

In the beginning. . .

By: Dr. Leah Adams

We are now at the beginning of the year. You are wondering I imagine, if I have lost some sense of reality. After all, Labor Day, the beginning of the school year, has passed. Rosh Hashanah, the beginning of the calendar year, has passed. Even Sukkos, the beginning of the Shalosh Regalim has passed. How many more beginnings can there be? Let's take a few steps back. When the school year started, how many things did you say you'd do differently this year when it comes to homework and bedtime with the kids? When Rosh Hashanah came around, how many things did you say you'd do differently this year when it comes to keeping Mitzvos? When Sukkos came around, how many things did you say you'd do differently this year when it comes to eating (or, should I say, overeating)? Well, now that the confusion and excitement of Yom Tov have passed, the chance to really start embarking on all of these new beginnings is now!

The question to be answered is, HOW? If all of these were so easy to accomplish then they wouldn't still come up on top of our "To Do" list every year and would have been moved to the "done" column. First of all, let me serve up a dose of inspiration. Rabbi Chaim Zev Levitan, in his Parshas Bereishis Drasha made a beautiful statement. He said "never let your yesterdays get in the way of your tomorrows". In other words, just because you have failed to achieve certain things in the past, don't let your frustration or feelings of inadequacy or failure from yesterday's lack of accomplishment, steer you away from the can-do attitude that you need to take on tomorrow's challenges. Now that we have that distraction out of the way, we can ride the "Little engine that could" to "think we can, think we can, think we can".

Let's start with the school work issue. Many articles have been written on techniques for encouraging success in your kids and the most efficient way to get homework done. I have a simple bit of advice. Don't bite off more than you can chew. This applies to the parents as well as the students. When my older kids were in elementary school I made the mistake of thinking that activities fit into little concise measureable boxes of time. So, if there were enough hours in an evening to eat (half hour), make a phone call (5 minutes) and have time for homework (1 hour) and shop (1 hour), then we could do all of it on a regular night. After all, wouldn't getting the kids out of the house be more fun for them?

Here's where the problems pop up. First of all, nothing takes as little time as we anticipate it will. Traffic and tired, over-schooled children delay anything that we do even though we think that we will just be "running to the store". Dinner inevitably drags on as food doesn't finish cooking as quickly as we thought it would and the table often does not get

cleared off quickly enough to eat right away. A five minute phone call often turns into a longer call or becomes just a reminder of the other phone calls that we have to make. Also, kids and adults all need a chance to unwind at the end of the day. By the time the opportunity for homework rolls around, no one in the house has the patience to deal with it. Even if everything does run according to schedule, the kids just need time to do “whatever”.

When I said don't bite off more than you can chew I mean don't plan anything extra for a school night other than dinner, homework and bedtime. If all of these are finished early because you've laid out such a simple plan then everyone can use the extra time relaxing with a good book! (Yes, it really does happen.) Oftentimes, if we plan well, our shopping can be condensed to Sunday. If other things have to be purchased during the week then make sure that weekday shopping is the exception to the rule and not the rule and use the homework schedule to plan your trips. If you know, for example, that Wednesday night is the heaviest day for homework, then shop on Thursday. Food preparation also follows this rule. Plan your least complicated dinners for the nights when the kids have heavier homework assignments and when you have later work days. Likely, your kids would rather have a calm parent who has the patience to help them than a frazzled parent who cooks complicated, gourmet food.

Allow plenty of time for homework. Even the supposed 5 minute assignments require time for a kid to find a nice spot to work, go get their knapsack, get distracted by a game, snack or sibling, take out their work, find the pencils, spend time sharpening 10 pencils (“Eema, you never know when one might break, of course I have to spend time sharpening 10 of them!”), and finally doing their work, having you check it over, putting it away in the knapsack, putting the knapsack away, taking the knapsack back out to pack the 10 pencils etc. I figure that the average 5 minute assignment actually takes about 20 minutes from start to finish. This holds true with our projects as well. That's why any extra housecleaning, house organizing or home beautification projects, no matter how simple, should be left for non-school or shorter school days. I can tell you from experience, once I learned to recognize the above ideas; our lives really did get simpler.

Once you figure out how to have less on your plate on a weeknight (yes, pun intended), you can have time for introspection and time to remember your Rosh Hashanah goals. We spoke about some of this a month ago in the article titled “Septelul is coming”. Use the same approach as above. Don't bite off more than you can chew. Adding a Shiur to our schedule every day or a Tehillim group every day or knocking on doors for Hachnosas Kallah every day or cooking for Kimpeturns every day or doing volunteer work for our school's PTA everyday are likely not realistic (especially if we internalized anything from the above paragraphs). Start at the point where you are really at right now in your observance of Mitzvos and perpetuation of Chesed. Add something to this on a regular basis. Think about your kids' homework, good

teacher's assignments build on previous, easier assignments at a certain steady pace. For example, if your Kavanah is lacking in davening, start by learning about a different Bracha each day to help improve your focus. Eventually you might learn about two Brachos a day or more. If you do enjoy cooking, pick one night (again, not a heavy homework night) a week or a month or every few months to participate in Kimpeturn cooking. Worried about speaking Loshon Hara? Plan to learn 2 halachos a day on this topic; don't plan on completing an entire Sefer in two days! Whatever Mitzvah we committed ourselves to doing better last Rosh Hashanah needs to have a starting point and a do-able plan.

Well, not surprisingly, we spent so much time on homework and Yomim Noraim that we didn't even get to talk about beginning a new eating plan. Oh well, I guess that means that we have at least until next article to continue eating whatever we want! Hey, that's another new beginning, coming up with new excuses to avoid counting calories.

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This article was published in TheFrontPage Magazine, October 17, 2012.