RABBI
SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the home

PARSHAS BALAK

THE RIGHT FOCUS FOR THE RIGHT RESULTS

Chazal teach us that Balak was only able to see with one eye. The Yetev Lev (in Parshas Shelach) quotes the Maharam Ash who writes that a person looking through both eyes has weaker vision and can only see what's close by. When he wants to see something further away, he closes one eye to focus his energy. This explains Balak's exceptional vision and perception.

This concept is linked to an idea brought by various *seforim* which note that a person has two eyes in order to serve two distinct functions – one with which to see *Gadlus Haborei*, the greatness of Hashem, and the second to see *shiflus ha'adam,* his own lowliness. Balak, with his one eye, was capable of perceiving Hashem's greatness but incapable of seeing how comparatively small he was, and his arrogance misled him.

There are areas in life when we have to focus on two contradictory things simultaneously; and there are times that we actually need to close one eye and focus intensely on just one thing. When we see difficult behaviors in a child, it sometimes blocks the "second eye" from seeing what a gift this child is and all the things he does right. Instead, he becomes a "difficult child" in our eyes, and that picture only reverts to a more balanced one if someone comes along complaining about that child, prompting you to defend him and suddenly see the good in him again.

It's so important to learn to use our eyes correctly when we look at our children, and to know when to close one eye and turn our complete focus on the good in them, which brings out even more of the goodness. The same is true for a spouse, and even for oneself. While it's necessary to be aware of our own faults and not remain oblivious of what needs correcting (as the original idea of the "second eye" teaches), if we become too self-critical, the negative can become the sole focus and all we are capable of seeing. Sometimes, focusing more on the good in ourselves can make us feel good enough to bring out even more of it.

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Question:

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

Firstly, I really enjoyed your teleconference course and felt it was an eye-opener. It made me aware of the different personalities which bring about the different behaviors in children. However, I am really confused about how to put boundaries in place. Most of my children are sensitive; therefore, they seek to be in control, and I'm getting stuck. My 11-year-old is especially challenging and defiant. If I place a boundary, they defy it. How do I follow through with a boundary when the more I try the more defiant and more chutzpadik they become? With no boundaries that work, they end up doing whatever they want.

You said that most UV children are okay unless they are challenged. But they seem to find every boundary challenging and they react with temper tantrums, which I don't know how to approach.

Here's an example: I told my son that since he came home very late last night, I want him to have an early bedtime. He refused and answered extremely chutzpadik. He said that if I give him this consequence, then he'll give it back to me by going to bed extra late. I warned him a few times that if he continues with this chutzpah, his bike will be locked up, which ended up happening. He had a massive fit and went completely wild, even becoming violent. It took several hours to calm him down. Still, he kept threatening that he is going to bed later, and in that sense he won. He added that tomorrow morning, he will show his control again by not getting up on time and staying home from school.

I would really appreciate some advice on how to approach him and my other children in the best way without feeling flustered and not knowing how to enforce my boundaries.

Thank you.

Answer:

Disciplining children who behave obnoxiously is very challenging, but it's a lot more common than you think. The reason you may think that what you're dealing with is beyond the range of normal is that this isn't something most people are comfortable discussing. Thinking you're the only one struggling with an issue can make you feel frustrated and incompetent. But children are challenging in many homes, and another thing to note is that a significant number of these challenges are thankfully age-related and will naturally resolve over time. Realizing that alone can make this issue much easier to deal with.

While it may seem counterintuitive, the initial approach with such children isn't discipline. It's definitely important to educate and discipline your children, but the first thing you need to do is understand them. Since you already heard my *shiurim* on this topic, you know this already, but it's so critical that I want to emphasize it once more.

Much of your children's behavior comes from feeling challenged, as you note. It doesn't mean that *you* are challenging *them*. It doesn't mean that you're doing something wrong. But your children are still *feeling* challenged – which is what the fragile child is all about. That's why it's so important to make them feel good about themselves and to give them attention. This approach is so much more productive.

People often see discipline and boundaries as coping mechanisms to control their children. While being in control in an overall sense is important, it's not the goal. The goal is making our children feel good, even special, which eventually leads to them becoming less challenging. With sensitive children in particular, this can be a long and difficult process as it takes a lot to build their self-esteem. Such children are hard to satisfy, but they need to have their self-image bolstered in order to thrive. Try staying a step ahead – your ratio should probably be 80:20; eighty percent making your child feel good and only twenty percent learning how to control the situation without being controlled by your child. The fact that your child is so challenging only illustrates how limited he is at present. It shows "who" you're dealing with much more than "what" you're dealing with.

Someone recently told me that his wife had been complaining about something he had done five years previously. I agreed with him that ordinarily, she should have gotten past it long ago – but I added that the fact that she was talking about an event from five years back only proved how challenged she was feeling. In such a case, instead of trying to resolve the old issue or questioning her for bringing it up, it's important to learn how to approach and relate to someone who can feel this challenged.

Similarly, your question here isn't what to do about your child's obnoxious behavior as much as how to deal with a child who is feeling so challenged that he will engage in such behavior. The way to achieve this is to make him feel good about himself, which will naturally calm him down and make him easier to deal with. Once you've achieved this shift of focus you'll be much closer to hitting on ideas that will make this child behave better.

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This said, you're right that some boundaries have to be put into place regardless of how successful you are in getting your child to feel good. Don't wait for challenging moments to do so. Instead, find a quiet moment and discuss things in advance. You may end up not having to talk about punishment at all. Talking in a calm frame of mind and in a confident yet firm tone can often work magic. No threatening, no anger, and no from-the-hip reactions. Try saying things like: "It's important to me that you do this. Please make sure you do it for me. Thank you." Sometimes you can even be a bit vulnerable and add something like: "It's hurtful to me that I asked you nicely to please be home early and you didn't comply. Please make sure it doesn't happen again." Sometimes I even suggest adding: "I'm not going to punish you. I'm just going to tell you again what's important to me and I'll leave it up to you to do the right thing." Addressing your child calmly, confidently, consistently, and clearly about what you want will make a child take you more seriously than you imagine.

Of course, there will still be times when that's not enough and you will have to be clear about not being okay with your child not cooperating and complying. You can be assertive and firm about what has to happen, yet there's still room for kind and gentle wording. It's fine to be encouraging and understanding and even to cushion your message with an incentive. "I know it's hard for you to come home on time and I realize that some of your friends stay out late. When you come home on time, I'll have something special for you." Showing your child that you appreciate his challenge makes it easier for him to listen. Incentives are fine as long as they're on your terms and you initiate them. Of course if your child is demanding a reward for compliance you should not submit to being dictated to. Otherwise, there's no problem with occasionally giving a child something small to encourage proper behavior. Offering an incentive for working along doesn't necessarily make it optional, and sometimes just does the trick.

When even providing incentives isn't enough, you're going to have to switch tactics again, and focus on consequences. "This comes up every so often. If it happens again, I might have to do XYZ, although I really don't want to." It's important to emphasize that you genuinely don't want to reach that point. This isn't about showing your child who's boss. Furthermore, don't lose a sense of empathy about how this will impact him (for instance by telling him that you don't care if he has his bike taken away). You don't *want* to control him and you certainly *do* want him to have his bike – make sure he knows that. You're simply communicating that it's very important that he gets home on time. "Being home on time is important, so in order to make sure that happens, I'm going to have to do something I really don't want to." Say it calmly, but in a way that your child sees you really mean it.

Another important point about consequences: Try to make them about yourself. "If you don't come home on time, *I will have to* do XYZ." When it's something *you* do, you remain in control of the outcome. "I feel bad, but after eight o'clock, I won't be able to help you with your homework." If a consequence is something your child has to do, you're back at square one – what will you do if

he doesn't comply? But if it's about you it's that much simpler.

In a case where a child threatens not to go to school the next day, I often guide parents through the entire scenario and tell them to allow it to happen. Usually, if it's handled right, it doesn't happen more than once. As soon as your child realizes that this form of manipulation doesn't work, he'll stop using it. Tantrums and chutzpah are usually just manipulative tools, and if you don't allow them to influence your approach, chances are your child won't use them again.

You may still deal with the occasional extreme situation of chutzpah or other difficult behavior, and then you may benefit from having someone to guide you on how to put a stop to it. Tolerating such behavior, especially if your child gains from it in some way, transmits the message that it's not so bad after all, making it more likely to recur. With guidance, you will be able to clearly communicate that the behavior crossed a red line.

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In general, whenever you present a consequence, you must take care to follow through, which is another reason to be very careful with what you say you'll do. Children aren't fooled by extreme threats they know you won't implement; more importantly, a parent who doesn't follow through teaches his child that he doesn't mean what he says. This is another reason why consequences should be communicated in a calm moment, when it's much easier to say something you really mean. Your child may test you, but he'll end up taking you more seriously when he sees that your word is thought out and something you mean.

With all that said, let's turn back to where we started. I want to reiterate the importance of making the sensitive child feel good about himself, understanding where he's coming from, and recognizing how sensitive and fragile he is. Focusing on these things will also help you to avoid focusing on the wrong things.

I would like to conclude with an interesting story about someone who traveled to Lakewood to visit R' Kalman Krohn and tell him about a certain child who was misbehaving and being very chutzpadig in cheder. Rabbi Krohn suggested that the father find his son a good *chavrusa* and tutor to make sure he did extremely well on every single test. Seeing the father's surprise, Rabbi Krohn explained: "If your child gets good marks, he'll feel much better about himself, and that's going to help him start behaving." And that's exactly what happened.

That's the key. Focusing with the "right" eye on a child's good qualities will bring out the best in him and help you avoid many other difficulties.

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

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BALAK 5782

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