



Montessori

This D'var Torah is in honor of the Hanochs (*mechanchim* and do-it-yourselfers) on occasion of Nehama's Bat Mitzvah.

Jennifer and I are strong believers in Montessori. To many, Montessori appears to be inconsistent with Judaism, especially because Maria Montessori was a Catholic, and thus, they associate Montessori with Christianity. As believers in learning from all people, we think that attitude is narrow-minded.

Montessori is, at its essence, a restatement of "*chanoch la'na'ar al pi darko*," a self-paced self-correcting method of teaching children. Therefore, Montessori is largely consistent with a Torah hashkafa. Montessori is an environment that is integrative in that it subsumes even secular subjects under a Torah-consistent educational model. Montessori also models the attitude of learning as its own reward, which is essentially a restatement of learning *lishma*.

People learn things one at a time, and when learning a new concept, they reach a point where they "get it" and then move on to another lesson. Most subjects build upon previous material, so ensuring that someone "gets" a lesson before moving on to the next one is important. The trick is to get a student to a point where they are receptive to learning things, and usually that is because they have asked a question and are genuinely interested in finding out the answer.

The *Pesach seder* is an embodiment of what we have described above. As a matter of fact, embedded in the *seder* are the four children, yet another restatement of "*chanoch la'na'ar*." Note that the first three children are receptive to learning, because they have asked a question. The fourth child, *sh'aino yodaya lish'ol*, doesn't even know how to ask a question, and needs us to start out for him (or her). The "you" who needs to start out is phrased in the feminine, because it takes a "motherly" mindset to get a child who hasn't started out asking question to ask that very first question on start out on a life of learning. (In other words, when you "kick someone in the pants" to get them started, you need to do so in a kind, loving manner.)

The four children can also be viewed as four developmental stages in an educational process, starting at the bottom and working toward mastery of a particular subject.

One important aspect of the things that people learn is what we'll call "granularity." Take, for example, learning the times tables, which is a struggle for apparently a large number of children. Children either "get" that the multiplication facts never change, and then decide to memorize a number of multiplication facts to save counting on fingers or what have you, or they don't. Is the granularity the entire times table, a single row thereof, or a single cell (one fact)?

Granularity is important because one aspect of "*chanoch la'na'ar*" recognizes that not only do people learn at different paces - they also learn their fundamental factoids in different "bite sizes." Thus, one child may need to have the attitude of feeling satisfied with themselves only after having learned the entire times table, another may need some reinforcement after each row, and a third may need us to make a big deal as they learn each fact, one by one.

An associated question is whether there is a minimal level of granularity - for example, can you learn half a math fact? Our tentative answer to the first question is "yes" and to the second is "no." We find support for this in the *parshiyot* that we read about the design and construction of the *mishkan*.

The *mishkan* was the ultimate do-it-yourself project. G-d gave Moshe a brief description of each component, and it was up to Bezalel and Oholiav to figure out the detailed construction plans and techniques based on a general overall plan. Each component of the *mishkan* was built of multiple materials and components, save one, and one alone.

The *menorah* was constructed from one gold ingot, and needed to be constructed in such a way that the ingot remained indivisible throughout the process. Additionally, according to the *gemara*, when G-d told Moshe about the *menorah*, Moshe was stumped, and G-d tried over and over again to tell Moshe (see Rashi on Shemot 25:40). Finally, G-d had to show Moshe what it looked like. The *menorah* seems to be emblematic of a minimal level of granularity in an educational process, and also an example of "*at ptach lo*," what to do when a student is at an impasse and seems to be non-receptive to learning.

We note that when we "get" something, we often say that we have "seen the light," so it is more than coincidence that the *menorah* is emblematic of the start of an educational process - a loving "kick in the pants," if you will, that everyone needs from time to time to start on the road to real understanding.

Theory is one thing; practice is another. We welcome your comments on kind and loving ways to get children of all ages started out on a life of learning.

Shabbat Shalom,

Jennifer Kotzker
Danny Geretz

<i>Bezalel and Oholiav</i>	Master craftsmen who oversaw construction of the <i>mishkan</i>
<i>Chanoch La'na'ar</i>	
<i>Al Pi Darko</i>	Teach a child in a manner conducive to their personality and skills
<i>Lishma</i>	Learning Torah for its own sake (not for profit or some other reason)
<i>Mechanchim</i>	Teachers/instructors/mentors
<i>Menorah</i>	Seven branch candelabrum in the <i>mishkan</i>
<i>Seder</i>	Special educational Passover meal on first (two) night(s) of Passover
<i>Sh'aino Yodaya Lish'ol</i>	Doesn't know how to ask a question
<i>Mishkan</i>	Portable sanctuary
<i>Parshiyot</i>	Weekly Torah portions

Upcoming Events:

Thursday, March 20, 2008 – Megillah Reading and Purim Mesibah

Join us for the megillah reading and a Purim mesibah at the Hanochs, 227 Montgomery Street, Highland Park, at 7:45 pm.

Friday, April 11, 2008 – Parshat Metzora – Mincha and Kabbalat Shabbat

Join us for Mincha and Kabbalat Shabbat at the Center School, 319 North 3rd Avenue, Highland Park at 7:00 pm. (Hadlakat Neiroi at 7:15 pm)