

# Explaining Sensitive Torah Concepts to Children

## Jews and Non-Jews

- Always remind children that all people<sup>1</sup>, including non-Jews<sup>2</sup> of every race and ethnicity, need to be treated with utmost dignity<sup>3</sup> because they possess a *tzelem*<sup>4</sup> *Elokim*<sup>5</sup>.
- While all of humanity possesses the quality of *tzelem Elokim*<sup>6</sup>, *Yidden* have the distinct status of being *banim l'Makom*<sup>7</sup>. This is a source of great pride and joy for all *Yidden*.
- This deep pride should never result in us belittling others<sup>8</sup>, rather it should serve to strengthen our adherence to our additional obligations and responsibilities.
- Being *banim l'Makom* means we possess loftier *neshamos* that have greater capacity and more opportunity to impact the world<sup>9</sup> and be closer to *Hashem*<sup>10</sup>.
- Teach children that *Klal Yisroel* is not an exclusive “club”, as anyone who desires to join can do so provided they accept upon themselves all of *Torah* and *mitzvos*<sup>11</sup>.
- Since we are all *banim l'Makom*, we treat all *Yidden* as close relatives, always responsible for taking care of one another<sup>12</sup>.
- Point out that although we treat non-Jews with cordial respect, the *Torah* provides us with many *halochos* that serve to prevent us from becoming too friendly with them<sup>13</sup>, because we need to protect our uniqueness as the *Am HaNivchar*.



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1. *Avos* (perek 3, mishna 14) *Chaviv adam shenivrah b'tzelem*.
  2. In the past (particularly in Europe), when we were constantly oppressed by non-Jewish governments and the majority of non-Jews that we came in contact with were uncouth and often times outright negative, the attitude towards non-Jews was often one of subtle ill-will. In today's day and age it is not wise to convey this attitude to our children, since there are many decent non-Jews out there (including the government) who deserve basic dignity in our interactions with them. Furthermore, if we don't train our children to regard them with basic respect this can lead to great *chilul Hashem* in their future dealings in business and the like.
  3. See *Mishnas Rav Aharon* (vol. 1 p. 157) for an elaboration of this point.
  4. The term *tzelem Elokim* can be explained to children as “*Hashem* like qualities”. They include: 1) the ability to make moral choices or free will (see *Sforno* and *Malbim* on *Beraishis* 1:26), 2) the capacity for emulating *Hashem*'s compassionate traits (see *Tomer Devorah* perek 1), and 3) a superior intellect (see *Rambam Yesodai HaTorah* 4:8).
  5. The term *tzelem Elokim* is very elevating and sublime and should be often used by parents in reference to people.
  6. Non-Jews are also rewarded for their positive actions in the next world, see *Rambam* (*Melochim* 8:11) and *Teferes Yisroel* (*Avos* 3:14).
  7. *Avos* (perek 3, mishna 14) *Chaviv Yisroel shnikrah banim l'Mokom*, see *Rabeinu Yonah* there.
  8. Chazal tell us to make an effort to greet everyone we meet, even gentiles. See also “With Hearts Full of Love” by Rav Matisyahu Solomon *Shlita*.
  9. See *Nefesh Hachaim* (*shaar* 1) at length on this topic.
  10. Explain to children that because our *neshamos* are loftier they are therefore more sensitive spiritually and therefore we have unique *halochos* governing many aspects of our lives, such as *kashrus* and other similar laws.
  11. In other words they undergo the *Gairus* process.
  12. See *Rambam* (*Matnos Anyim* 10:2) that for this reason it says *kol Yisroel achim*.
  13. Such as *pas akum*, *yayin nesech*, etc.

## Non-Frum Jews

- When talking to young children about non-*frum* Jews, especially relatives, clarify that they are not non-Jews although they might look like them<sup>14</sup>.
- Articulate to them that we feel sorry for them that they were not exposed in their youth like we were to the greatness and beauty of *Torah* and *mitzvos*<sup>15</sup>.
- Reiterate to your children that all *bein adam l'chaveiro* obligations<sup>16</sup> apply to non-*frum* Jews who have had a secular upbringing (even if they don't believe in Hashem<sup>17</sup>), just like they do to *frum* Jews.
- Explain to them the idea that anyone who was not educated early on in a *frum* environment is considered to be a bona fide *tinok shnishbeh*.
- Remind them that even when non-*frum* Jews are introduced to *Torah* they don't immediately lose their *tinok shnishbeh* status<sup>18</sup>.
- When children witness *frum* from birth teenagers who who dropped out of *yeshiva* and became irreligious, always tell your children how much they should be pitied that they, for whatever reason, are not able to keep the *Torah*.
- Reveal to them that such teenagers also might have the status of a *tinok shnishbeh*<sup>19</sup>.
- Although we are obligated to have *ahavas Yisroel* towards non-*frum* Jews, one must be very careful and weary about allowing children to develop meaningful relationships with secular children<sup>20</sup>, particularly cousins<sup>21</sup>.



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14. Teach them that what makes someone a Jew is the fact he was born a Jew, not the fact that he keeps the *mitzvos*.
  15. Many children will raise the question: "why can't they be told about the *Torah* now?" The response to that question should be that *Torah* is the type of thing that if you don't know about it in your youth it is extremely difficult to learn about and adjust to later in life.
  16. Such as *chesed*, *lashon harah*, *onas devorim* and *ahavas Yisroel* in general.
  17. The consensus of many *poskim* is that the concept of *tinok shnishbeh* applies not only to general sinners but even to heretics who don't believe in the 13 principles of faith (see *Chazon Ish* Y.D. 2:28, *Igros Moshe Even Haezer* vol. 1, 82:11, and *Teshuvos V'Hanhagos* vol. 2 *siman* 460 and vol. 3 *siman* 480).
  18. The *Torah* lifestyle is so far removed from the world view of a secular person that even when he hears about it he can't really relate to it, and therefore he still retains his *tinok shnishbeh* status.
  19. Heard from Rav Shmuel Furst *Shlita* of Chicago. He explained that in all probability such youngsters never received or internalized properly the basic tenets of *Yiddishkeit*. In today's society, where the secular lifestyle reigns supreme and can be so seductive, someone who never understood and absorbed the basics of *Yiddishkeit* is tantamount to a *tinok shnishbeh*.
  20. Such relationships can have an extremely negative effect on impressionable young children for numerous reasons.
  21. Someone who has secular relatives who live in close proximity, must seek guidance as how to distance the children from their children without them being terribly insulted.

## Gehenom

- Although children should be aware of the concepts of Divine punishment and *gehenom*, it is not wise<sup>22</sup> in today's day and age to use them as motivating factors<sup>23</sup>.
- When discussing *gehenom* with children, always stress<sup>24</sup> that the essence of *gehenom* is not about *Hashem* taking revenge<sup>25</sup> on those who disobeyed His will, rather it is akin<sup>26</sup> to a Divine washing machine<sup>27</sup> where souls can be cleansed of spiritual stains<sup>28</sup>.
- Reiterate to them that true *teshuva*<sup>29</sup> eliminates the stains of sin<sup>30</sup>, precluding the need for *gehenom*.
- It is also extremely important to underscore to children that personal suffering<sup>31</sup> in this world, both physical and emotional<sup>32</sup>, can be in lieu<sup>33</sup> of *gehenom* in the next world.



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22. Rav Hutner z"l.

23. Rav Moshe Feinstein z"l in *Igros Moshe* (Y.D. 3, *siman* 71) dedicates a responsa to the topic of how we should motivate our children here in America to the adherence of *Torah* and *mitzvos*. It is amazing to note that nowhere in responsa does he mention *gehenom*. It is quite clear that he felt that in the present era *gehenom* should never be used as a motivating element in *chinuch*.

24. If children don't realize this they can develop a subconscious animosity to *Hashem* for creating the concept of *gehenom*.

25. See *Nefesh HaChaim* (*shaar* 1, *perek* 12) at length.

26. Point out that *gehenom* was actually created for our benefit, since no one would want a visible stain on their spiritual clothes for all of eternity, see (ח"ב ס' נ"ב), *מכתב מאליהו* (ח"ג עמ' רמ"ו).

27. Illustrate that if clothes had feelings they would also not enjoy being tumbled about in the washing machine, however if they are to be worn again they have to go through this process. The same dynamic is true regarding the soul and sin, see (סנהדרין פ"י אות ב') תפארת ישראל.

28. Point out that *aveiros* are not just a violation of *Hashem's* will, they actually create and disperse a negative charge (or contamination) that affects the delicate balance of the cosmos (see *Tomer Devorah perek* 1, *noseh avon*) that ultimately has to be reversed or rectified one way or another, see (בית הלוי בראשית יח, כ.).

29. See *Mesilas Yasharim* (*perek* 4) who posits that *teshuva* works retroactively. The effect of *teshuva* on past misdeeds can be explained to children as a permanent edit on a video clip.

30. See *Tomer Devorah* (*perek* 1, *noseh avon*).

31. Even drawing the wrong coin from one's pocket can be considered *yissurim*, see *Eruchin*.

32. *Tzidkas HaTzadik* (57), see also *Rashi on Berachos 55b chalom rah*.

33. *Kiddushin* (40b). The *Vilna Gaon* z"l would often say human suffering is an exchange for *gehenom*, see *Shaim Olam* (*chelek* 3) and *Yalkut Meishev Nefesh* (p. 128). Regarding the great benefits of *yissurim* see *Chachmo U'Mussar* (vol. 1 *siman* 193), see also *Krayna D'Igrata* (vol. 2, letter 28).

## Mashiach

- Inform your children from an early age about the astounding and awe-inspiring concepts of *mashiach* and *techias hameisem*<sup>34</sup>.
- Tell them the reason that we desire the coming of *mashiach* so much is because we will be able to become much closer to *Hashem*<sup>35</sup> than we are able to now<sup>36</sup>, and not because there will then be no *tzaros* and life will be physically easier<sup>37</sup>.
- Explain to them that coming closer to *Hashem* gives a person tremendous knowledge of *Torah*, and is a source of enormous spiritual pleasure to a person and his *neshomah*<sup>38</sup>.
- It is wise to demystify and make the era of *mashiach* more comprehensible to children by mentioning the *Rambam's* opinion<sup>39</sup> that the coming of *mashiach* will take place as a natural progression and that the world as we know it will not change at all during that epoch<sup>40</sup>.
- Mention should also be made that the exact sequence of events<sup>41</sup> and all the details of *mashiach's* coming are totally unknown to anyone<sup>42</sup> even to *Chazal*<sup>43</sup>.



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34. Besides the fact that these concepts are included in the 13 Principles of Faith of the *Rambam z"l*, they can be a great source of comfort to children when they are confronted with human mortality.
35. See *Yeshaya (11:9)*.
36. The *Rambam z"l* mentions the idea that our primary desire for *mashiach* is due to spiritual reasons (*Mishnah Torah, Melochim 12:4*). This approach will also resonate better with children who have not yet experienced any difficulty in life.
37. Even though this is indeed true, see *Mishnah Torah (Melochim 12:5)*. The *Rambam z"l (Perush Mishnayos Sanhedren, perek 11)* says people will live much longer then because there will be so much less stress and tension.
38. See *Mesilas Yesharim (perek 1)* where the idea of the supreme perfection and pleasure inherent in being close to *Hashem* is articulated beautifully.
39. See *Mishnah Torah (Melochim 12:1)*.
40. The *Chofetz Chaim z"l* once said that if *Klal Yisroel* is not *zoche*, all the miracles portended for the messianic era will be fulfilled by natural means. It is highly plausible that the unprecedented explosion of technological knowledge that humanity is currently witnessing is indeed a preparatory fulfillment of the predicted wonders.
41. For example, the coming of *Eliyahu Hanavi* will take place prior to or after *mashiach*.
42. Children will therefore not be disappointed when you are unable to answer all their questions on the subject.
43. See the strong words of the *Rambam z"l (Mishnah Torah, Melochim 12:2)* to that effect.