



Readers' forum

Who's Minding Your Children?

By Dr. Yitzchok Levine

In the June 21 Readers' Forum, "A Concerned Bobbie" writes about seeing "a young *chassidische* boy, between 7 and 9 years old, in the company of two *chassidische bachurim*," smoking a cigarette. She goes on to write, "Mothers, make sure that you know in whose care you are entrusting your precious, *heilige neshamos*. I am sure this mother would be equally outraged (if not more so) if she would know what her son was being initiated into. This is a wake-up call and a warning to all mothers. Make sure you know in whose company your child is at all times. And make sure those people can be trusted not to endanger your precious child."

The incident related by "A Concerned Bobbie" certainly is an extreme. However, her warning should cause us to pause and look carefully at who, more often than not, is indeed minding our children.

Traditionally, Jewish children were raised and nurtured primarily by their mothers. It is the Jewish mother who historically inculcated in her young children an early appreciation for Jewish values and practices and *yiras Shamayim*. The importance of this task cannot be over-emphasized. Much of the personality and many of the character traits of children are molded when they are young. This is an awesome responsibility given what is at stake.

a family that is blessed with many children. When one adds up the expenses of paying for tuition, clothing and shoes, camp, food, and housing for a family of seven, the sum is astounding even for those who live most frugally. In order to survive financially, many parents find that it is necessary for both of them to work. No matter how much the mother may want to stay at home, she simply cannot. One salary, even a "good" salary, is just not enough to cover the basic expenses of the Orthodox family.

For mothers of younger children who have to pursue activities outside of the home, there are a number of questions to be dealt with: How much time should she spend away from home? What is an appropriate balance between time allocated to activities outside of the home and time spent with the children? When she is away from home, who is an appropriate person to care for the children? Can an observant caretaker be found whose Torah values mesh with the family's? Does it really pay financially for the mother to work?

This last question is based on the fact that a woman working outside of her home does incur expenses such as child care, transportation, the additional clothing that one needs for one's position, and other expenses. In some cases, if one does a careful comparison of the expenses associated with a mother working outside of her home and the net income that she earns, it turns out that the actual dispos-

However, today more and more women work outside of the home, and we see that in many observant homes children are taken care of not by their mothers but by hired caretakers. In many of these homes it is not uncommon for preschool children to spend a large part of their day in the care of irreligious Jewish women, or even gentiles.

These caretakers, even with the best of intentions, simply cannot replace the Torah influence that a devoted, observant mother can have on her children. And there is the actual influence that these caretakers have on the children they baby-sit for. What sort of values does a non-observant or non-Jewish woman impart to the children in her care? They certainly cannot be Torah values. More often than not, they will expose their wards to values that the parents would want to shield their offspring from.

Let me make it clear that I am not saying that every woman should stay home all the time to care for her preschool children. While for some women this is fine, for others it is simply not a reality. Some women feel that they cannot spend day in and day out caring for young children. When they have some outlet or interest outside of the home, they find that they are better mothers when they return.

A primary consideration that often forces mothers to work outside the home is the economic aspects of raising a family, particularly

able income brought in is only a few thousand dollars. In such cases parents must ask themselves, "Is it really worth, say, three or four thousand dollars more a year for our children to be cared for by those who do not share our Torah values?"

The issues raised above are complex, and there are no simple answers that will neatly resolve them. Each family must evaluate its situation and make a decision that is appropriate for all of its family members. Such decisions by definition will often be different for different families in different circumstances. However, it is an issue that the Orthodox community must deal with today. Who can imagine the long-term repercussions of having large numbers of preschool children cared for by those who do not share our Torah values?

Our children are our future. Shouldn't we do everything in our power to guarantee that the next generation is imbued as much as possible with Torah values and *yiras Shamayim*? An Orthodox Jewish family needs to be more than financially viable. It needs to be spiritually viable as well. It is only in this way that Torah-true Judaism can continue. It is the responsibility of all members of the observant community to make sure that this is the case for as many families as possible.

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