

PARENTING ACCORDING TO ETHNIC BACKGROUND

By Mike Harris

If there is one thing over which we have absolutely no control or say, it is who our parents are. It is pure chance, or luck. "Birds of a feather flock together." People of like ethnic background join and create ethnic enclaves which become the homes of these people, and certain truths, beliefs, and traditions become unique to them. Jewish parents created a question in relation to parenting that is, while similar to the usual parenting rules, distinctly different. Parents can have the last say, but are constantly judged on their performance by the community for the first thirteen years.

Parents have to prepare their offspring to be responsible for their actions. The children should be able to know right from wrong and be able to learn how to fit and get ready for young adulthood.

When parents fail, peer pressure takes over, then life within the community becomes less pleasant. For the first thirteen years the child is taught that his or her behavior reflects on their mother and father who are held responsible for their actions. Then in a ceremony at thirteen they are told from now on they are responsible for their actions and only reflect on how good a job their parents had done.

These first thirteen years the community scrutinizes how well the job is being done. If it seems that the parents, in spite of their best efforts, are not capable of doing what is necessary, the community offers to help.

In my community in Norristown, PA, it so happened that a family had two children who were not quite retarded but definitely slow. The Rabbi called a meeting of the community and the parents and asked the parents would they accept help for their children? Getting an affirmative he asked the community for volunteers. The response was overwhelming. Help with school lessons was first. For one hour every day in the synagogue the two children came. Before long the failing grades became passing "Bs."

The volunteers then undertook to prepare them for the ceremony of "BAR-MITSVA." This required mastering passages in Hebrew from the Old Testament and certain other traditional rites. I will not belabor us here with all the details, suffice to say they performed well and there was not a dry eye in the congregation that Saturday service. They graduated high school and the girl got a job as a file clerk, the boy became a truck driver and both became valuable members of the community.

This small community had, by volunteering their time, ability, and understanding, accomplished a near miracle, definitely a lasting good deed.