart feels towards parents who truly understand what Hakadosh Baruch Hu gave them and perceive it correctly as a task. All of Klal Yisrael is indebted to you, owing you the greatest *הכרת הטוב*, because you are the cornerstone of the universe. *עולם חסד יבנה*, and true *chessed* is *chessed* bestowed without anticipating anything in return. You are parents continually, always remaining fathers and mothers, without expecting any great *nachass*.

In truth, after all your efforts, after all the work you put into your child, Hashem grants you *nachass* that cannot be experienced with ordinary children. The boundless joy that comes from the slightest change, from the smallest amount of progress, caused by your efforts, is very great reward indeed. This is the true fulfillment of *רוצה אדם בקב שלו יותר מתשעה קבים של חבירו*.

In addition, and perhaps most importantly—with the proper belief and perspective, you know without reservation that Hakadosh Baruch Hu gave you the chance to have not a child among millions of others, but a unique child, a child so elevated, you cannot reach him at all. You cannot relate to him, only slightly, you can scarcely connect with him—but he is your child, and he is very, very lofty.

As *Chazal* clearly say, these imperfections are merely illnesses, and like all illnesses, they are curable. We do not know how, we cannot relate to this. Our medicine has no inkling of the cure, but it is an illness and it has a cure.

Every *tzelem Elokim* will ultimately become healthy, and when your child is cured, his form will be spectacularly different. To use our meager words, you will reap such *nachass* as to cause jealousy in those who do not reap it. To see such *nachass*, you need to be זוכה; you need to take this as a task. Then, with the help of Hashem, you will live to see the true and great *nachass*, במהרה בימינו אמן.

לז"נ

אשר בן אליעזר
מלכה בת שמואל הלוי

ת . נ . ע . ב . ה .

לעילוי נשמת
האשה החשובה
בלימא שבע עלקא
בת גרשון ע"ה
ת . נ . צ . ב . ה .

לעילוי נשמת
אברהם בן מזל ע"ה
ת . נ . צ . ב . ה .

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