

# The Art of Storytelling

IMPARTING OUR VALUES  
THROUGH A STORY



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## IMPARTING OUR VALUES THROUGH A STORY

Every story should have a lesson of goodness and *kedusha*.

(*Hisvaaduyos* 5721, vol. 30, p. 53)

The most important aspect of *chinuch* is not expressed in acquiring a vast amount of knowledge (good knowledge and so forth). Rather, the main essence of *chinuch* is in relation to *middos*.

(*Hisvaaduyos* 5742, vol. 3, p. 1197)

**S**tories are one of the most powerful tools an educator and parent have. A story shows the listener that the principles and *middos* they are learning about are achievable and in their reach. When there are certain values we want to ingrain in a child, stories can be one of the most impactful ways to see transformation. If we wait for an opportune time to tell the child a

story about *middos tovos*, the child receives the lesson in a way they can internalize and without embarrassment.

Telling stories of *tzaddikim* is also a “preemptive measure,” fertilizing a young child’s mind and heart with the lessons and role models we want them to emulate as they grow older. The world around us conceals the G-dliness in everything. *Olam* is from the word *helem*, hidden. When a child steps out into the world, it can be difficult for him to see past the external concealment and stay connected to the Torah truths he has learned. However, if his mind and heart are saturated with stories of different *Yidden* carrying out the Torah’s ways under all different circumstances, he is inspired, motivated and encouraged to imitate their behavior. He knows that he, too, can forever adhere to the path of Torah, even in the face of adversity.



## Utilizing stories

As a part of *chinuch*, one should tell stories. A child is often afraid of learning something difficult, fearing that he will be unable to understand it with his mind; stories banish this fear. Stories arouse the interest of the child, so he wants to hear more and more.

... As is known and explained in several sources, all of the Torah's instructions are transmitted by way of stories. The advantage of this approach to *chinuch* is that when a lesson is communicated in the form of a story, the child will more readily take it to heart.

(*Hisvaaduyos 5745*,  
vol. 4, pp. 2302-  
2303)

## Before age five

Before the child reaches *ben chamesh l'mikra* (at five years of age a child is brought into the study of scripture), *chinuch* occurs mainly through relating stories of the Torah: the written and oral Torah, *aggados*, and *midrashei Razal* from *Ein Yaakov*.

(*Hisvaaduyos 5748*, vol. 3, p. 307)



## Focus on the Positive

When telling a story, we have the ability to positively frame it so that it motivates the right kind of response in the listener. The same story told with a completely different focus and tone of voice can leave the listeners with the opposite takeaway message and understanding of what is important.

## Emphasize the good

The main thing is – unlike the way of *baalei mussar*, with their emphasis on lengthy explanations and descriptions of the *ra* (bad) – that one’s main efforts and explanations [to a child] should be about the virtue of true goodness.

(*Igros Kodesh*, vol. 12, p. 378)

We want our stories to demonstrate the Torah approach to life to our children, specifically through the positive lens of Chassidus which the Rebbe has given us. We need to enthusiastically emphasize and elaborate on the good *middos* over and over again throughout the story. The more our storytelling is saturated with positive messages, the more our children will be able to absorb the ideals. For example, when teaching our children the *makos* in Mitzrayim, our emphasis can be on how Hashem loves and protected the *Yidden*, how powerful Hashem is, how lucky we are to be Hashem’s chosen nation, and that we are able to do Hashem’s *mitzvos*.





What about the negative parts of the story? Our children are very impressionable, and we do not want to model undesirable behaviors and *middos*. When telling over the stories of *parsha*, Chanuka, Purim, etc., we tell the children about the obstacles the *Yidden* faced, and we provide the necessary context to understand the story. However, we don't go into dramatic detail about the negative. They could be taught very matter-of-factly, without these parts needing to be acted out by a teacher, parent, or especially by a child. (See *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 31, pp. 279-280 where the Rebbe says regarding a child being given the part of Haman to play in a Purim play, that a child should not act even for a short time in a way not fitting for a *Yid*.)

For example, in teaching about the time of Chanuka, children can be taught that Antiochus decreed that *Yidden* could not do the *mitzvos* of *kiddush hachodesh*, *bris mila*, *Shabbos*, and learning Torah. They can be taught that the *Yevanim* had a much bigger and stronger army than the *Yidden*, and that they came into the *Beis Hamikdash* and made all of the oil impure. However, all of this can be explained without acting it out and making it dramatic.

The parts to explain dramatically are about the *Yidden* bravely deciding, "We will continue to learn Hashem's *heilige* Torah! We will continue to keep Hashem's *mitzvos*!" and "We won't use *tamei* oil to light the *menorah*, even if it is allowed. We want to do *mitzvos* in the most beautiful way possible! We will only use *tahor* oil!" We can bring out the message that today our *yetzer hara* might try to tell us what the *Yevanim* did, but we only listen to

our *yetzer tov*! It doesn't matter if the *Yidden* are the minority among the nations of the world, we are so proud to be Hashem's chosen people, and so blessed we can do Hashem's *mitzvos*. Every *mitzva* we have, we want to do in the most *heilige*, *mehudar* way possible.

A great place to look for what messages to bring out on each *parsha* and *yom tov* is *The Rebbe Speaks to Children*, *Der Rebbe Redt Tzu Kinder*.



In the example of Purim, we want the child to go home from school thinking about how strong Mordechai was, trusting in Hashem without compromising his values. If the child goes home and what he vividly remembers of the story is how scary Haman was, he has not strengthened his *bitachon* in Hashem and he is definitely not more prepared to face the world than he was before learning the Purim story.

Our goal is for our children to realize that Hashem runs the world and to have *bitachon* in facing the world. Just as Hashem made everything good for the *Yidden* then, we can rely on Hashem now. As *Yidden*, Hashem has given us all the *kochos* we need for every challenge that we face, and the answers to all questions can be found in our *heilige* Torah.

## Seeing the big picture

There is a special advantage in teaching through stories – about the events that transpired from generation to generation with *Bnei Yisrael*, or even with an individual *Yid* – in which we see how even matters that at first seemed undesirable were revealed in the end to have been for the good, to the point that they thanked Hashem for this:

יודו לה' חסדו

ונפלאותיו לבני אדם (they thanked Hashem for His kindness and His wonders with people).

(*Hisvaaduyos* 5745, vol. 4, p. 2303)





## The Impact of Sight

The Rebbe told us to be careful that our children should see only pure and *heilige* things. They should be surrounded by *kedusha* from birth. There are stories of *tzaddikim* that have very scary and violent illustrations.

The young and impressionable *neshamos* are deeply impacted by the images they see. Though we may not notice it right away, at some point the influence can surface. The weapons or aggression they witnessed could be far more potent than the non-kosher animals we are so careful to shield them from.

## Pure and heilige sight

It is quoted in holy *seforim* that whatever one sees and gazes upon has an impact on the person. Seeing holy things has a positive impact on a person, while seeing images of *tamei* (impure) animals has a negative impact on a person.

... חנוך לנער על פי דרכו גם כי יזקין לא יסור ממנה – Educate the child according to his way, so that when he grows old, he will not depart from it: The *pasuk* implies that being careful about this matter [what one sees] is especially important during the age of *chinuch*. This is because things are engraved into children's thoughts through sight at this age, and this affects them for life.

...Care in this area is especially important now since we are in the time of *Ikvesa DeMeshicha* when ואת רוח הטומאה אעביר מן הארץ – I [Hashem] will remove the spirit of impurity from the land. Therefore, we need to prepare for the coming of Moshiach by "tasting" from what will be in the future, by influencing those that surround us to use only images that are *tahor* and holy.

(*Hisvaaduyos* 5744, vol. 1, p. 487 ff.)



If a child is not meant to see non-kosher animals (which are often also cruel and aggressive in nature), as it is not good for their *neshama*, surely we can apply a lesson from this principle in other areas. Should our children see aggression? Should they see weapons? Is it really necessary?

## What is appropriate for a *tomim*

Rabbi Nochem Kaplan relates:

We were in Fort Bragg, NC over Shabbos and *motzaei* Shabbos. We got together with the soldiers and exchanged jackets. I put on an officer's jacket, and he said to me, "Take my gun and make it look real." Yankel Goldstein took a picture.

When all the pictures were given to the Rebbe this one slipped in by mistake.

The next day Rabbi Hodokov called me and said

דער רבי האט

געפרעגט ווי קומט צו

א תמים א כלי משחית

("How is it possible for a *tomim* to hold an instrument of destruction?")

One of the main goals of storytelling, maybe even the *main* goal, is to implant and nurture good *middos*. How disappointing it is when after learning the Chanuka story, children go home and act out the battle with swords and shields! This is surely not the message we hoped to impart to the child about Chanuka. These are not the *middos* we were trying to implant. For some reason, it seems that children tend to remember the negative parts of stories the most vividly, and the one negative part of the story acted out is what they end up copying later.





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*Just as whatever middos we give attention to in our homes and classrooms strengthens those middos, whatever we focus on in a story makes it more likely that behavior will be repeated*



It is often not effective to just tell a child not to be like the *rasha* in the story, or not to copy negative behaviors that were described in a story. We read these stories to our children hoping the child will learn the good *middos* of the *tzaddik*. We hope the child will discern the good from the bad and choose to only emulate the good of what we have exposed them to. Our hope is that when faced with a challenge, the negative behavior of the *rasha* will not be the one that comes to mind as the way to express and release the negative emotion they are feeling.

Acting out the part of the *rasha*, especially when this is done in a passionate tone, actually models this behavior to the child. Just as whatever *middos* we give attention to in our homes and classrooms strengthens those *middos*, whatever we focus on in a story makes it more likely *that* behavior will be repeated. Negative situations and characters are best not acted out at all. The person telling the story can matter-of-factly state the facts of what happened. The children will have less of a connection to the negativity in this way.

We can package the message to our children most effectively by focusing on the positive, speaking in passionate tones only when describing good *middos* and messages, and only showing our children *aidel* images. When we elaborate enthusiastically the positive, the story is far more likely to have the desired impact.

## What age does all of this apply to?

We know for ourselves that the more positivity we fill ourselves with, the more strength, *chayus* and inspiration we have to do our *shlichus* in this world. The more Chassidus we learn, the more we can see the world through the beautiful, empowering lens the Rebbe has given us. Our children are even more sensitive and receptive than we are. Let's fill them up with light!



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