

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

BORN HOLY

Parshas Shemos introduces Am Yisrael in Mitzrayim and Pharaoh's worry that the Jewish people will soon pose a threat as the population is multiplying so fast. He therefore decides to kill the newborn baby boys.

The Divrei Yisrael asks why — why doesn't Pharaoh simply kill everyone?

In his explanation, he refers to the statement of the Jewish midwives, who told Pharaoh that they weren't successful in killing the newborn baby boys because the mothers — being "like *chayos*" — had already given birth by the time the midwife arrived.

Translating "*chayos*" as "full of life," the Divrei Yisrael suggests that Pharaoh assumed that Jews only acquire their full spiritual energies when they receive their *yetzer hatov*, as adults, and that babies would be vulnerable to his attack. What the midwives were saying was that he was mistaken in this belief. While the babies may have lacked a *yetzer tov,* they had an inherent *kedushah* already at birth, "even before the midwife arrived." Therefore, Pharaoh was powerless against them.

All Jewish children, even before bar mitzvah, have a natural tendency toward doing the right thing, an innate desire to learn Torah and do *mitzvos*. This is inherent and doesn't depend on the way we bring them up. We don't necessarily deserve any credit for it.

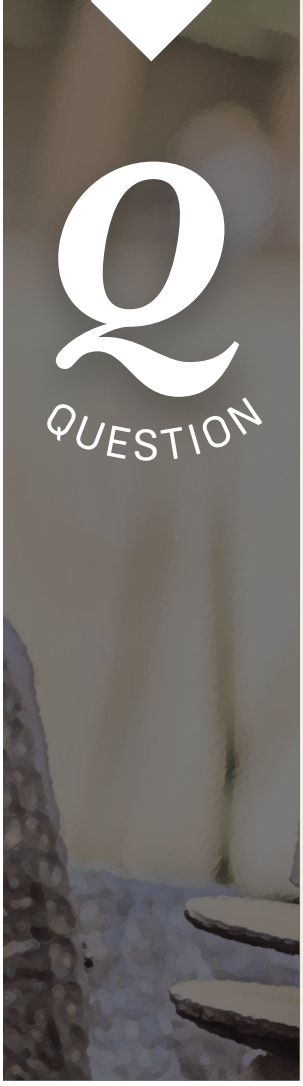
This is why it's important to view a child who doesn't seem to want to go in the right direction not as a bad child but as a naturally holy child who is experiencing difficulties. It's important that we believe in a child's abilities, so that instead of interpreting his struggles as signs of a difficult character, we get to the bottom of what's troubling him so that we can restore to him his inherent attraction to *kedushah*.

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Parshas **Shemos**
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Q QUESTION

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

Thank you so much for your *shiurim*. I don't know of any other Rov who is so approachable and whose answers are so relevant and helpful.

My question is about my five-year-old. From what I gathered from your *shiur* on TorahAnytime, he's what you call a fragile child. He's mature and kind-hearted but also very sensitive. He needs huge amounts of attention and always needs to be the best.

Since he's our oldest child he became accustomed to getting that attention, but lately things have changed, and I think it's because our almost-four-year-old has recently started at the same school. Our oldest seems to be feeling very threatened by this and has started acting out quite a bit, which is unlike him as he used to be so good-natured and easy-going.

I wonder if you could address how to make him feel good about himself, so that when he sees his brother succeed he won't take it as a knock to his own self-esteem.

Another point I'm struggling with is the amount of attention he needs. To give an example: We had some guests on Shabbos and although we spent a lot of time talking about him and his *parshah* sheets, as soon as the conversation turned to something else he started doing silly things to get attention. I understand fragile children need extra servings of attention but what about the times when it simply isn't possible? How can we deal with him at such times and help him cope?

Thank you for your time; I'd really appreciate it if you could guide us.



A ANSWER

The key to understanding and helping any child, fragile or not, is, "*Chanoch le'naar al pi darko*" — figuring out what his individual character requires — and being flexible enough to work with it. Once we gain insight into who a child is, the methods we need to apply often become obvious and we realize that in most cases, there's no need for fancy solutions.

Another thing that's critical to keep in mind is that even the most helpful advice won't provide a quick fix. As with virtually everything related to the *chinuch* of our children, issues need to be dealt with on a slow, steady, consistent basis.

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Before I address the specifics of this situation, I would like to provide a short introduction on "the fragile child," which is one way of describing a child who is naturally very sensitive. For those who have read my book *Get Along With Everyone,* this will be very familiar.

Some people are born highly sensitive to their surroundings, to what others think of them and say to them, and they experience intense emotions. There's no need to look for a background of trauma or difficulties to understand why they are that way. They are simply born like that, and trying to alter their nature is a waste of time and effort.

While everyone has a degree of sensitivity, for such children (and adults), sensitivity is the most dominant of all their traits and recognizing this helps us to perceive them correctly. If a fragile child seems to have an "anger problem," for example, at its root one will usually find that it is his hypersensitivity which translates into a lower level of tolerance and causes him to explode at what seems like the slightest provocation.

Just as we don't berate a person with a sore toe for screaming when we accidentally tread on their foot, we shouldn't look down on a fragile person who "loses it" over an issue that we see as trivial. It's simply that for them, it hurts a lot more than we can comprehend.

Even the calmest, most laid-back people can explode if they're pushed far enough. Understanding that highly sensitive people have a relatively low threshold for emotional discomfort is key to understanding them and dealing with them successfully. While everyone can shift their discomfort threshold a little with the right amount of work, expecting big changes in how much someone can tolerate is unrealistic.

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Children born with this hypersensitivity (which can become apparent very early on) are more demanding in many ways. No, not all children are like this, and it can get confusing when only one child in the family is highly sensitive. If it's the oldest child, parents can worry that they won't be able to provide the same amount of attention to all their children. But children who aren't highly sensitive don't usually need as much attention and reassurance. Conversely, parents whose older children aren't highly sensitive but then have a fragile child may not realize at first that this child has a different set of needs.

It can feel daunting to contemplate years of such devotion to bolstering a fragile child's self-esteem. The truth is that parents won't usually need to invest so much for so long, because if they pour enough energy into the early, formative years, many issues that would have arisen later simply won't, and issues that they struggle with at first will later fall away. In some ways, it's actually simpler to deal with the problems experienced by a highly sensitive child, because they are virtually all related to self-esteem, and mostly interconnected. Recognizing this is often the "master-key" to unlocking such a child's issues and finding solutions.

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Another important point to keep in mind with highly sensitive children is that deep-seated issues need to be dealt with during calm moments and not when the issue has just blown up in your face. When a fragile child is overwhelmed with his feelings, it's almost impossible to get through to him. All you need to say at such a time is something calming and reassuring along the lines of, "Yes, it's tough. I understand."

Later, when things have calmed down, you can talk to the child and address the issue, being extremely careful not to sound condescending or critical. It's vital not to condemn their reaction or personalize it as typical for "someone like them."

But you don't have to wait for things to happen and then react. You should also try to preempt any situation you know will prove challenging, and address it in advance. It might not be possible to avoid the explosion, but reducing its intensity is often possible.

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In the situation described in this letter, the first thing I would note is that sibling rivalry is so normal and certainly isn't just a problem when one of the siblings is highly sensitive. A young child wanting to be the center of attention at the Shabbos table, especially when there are guests, is also very normal.

That said, this doesn't mean that you have to resign yourself to experiencing significant problems. As I noted above, addressing the upcoming challenge before it lands on a child will usually help. In the example you give, you can take your child aside before the *seudah* and tell him how much you enjoy going over his *parshah* sheets with him and chatting to him about his week in *cheder*. Then you can add, "And this Shabbos, we have guests, so I/Tatty will be talking to them as well. Whenever you see me/Tatty talking to the guests, it would be so nice if you could listen quietly. You're a big boy and I know you can help us to make the guests feel really welcome."

Addressing problems before they arise is also something I often advise for *melamdim*, who may find themselves dealing with a class of around 30 boys at least one of whom is highly sensitive. While it's not usually feasible to give extra attention to one or a few children during class, talking to them for a few minutes before or after class is quite realistic.

A *melamed* might tell a child, for instance, "I really enjoyed how you participated yesterday. Today, I'm going to be teaching something that's quite complicated, but I'm sure you're going to get it, and I'll be keeping an eye out to make sure you do."

Drawing further on this idea, the parent of an older child who feels jealous of a younger one could tell him, "Your little brother is finding it quite hard to adjust to

a new school, and he's so relieved to have his older brother around. If you could give him a compliment from time to time, and let him know that you're looking out for him, I know it would make him feel so much better, and I'd really appreciate it too."

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Another advantage of preempting the challenging situation is that the child knows that you're thinking about him even when you're not actively showing it. This makes it less likely that he'll act out to get your attention, as he knows he already has it.

Giving a child attention is always good when that's what's needed, but it means so much more when the child doesn't have to demand it, either directly (which is unusual) or via behaving badly. Positive attention that comes from the parent or teacher without any obvious prompt can be so very effective at resolving problems.

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Problems, of course, are not going to be solved overnight. Children who are highly sensitive generally grow into more sensitive adults and to a degree, they may struggle more with various issues later on as well. Others with less sensitivity can find it easier to keep themselves in check.

Giving lots of positive feedback is very reassuring for everyone and definitely for a fragile child who really needs it in order to grow into a more robust adult. So, if your five-year-old sits quietly even for a few minutes at the Shabbos table while you are busy with the guests, make sure to tell him how wonderfully he's behaving as soon as you get the opportunity.

Your son might still struggle with not being the center of attention at times, but there are plenty of ways to deal with this, such as asking him to help clearing the dishes or suggesting that he think about the story his *rebbi* told over in *cheder* that week so that he can say it over after the *seudah*.

It's important to keep your goal of lifting your child and helping him forefront in your mind. The aim isn't to have a calm *seudah*, to stop him fighting with his little brother, or to avert the next tantrum. Not that these aren't important things in themselves, but when you keep your eye on the overarching goal — making your child feel good about himself — everything else will naturally fall into place. But as mentioned, falling completely into place can take a while — in fact, it can take years.

Meanwhile, you'll still have to deal with occasionally problematic behavior just as you would with any other child, fragile or not.

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All children need to know that there are consequences for behaving wrongly, and while we have to proceed with more caution with highly sensitive children (as mentioned earlier), we shouldn't gloss over things that need to be called out.

What all children also need to know just as much, if not more, is that there are benefits for doing things *right*, for trying hard, for making improvements. Difficult behavior is far more noticeable so we do need to make an effort to notice the calm moments that might not have been calm, the words unsaid in a storm of tantrum, all the little things that make up daily life that should be appreciated.

It's so important that we build our children and work with their natures instead of against them. Hopefully, we will be able to help our children learn how to deal with life even when it feels overwhelming, and *im yirtzeh Hashem* reap a great deal of *nachas* from them all.



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