

# What Is A Child Prodigy?

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**A**lthough we often hear the words "child prodigy" in reference to unique displays of brilliance in those tender in years, the true essence of a child prodigy is all too often overlooked. However, many anecdotes recounted through-out the history of the Jewish people illustrate clearly the early intelligence and potential of those who have gone on to become revered personages in later life. The following anecdote about a young Jewish boy, is relayed by Rabbi Yeoshua in the Talmud ( Eruvin): I was once on a journey when I noticed a little boy sitting at a cross-roads. I asked him, "By what road does one go to the town?" "This one is short but long, and that one is long but short," he replied. I proceeded along the "short but long" road. When I approached the town I discovered that it was hedged in by gardens and orchards. Turning back I said to him "My son why did you tell me that this road was short?" "Did I not also tell you 'but long'?" he replied. I kissed him on the head and exclaimed, "Happy are you Israel, all of you are wise, both young and old!"

Many of us in a similar situation would have much preferred to have been given simple and straightforward directions rather than riddles, regardless how ingenious. And R. Yehoshua, a spiritual leader of his day, a famous scholar, a counselor whom even the Roman emperor frequently challenged with questions, certainly had no time to waste. Surely the boy could have said, this road is shorter but full of obstructions, while the other is longer, but smoother, and thus ultimately quicker. However, what the boy actually said was briefer, handsomer and far more memorable. Consequently R. Yeshoshua was too impressed to take offense. He, like our

Sages in general, highly valued parsimony with words, and brevity of expression. Then again, those words suggest

childhood. One day after playing outdoors with his friends, he arrived home covered in mud. His mother reprimanded



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something deeper than mere geographical information. There is a hint of wisdom here which we would hardly expect to come from the mouth of so young a child— we are often tempted to fulfill our lives' objectives too rapidly, by cutting corners. But that which seems like the easier route may ultimately turn out to be filled with obstacles. On the other hand, what initially appears overly arduous, may ultimately turn out far better.

A similar story involves R. Chaim Soloveitchik who to this day is viewed as a great innovator responsible for the development of the penetrating and analytical study of Talmud concepts which has become standard in this century. His passion for rigorous logical thinking manifested itself early on in his

him saying, "Chaimke, did you ever catch me with such dirty hands?" "No," he replied, "but did your mother never see you so?"

This kind of remark may be regarded as insolent by some. However, most parents would be delighted to witness such a precocious display of wit. The same goes for an argument voiced by the child who later became the chassidic leader, R. Naphatali of Ropshitz. His father reproached him for unseemly behavior one day. The young Naphatali claimed that he could not help it; the *Yetzer Hara* (the Evil Inclination) had made him do wrong. His father pointed out that he ought to emulate the *Yetzer Hara*: the latter's allotted task being to seduce unsuspecting people into sin, a



task he unswervingly worked to accomplish. "Your task is to behave in accordance with the teachings of Torah," Naphatali's father reminded, "You too should pursue what is expected of you without allowing anyone to deflect you from your path." "But there is no comparison," replied Naphatali, "The *Yetzer Hara* has it so much easier; his path is free of obstacles, there exists no other *Yetzer Hara* trying to prevent him from carrying out his duties."

The stories of children who exhibit wisdom beyond their years most worthy of preservation are the ones which involve those who have displayed rare moral sensitivity and profoundly religious insights. After all child prodigies have existed throughout the ages in many fields: Everyone has heard of the 19th century mathematical genius, Gauss who at the age of five demonstrated striking ability. It is also common knowledge that by the age of four Mozart was playing the piano with great precision, and by the age of five he had started to compose his own music.

There are certain intellectual and artistic areas in which precocity is not so uncommon. Even children endowed with only average intelligence display some musical talent in early infancy. They also possess some degree of arithmetical, geometrical and language ability and certain manual skills.

On the other hand, moral sensitivity and the development of genuine religious sentiment usually start at a markedly later stage. An experiment undertaken by Piaget, the celebrated pioneer of child psychology, demonstrates this fact. The experiment was performed on a group of six-year old children to whom Piaget recounted two sets of stories and then recorded their reactions. The first set of stories concerns two young girls who accidentally cut holes in their dresses, and the second set involves two young boys who end up breaking some cups. However in each scenario, the first child, although responsible for greater damage, had started out with good intentions. The second child while only incurring minimal loss had done so of his/her own accord and not in the process of pleasing others. Piaget's discussions indicated that in each scenario, the group condemned the first child as the naughtier of the two, 22 *Chai Today*

as their actions involved greater damage. The fact that these children had started out with good intentions played no role in the group's judgement because they focused only on the concrete results. On the basis of these and other experiments, Piaget concluded that the ability to make sophisticated moral judgements which take into account not only the palpable results of an act, but also the spirit which prompted it, is not usually acquired until the age of eight or nine. During the early years a child gradually develops the abilities that are essential for its physical welfare, and only later (if at all) does it acquire the sensibilities which are required for the enhancement of its moral and religious well-being.

Conspicuous exceptions to this rule surely deserve our special attention. For example Avraham Yeshayah, later known as the Chazon Ish displayed acute moral sensitivity and judgement even as a young child. Once as the family sat around the dinner table, Rebberzin Karelitz noticed that the seven year old Avraham Yeshayah was not eating. When asked for an explanation, the little boy said softly "I do not have a fork." Looking down, his mother saw that she had forgotten to give him not only a fork, but a portion as well. Avraham Yeshayah's sensitivity at that early age prompted him to minimize his mother's oversight. Given the prevailing culture of our time, it would be hard to find a boy twice that age exhibiting such a degree of sensitivity toward his mother.

Another story involving Rabbi Meir Simcha Hacohen tells of a time his father took him to the bathhouse when he was only three years old. While scrubbing the little one's back, his father said "Remember my son when you grow up and I am too old to fend for myself, you will have to scrub my back," to which the small boy replied "Father when I grow up I will have to scrub my own child's back." Aside from the sharpness displayed by a three-year-old it is also remarkable that at such an early age he should have been aware of duties he would have to assume in the remote future. Some might read even deeper implications into the child's remark. As is known we are unlikely to be able to repay our parents for everything they have given us. One important way of showing our gratitude for the many benefits we received from them, is to

confer similar benefits on our own offspring.

The following comment made by a child is both remarkable and moving as well as profound in its implications. R. Menachem of Minsk, author of the widely read *Zichron Menachem* became an orphan when still an infant. His uncle paid a woman to care for the child in her home. Once his uncle came to visit and found the boy immersed in prayer. He waited until Menachem finished and then asked "What were you praying for just now?" The child replied "I was praying to my Father in Heaven that he should provide me with food, since the woman who looks after me gave me but half a roll for breakfast and that was not sufficient." "And now that you prayed," continued his uncle, "Did Heaven provide you with more food?" "No" replied the little boy, "but having prayed I no longer feel hunger."

Here, we have a child expressing invaluable insight into the nature and function of prayer, an insight many adults, even those who pray regularly, often fail to appreciate. Many of us think that petitionary prayers are answered, when and only when, we have been granted what we have been asking for. In fact however, prayers may be answered in a variety of ways. As a result of prayer one may, for instance, gain an understanding that one can very well get along without the object of imploration; or when petitioning the Almighty to provide some specific means for securing a certain advantage, the supplicant may suddenly have his eyes opened to the existence of a more readily available means for obtaining the same end, or again when a victim of pain prays for the cessation of his suffering he may as a result gather the strength and the ability to endure it. Last but not least, as probably was the case with the young Menachem, praying, which is like being granted a private audience with the Almighty, can give those capable of grasping its significance, such intense fulfillment as to render the supplicant oblivious to trivial physical discomfort. Thus we are presented with a young child with an unusual and subtle religious discernment, which offers us a highly illuminating, succinct commentary on the scope and power of genuine prayer. ■