



LET THEM BE KIDS!

*Chovas Hatalmidim – Chapter Two of a new commentary by
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“Stoop ball “(also spelled "stoopball") is a game that is played by throwing a ball against a stoop (stairs leading up to a building) on the pavement in front of a building. Historically, it has been popular in Brooklyn and other inner cities.”

This game is the stuff of urban legend. It is said that many a great sportsman started their career by bouncing a ball against a neighbourhood set of steps as the sun set on a city skyline.

What you may not know is a fair number of Rabbonim, Roshei Yeshiva, and well-known askonim spent many a youthful hour throwing the same sort of ball against stoops very much like any others. In the late 1950's boys would leave yeshiva at about 6pm and run off with their friends to play this simple game till being called home by mothers who had prepared large suppers for their budding Talmudic scholars.

Our chevra enjoyed those summer days; we were an average group of kids. I wasn't the best of players, nor the greatest student; just average. The others were far better, in all areas, yet we played together, shared the sun, laughed, chatted and grew in so many ways. As it happened, of that small group, one became a well-respected Dayan, another a Rosh Yeshiva, two are renowned baalei tzedakah, and lastly there is yours truly, the weak link of the group! We learnt in different mosdos, yet the stoop became our equaliser in more ways than the game. We ended up davening in a shteibl together, and despite the sparsity in numbers, we bonded in our thirst for spiritual growth.

In his opening chapter of Chovas Hatalmidim, the Piaseczno Rebbe Ztl describes how blessed his young readership are an eternal link in the chain of kedusha that is Bnei Yisroel. He depicts how their souls shine and how Hashem awaits their service as a father does his child.

Then with magnificent deftness, this pedagogical genius turns to his students and writes:

“My dear son, it could be that all this talk frightens you. Here you are, young, enjoying a bit of mischief and having fun with your friends. Suddenly I come along with plans for turning you overnight into an old man who sits and does nothing, and to rob you of your youth.”

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לזכר ולעילוי נשמת
הרבנית הצדקנית
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The Rebbe is reaching out to his young readership. He accepts the obvious, and articulates what most of us are afraid to. Youngsters often hear all about the lofty ideals of learning Torah all day, and becoming a future light for the entire Klal Yisroel. But their young minds cry out, "Hey, I am a kid! I want to be just that. Let me go outside and run around! I have time to be an old man later. Don't steal my enjoyment."

Sadly, it is often the case that our young get the wrong idea. They hear about expectations that could never fit into their limited landscape. They learn to turn off their minds and just miss the point. So, the Rebbe calms them down, telling them that such is not the goal he is setting for them.

The Rebbe continues:

"One of the top priorities on our agenda is not forcing you to go in Hashem's ways against your will. Our objective is that you will want to do so."

The Rebbe starts with this unique openness with his young readership. This was the hallmark of this Tzaddik. Everything was about the young, and they knew that in him they had a leader who understood their struggles. In the Beis Medrash of the Rebbe the first rows of seats were given over to children. The Rebbe's warmth drew youngsters to him in droves. His was a Rebbishe court created totally by his greatness. Orphaned as a child, he became a beacon for the many who were lost in the maelstrom of those turbulent times. The Bobover Rebbe, Rav Shloma Ztl, when in Warsaw, took the opportunity to sit with the Rebbe and speak about chinuch.

This was the author of the Chovos Hatalmidim, and he sought to open the young hearts of his time to the love of Yiddishkeit.

He explains that young people are meant to enjoy their youthful endeavors. He never seeks to make them into automatons.

How then does the Rebbe propose that we link the natural exuberance of the young with the supreme kedusha that is their birthright? One mainstay of the Rebbe's plan is that young people create chaburas with good friends who are like-minded in their quest for kedusha. These groups must gather regularly, not only to learn, but to share childhood recreations. They must be children, doing child-like things, yet, doing them together with others who share higher expectations.

The Rebbe wants to create an atmosphere where youngsters bond together as friends who share holy ideals and without demanding too much too early.

"You just have to know how to enjoy yourself and have fun. Just believe and know that Hashem reigns and sees everything, including the things you do for fun. The same way people have to eat and drink and take care of their physical needs because that's the way Hashem created them, so you have a strong urge to play, because you are still young. Just remember while eating and having fun that Hashem is the Master of the world. He created it, He directs it, and He watches over it; everything is His, including ourselves."

With these words the Rebbe showers his young charges with warmth and hope.

We played stoop ball, just kids, and with each bounce of the ball, somehow, we gained so much more.

It's a lesson we should be giving our young today: let them be kids, Torah kids!