

The Misuse of The Zohar and How It Can Hurt Our Boys

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FEATURE

How should our young boys and teenagers tackle one of their biggest spiritual challenges they face growing up? The challenges of purity and puberty- controlling what one sees, thinks, and does- could be very daunting. The approach taken by some in our community has been, at best, misguided, and at worse, downright dangerous.

In the past two decades, a significant segment of the newly religious Bukharian community has become increasingly influenced by Kabbalistic teachings. The religious Bukharian community is hardly monolithic, but there does exist a strong influential subgroup of religious Bukharians, laymen and leaders alike, who learn the Zohar and have a Kabbalistic outlook on life.

Bukharians have a history with the Zohar, as do most Sephardic communities. During Shabbat meals, for example, Bukharians households have long had the tradition to read portions from the Zohar and many still do. No Yahrzeit goes without the obligatory recital of the Zohar.

Bukharians are proud of their relationship with the Zohar and many religious Bukharians are drawn to rabbis with Kabbalistic leanings and learn from books that are Kabbalistic in nature. As a result, Breslov books have taken an enormous appeal to many religious Bukharians partly because of its mystical overtones.

One serious implication of Kabbalah's popularity among religious Bukharians has been a specific approach towards educating boys about purity.

The Zohar is replete with warnings about the severity of sins associated with purity and holiness. The Zohar is unequivocal in its stance against these kinds of transgressions: they are the worst type and even repentance

might not work. A big part of the Zohar revolves around this theme. Consequently, in the Zohar's view, everything in a man's life- his spiritual growth, livelihood, spouse, children- is contingent upon his commitment to the precepts of purity. This is why in many Kabbalistic works, including the Zohar, sins that pertain to purity are commonly referred to as the "Yesod," which means foundation. The Zohar views the issue of purity as the foundation of one's spiritual edifice. Any crack in the Yesod risks the crumbling of a man's spiritual state.

A considerable number of religious Bukharians have taken what they view as the approach of the Zohar regarding purity and have used it in their efforts to teach teenagers and young men about the severity of the sin and the paramount significance it holds in Judaism. They have the noblest of intentions but they are deeply mistaken. This approach does not work, and worse, it can be counterproductive, even dangerous.

The tests that boys face today with issues of purity are very difficult and many are struggling. Social media and the ubiquity of the Internet have certainly not made things any easier; what was hard has now become exponentially harder. For many of our youth, it's a long, arduous challenge. The goal should be for our boys to reach a state in which they can effectively learn how to control their primal instincts.

The Zohar takes an absolute and blunt approach towards issues of holiness and purity. But that does not mean it should be conveyed this way to our boys. The approach might work short-term by instilling fear in them, but in the long-term this approach fails for most individuals.

It fails because when the worst sin in the Torah is the one main thing a teenager or a young man is struggling with, everything seems hopeless and bleak. When sins of purity as depicted in the Zohar are akin to murder, religious life becomes unbearable.

It fails because when the focus of everything becomes purity, the mind is mainly thinking of what it's not supposed to do or think, which, considering the nature of the sin, is in of itself a problem. Do not think of an apple and you most probably thought of an apple.

It fails because in our generation the emphasis must be on the positive and the outreach needs to emanate primarily from a place of love, not fear. The Zohar is for rabbinic scholars who study it and laymen who read it for its intrinsic holiness. But the Zohar is not a Kiruv manual.

The Zohar is a rich part of our heritage and the parts that pertain to purity are unquestionably important. The question is how we can convey this sensitive issue to our youth. On the other extreme, in some Orthodox circles, the issue is taboo and boys are left in the dark. Having no clue as to how to confront the issue, they get their information from friends and the Internet. This is no approach either.

What is the right approach? Torah scholars and experts in Jewish education have recommended a level-headed approach. A well-regarded book on the topic, "From Boys to Men," by Dr. Shlomie Zimmerman, was recently published and has approbations from various prominent rabbis and psychologists, including Rabbi Aaron Feldman and Dr. Pelcovitz. The book offers a systematic and methodical approach in guiding parents and educators in how to convey these sensitive topics to our boys. In his introduction, Dr. Zimmerman writes that the book attempts "to synthesize the guidance from the Torah as imparted to us by our Gedolim with the latest psychological research." The book encourages parents to be proactive about these topics and to take initiative about discussing them with their boys at various stages in their pre- and post-adolescent years. He writes: "The ideal formula for success is to have multiple brief conversations over time that promote questioning, sharing, and open dialogue." These conversations are very brief and serve to educate and impart our boys with the correct Torah Hashkafa on these matters. The first half of the book consists of talking points that parents can use as a guide to sensitive topics that can be awkward to speak about.

In a way, this approach is diametrically opposite to the one taken by some in our community, where issues of purity take center stage, sometimes obsessively. In the approach taken by Gedolim and psychologists like Dr. Zimmerman, the issue of purity should not be perceived as the be-all and end-all of everything. "Hesech Hadat," or diverting one's attention, has been the dominant approach of Gedolim on this sensitive issue. Our boys

need to be taught that their thoughts, drives, and challenges are perfectly normal. It's a difficult challenge, but one needs to move on and not dwell on it. The challenge needs to be redirected and channeled into positive things like Torah learning, hobbies, friends, and exercise. Keeping them busy with healthy outlets will make their challenges more manageable and lead to better outcomes.

The challenges of purity do not have to be daunting for our boys. Let's not make a challenging test for them an even harder one. With the right approach we can help our boys achieve success and attain a healthy outlook.

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