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TRAINING OUR CHILDREN FOR LIFE

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Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, presents to us a sublime opportunity. It's a day that's calculated and crafted in all of its features to stimulate and support us in turning away from death and toward life. Because that is precisely what it means to be at one with God: we become allied to the plan of the *Gaon Hakol* (גאון הכל), the Mastermind of Creation, to create and sustain life. So on Yom Kippur we turn our lives to the cause of life, to join that cause with all of our energy and spirit.

But is it possible to join the cause of life if we are training our children to kill? And is it an exaggeration to ask such a question?

Consider the case drawn together by Lt. Col. David Grossman, a retired Army Ranger and psychologist, author of *On Killing*. Grossman cites a variety of evidence to make the point that, "*killing is unnatural*"; it must be taught, because there is "a built-in aversion to killing one's own kind." In fact, he notes, military historians have repeatedly reported that until relatively recently, most soldiers *avoided* killing their enemies, as far-fetched as that may sound. For instance, most of the muskets found after the Battle of Gettysburg were still loaded; even more surprising, half had multiple loads in the barrel. World War II studies revealed that only 15 to 20 percent of all U.S. Army riflemen could bring themselves to fire at an exposed enemy soldier.

When the military became aware of this phenomenon, they began to develop policies and procedures that would reverse it. By the Korean War, 55 percent of our soldiers were willing to shoot to kill; by Vietnam the percentage had risen to 90.

How was this aversion to killing achieved?

Grossman describes the three main methods that were used:

Desensitization was promoted through the experience of "boot camp," in which soldiers were subjected to intense physical and verbal abuse. Children today, starting not at 18 years of age but 18 months, are subjected to similar forms of desensitization through exposure to violence in the media. The most recent and egregious example is

the association of food with violence in TV commercials. At the early stages of psychological development, children are rarely able to discriminate between the "pretend" they see on TV and real life—and these media experiences of murder and mayhem are repeated thousands of times in their young lives.

Classical conditioning was used by the Japanese to train their soldiers early in World War II. A large contingent of soldiers would be required to observe and cheer as a handful of their comrades bayoneted Chinese prisoners who had been placed in a ditch with their hands tied behind their backs. Afterwards the soldiers who had observed were given *sake*, the best meal they had had in months, and access to so-called comfort girls.

As Grossman points out, "Our children watch vivid pictures of human suffering and death, and they learn to associate it with their favorite soft drink and candy bar, or their girlfriend's perfume." Following the Jonesboro school shootings, teachers reported that many students (attending other schools) reacted with laughter when told what had happened—not unlike the reaction of children that many of us have witnessed in movie theaters when bloody violence is shown on the screen. As Grossman concludes, "We have raised a generation of barbarians who have learned to associate violence with pleasure. . . ."

Operant conditioning of soldiers by the military employs a powerful, repetitive procedure—stimulus-response, stimulus-response, stimulus-response—to train them to act automatically despite whatever pressure or chaotic circumstances they may experience. Pilots, for example, are trained to react automatically in emergencies. Military and police training use similar techniques—for example, linking the stimulus of pop-up targets with human forms to the requirement of a split-second response of firing at the target. The process teaches one to shoot to kill, reflexively.

Virtually all video games, which by design are in this genre, have exactly the same effect. There is, however, one important difference: in military and police training, personnel learn that under

certain circumstances the correct response is *not* to shoot; but with video games there is only one correct response—shoot to kill. Thus it should come as no surprise that youthful, *inexperienced* shooters who are veteran video gamers often demonstrate remarkable accuracy when they pick up real weapons.

As Yom Kippur approaches, every one of us—whether parent or not, whether our children are still living at home or not—should engage in self-examination about the role we play in the exposure of children and youth to massive doses of violence in the media and video games.

Most of us have allowed ourselves to be overcome by the momentum that has been generated by corporate greed. We should make no mistake: the producers are peddling violence and death for massive profits. And too many of us have allowed ourselves to become voiceless and powerless in the face of these death merchants. What parent hasn't said with frustration and a sense of futility, "There's no way to keep the kids from watching

violent TV and movies; the violent video games are everywhere."

If we want to train our children for life rather than death, there is a way . . . but it requires, fundamentally, that first we turn our own lives. We cannot help them turn away from violence and death without our own inner conviction and commitment to no longer be complicit in training them to be killers. Without that change in us, nothing will change for them—and now, on Yom Kippur, is the time to finally make that decision.

If the complicit among us are willing to acknowledge our failure to resist; if we are willing to express remorse to our children, who may not understand our confession; if we are willing to dedicate ourselves completely, without reservation, to training our children for life—if we are willing to do all these things, then there will be power in our acts and a basis for hope, because we will have allied ourselves with the life-giving God for the coming year.

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