

The ability
to dream!

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Thoughts on Dolls and Other Toys

ONE OF THE MOST unique talents which human beings are blessed with is the faculty of imagination. Unlike any other creature, human beings have a nearly unlimited potential for constructive fantasy.

In fact, our civilization is built on imagination. Without this human capacity, no progress could ever be made, whether in science, literature, philosophy, art, music or commerce. Our world would not be able to sustain itself and develop in a proper way if human beings did not continuously explore new and unutilized pathways. It is for this reason that every generation must make sure that its youngsters are provided with enough opportunities to develop a healthy imagination.

Children's toys have become a major industry. In the last few decades, we have witnessed a boom in the manufacturing of the most sophisticated toys. Today it is possible to buy dolls which can walk, sing, speak with other dolls, sleep, cry, smile, and even need diapers. No doubt, in a few more years the doll industry will confuse its clients with their evermore lifelike dolls—to the extent that their manufacturers will rush to the City Hall to register them as new births. The same can be said of electric trains, boats and planes, etc. Some of the electric cars which one can buy in toy stores can travel at a speed of 50 kilometers an hour, are equipped with radios, computers and wind-screen wipers, and can operate on solar power.

While our society welcomes these new innovations in the field of entertainment—regarding them as a great benefit to our children and grandchildren—this focus is a major educational mistake.

The Torah is often referred to as a toy. King David said:

Were not Your Torah my plaything, I would have perished in my affliction.

(*Tehillim* 119:92)

This concept is found throughout many parts of Tanach. Just like playing brings joy to a human being, so does the Torah. But from what is this joy composed? No doubt, one of the many elements which contribute to the pleasure of playing is the use of the faculty of imagination. *Joy is the art of seeing great possibilities.* When people learn Torah, it is not just the information that they assimilate which is enjoyable, but, above all, they thrive on the possibility of creating new insights, "*chiddushim*," in developing one's own imagination in the pursuit of understanding the Torah. This is one of the reasons why the Oral Torah was never completely recorded and why the Torah and, later, the Talmud, were written in a most cryptic script, requiring the student to read between the lines in order to fully grasp the profundity within. It allows the mind to expand, demanding much creativity. "It is impossible that a *Beit HaMidrash* will not contain a *chiddush*" (*Chagiga* 3a). One needs to use one's own imagination to add what the text itself does not reveal.

One of the most important benefits of playing with toys is the fulfillment of children's need to *pretend*. Children do not play with the toy itself, but rather with what they *imagine* while they are playing. And the greater the distance there is between the toy and the product of the child's imagination, the more intensive and beneficial is this pursuit to the child. The child will have to use all his or her imagination to create the world in which he wants to find him/ herself.

It is for this reason that it is highly undesirable that toys should approximate reality. A doll which can speak, cry or smile is not a real doll, precisely because it is so "real." A child is not being allowed to pretend because the manufacturer has already done it for him or her. Because adults do not have the same degree of imagination as do children, they mistakenly believe they need to produce toys which look real. What they do not understand is that the children themselves will imagine the part which is missing. To be sure, the child will *initially* be very pleased with a state-of-the-art doll which can sing and smile, but a child is not aware of his or her own psychological makeup, and will ultimately soon become bored. There is, after all, very little left

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for the imagination. In fact, more and more parents complain that the more expensive the toy, the sooner it is likely to be neglected.

No doubt, toy manufacturers are making more money than they ever did before, but it is not serving to improve children's education. For a healthy future, we need adults who are gifted with a healthy imagination. For that we need simple educational dolls for our children.

Whether we succeed will depend on the toy industry. If we do not, we are in trouble. After all, as the popular expression goes, "Toys R' Us."