

The Teacher's Sacrifice (Vezot Haberachah)

Those who educate children well are more to be honored than they who produce them; for these only gave them life, those the art of living well. -Aristotle

Jewish law dictates significant esteem and honor to one's teacher – sometimes above that of a parent. In our current age such a concept may seem unfathomable. How can this often minimum-wage earner, this socio-economic struggler, this stranger who lectures us, this quasi-professional, who may not be qualified to otherwise participate in the workforce, be placed on a pedestal above the people who brought us into the world?

As a student, I was subjected to a plethora of mediocre and perhaps even lousy teachers, with a sprinkling of good ones. Once every few years I would cross paths with an extraordinary and even inspiring teacher. I feel their impact to this day. I am now privileged to live in a community with an inordinately high percentage of teachers. I find most of these teachers to be passionate, dedicated and inspiring (and easily qualified to have chosen any other profession they may have desired). However, Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim of Prague, the Kli Yakar (1550-1619), on Deuteronomy 33:9, hints at the price they pay – and he is not referring to the financial one.

Moses blesses the tribes of Israel in his final speech. The Tribe of Levi was apparently destined to be a tribe of teachers, charged with instructing the Children of Israel as to God's Laws. Addressing the Levites, Moses states the following hard-to-understand line:

“Who said of his father, and of his mother: 'I have not seen them'; neither did he acknowledge his brethren, nor knew he his own children.”

The Kli Yakar explains that these Levite/Teachers are so committed to their studies; they are so absorbed in their teaching profession, that they simply have insufficient time for their family; not for their parents, not for their siblings and not even for their own children.

This is unfortunately not an uncommon phenomenon among teaching families.

May we all, teachers and non-teachers alike find the right work/family balance, and may we also remember that our families are perhaps our most important students.

Chag Sameach and Shabbat Shalom,

Ben-Tzion

Dedication

To Christopher Columbus, on the discovery that he was likely Jewish.