RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

Parshas Matos-Masei

Your Behavior Matters

Everyone will agree that we need to do whatever we can to ensure both the physical and spiritual well-being of our children, but we all know that regardless of our *hishtadlus,* we need immense *siyata dishmaya* to keep them safe. The Apta Rav says in his *sefer* Ahavas Yisroel on Parshas Matos, that when a person is careful to conduct himself properly and keeps his thoughts pure, he creates heavenly angels who protect his children from all evil.

With that he explains Moshe Rabbeinu's instructions to the *bnei Gad ubnei Reuven: "bnu arim letapchem"*. The word *arim* can mean *malachim,* as in *"irin kadishin".* Moshe was saying "Create *malachim* for the little children!" Adults have the power of choice and can choose to do the right thing. They can also repent if they didn't choose well. Children, though, need special protection, and by being careful of the way we behave, we are granting them that gift of special guardian angels that will protect them.

As parents we need to realize that being on our best behavior serves as an ideal for our children to emulate, but we're learning now that it also creates angels who will help them choose wisely and protect them from faltering.

This is similar to what the Belzer Rav, Rav Yissachar Ber zy"a, used to say; that while *chazara* is certainly a practical method to retain information, it is also a *segulah* for better memory. When we practice what we preach we are more effective educators, but additionally, our choices cause a *shmira elyonah* which we can't afford to forgo.

While I don't claim to know what does or doesn't create *malachim*, this idea can be applied to building our *shalom bayis* as well. When a husband or wife wants their spouse to do something, if they aren't up to it themselves it usually does not work. When you want someone to do something for you, you need to model a willingness to put in the same effort.

Question:

Hi Rabbi Gruen,

I listen to your *shiurim* on Torah Anytime and have even implemented many of your ideas, with great results B"H.

I have a family of boys and I'm finding it very hard to shop for them. I have always thought of boys' clothing as neat and put together, but lately I've noticed a shift to fancier and more fashionable clothes for boys. The stores are full of neon, metallic, graphics and writing on the boys' clothes, and I am very sensitive to these things. I find them not *eidel* for a Yiddishe boy. However, I have no choice. This is what is being sold in the stores.

I was wondering, is my sensitivity justified? How much does dress really affect the child? Is there really a spiritual significance to the clothes we wear?

Thank you.

Answer:

You're definitely onto something here. We are all aware of the concept of our externals influencing us internally and that what a person does, says, or wears can have a strong influence on them. We are taught to behave differently than the *goyim* and not to resemble them in our mode of dress.

In Ateres Yeshua (Parshas Kedoshim) there is a nice discussion on the common mistake people make, to dress like their gentile colleagues, in the hopes that this will endear them in the eyes of the gentiles or cause them to earn more money. Today the fact that this is far from the truth is patently obvious, as we see billionaires and others who are very successful while still wearing their full chassidish garb.

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Having said that, we need to be clear about what actually poses a problem and what is trivial. There are certainly articles of clothing that are decidedly *goyish*, while others are distinctly Jewish.

Most of the time however, the lines are quite blurred and we sometimes decide based on our own opinion, that a particular article of clothing, color or look is more Jewish or less Jewish than something else.

Many of the things we accept as "the norm" are not based on any halacha or minhag. We may have simply gotten used to things being a certain way, and we tend to believe that it is the only way. Actually it is possible that the particular style we have in mind was the only thing available at one time, and that's why it became the thing to wear. Instead of buying what is available now, as our forebears did then, we run ourselves ragged trying to find the same style of clothing that was worn many years before, not realizing that the reason they wore it was because that was what was sold then.

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There are some parents who decide that in order for their child to look Jewish, Heimish or Chassidish enough, they must dress a certain way, which is very different from what their

peers are wearing. While a person is certainly allowed to have standards and tastes and personal preferences, he needs to remember that it isn't always black and white (no pun intended!). If it is done at the child's expense and makes him feel singled out, then it can become a problem.

Sometimes, standing out like a sore thumb all the time will have a greater negative effect on your child than the fact that they are wearing something that might be a little more "with the times". So this is something to keep in mind.

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It is definitely true that some clothes give off a certain sentiment we are not necessarily comfortable with. It could be that the people who generally wear these clothes are not the types of people we want ourselves or our children to be associated with. Sometimes dressing that way is meant to impress people we are not interested in impressing. Such styles should probably be avoided.

In summation: When dressing your child, there is no *mitzvah* to dress him the exact same way you used to dress his teenage brother years ago (or the way your mother dressed your own brothers). Things change, and it is okay to go along with it, as long as it doesn't violate *halacha* or your family or community *mesorah*. However, if you distinctly feel like something is "off" or giving a wrong message, then by all means, leave it in the store.

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After mentioning the right and wrong and what is or isn't okay, let's mention another idea. Mode of dress depends very much on the specific community or demographic that you are a part of. You might find the same piece of clothing sends a different message based on location. I was once in an out-of-town community and *davened* in one of their *shuls*. It struck me that everybody was dressed differently. Some wore a hat and jacket, some didn't; some wore a white shirt, some wore a colored shirt. Nobody cared what anybody else was wearing or judged anyone based on what they looked like. That was fine, because that is what is the norm over there.

However, in Brooklyn, something like this would not fly. Almost every Kehilla has a very specific way of dressing, and deviating from that ends up sending a message. Whether it is right or wrong to attach such significance to externalities is irrelevant. If we're deviating from societal norms and sending certain messages we have to ask ourselves: do we want to be sending this message?

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It's true that if you look at old pictures, you'll note that yeshiva boys all dressed differently. Even the Rebbes all dressed differently, often based on whatever clothes they were able to find. There wasn't so much nuance inherent in every inch of their clothes like we have today.

Over the years, people did begin to conform to a singular type of dress. It so happened that every community wears a specific style/color/length that identifies him or her. It's not brought in any *seforim* and wasn't ever publicly instituted, but this is how it is. Getting angry at society for being this way is nonsensical, because we – as a collective unit – have brought it onto ourselves. Even while as an individual you had nothing to do with it, this is how social norms work, and it would generally do us well to abide by them.

There's an advantage to abiding by the accepted norms of the community we identify with and the schools we send our children to. Besides for the fact that we don't end up sending the wrong message to society, we also model humility and responsibility to our children by complying to and conforming with authority and fulfilling the dictate of *"Al tifrosh min hatzibur"*.

In an interesting twist, you will often find that those who decry social norms as confining and choose to be nonconformist, end up "conforming to other nonconformists". For example, if you take a look back at the hippie movement of the '70s you'll realize that, even though the whole movement was based on individuality and personal choice, hippies were instantly recognizable, because they all dressed the same way. If their credo was all about doing as one pleased, shouldn't all of them have looked different? This goes to show that, at the end of the day, we all end up conforming to *something*.

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If you have extreme trouble understanding this topic, or a terrible aversion to conforming, you might want to explore why that is. It is usually not a good sign when one is constantly looking to buck trends or resist social expectations. Why does it bother you so much?

If you have an older child who chooses to dress differently than is typically accepted in your circles, take the time to find out why they have this need to be different.

Some might feel the need to lecture their child on "how we do things" and which clothes are or are not appropriate. While this may be effective in the short term, overlooking the root cause of the problem will only ensure that it comes up again later. It's usually not that your child doesn't know that this is not how your

family or community dresses. If you force your child to conform without understanding why they chose not to conform in the first place, it might cause resentment to build up and explode the moment they become independent.

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When dealing with teens, you need to be especially careful. Teens often misinterpret their parents' emphasis on their choice of clothes. It might send a message to them that appearance and image in other people's eyes is more important to their parents than Yiddishkeit or *halacha*.

And like with everything else - similar to the *vort* mentioned above - make sure to keep your message consistent and true. A boy once told me that his father was always bothering him about his cuffs and his hat and the length of his jacket, while he couldn't be bothered himself to install a filter on his phone.

A father was once completely perplexed why his son wouldn't understand that he can't wear a colored scarf, but the father himself wore one! I had to explain to him that no, his son cannot understand why he can't wear something his own father wears. This type of talk sends confusing messages to our children. If you think something is a problem, don't do it! And if you do something, don't demand of your children not to.

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Another very important point to keep in mind is that we must not get stuck on one thing. There might be a girl or boy who does wonderfully in many areas, but chooses to wear something that isn't the accepted norm. Don't let yourself forget about their many great qualities and focus only on that!

I recently had a talk with a *bachur* in Yeshiva. He was learning well and an all-around wonderful student, but there was one article of clothing that he chose to wear a bit differently. The Yeshiva faculty made such a big deal about it and the *bachur* ended up very traumatized and hurt. B"H with lots of hard work and *siyatta Dishmaya* he was saved from being completely destroyed, but all of that heartache could have been prevented if the authority figures around them wouldn't have lost their focus like that.

As parents and teachers, don't try to control your children's choices or throw a fit about inconsequential things that are sometimes not even noticed by anyone. These approaches tend to be damaging and counterproductive.

Of course, you do not have to allow your children to dress ridiculously, and you certainly don't need praise their wayward choices, but sometimes, it would do us well to focus on their strengths while trying to find out why they feel the need to dress differently, and if there's any way that we can help them.

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On another note: Sometimes parents are faced with the opposite problem. Their child wants to be "*frummer*" or dress more stringently than they feel comfortable with. Don't always hold them back from doing so. If you think it's a childish thing, then it will pass. And if it doesn't pass, it's worth contemplating on which part of it is really bothering you. Why do you mind if your child looks more frum than you? Many parents have come to regret not allowing their child to grow spiritually when they were younger. Sometimes it can hurt a child to make some silly irreversible decision, but make sure you're not just making an emotional decision that can be at least as wrong as the parent who is not allowing the more modern mode of dress.

So to return to the original question; if a piece of clothing poses a real problem, such as going against *halacha*, *mesorah*, or your community's standards, definitely refrain from buying it. If it is not accepted in your circles, it is often best to conform. On the other hand, if your child wants to wear it and it is the accepted social norm - without breaking any rules - maybe it's best not to care so much about it. And, finally, if you or your child feels this intense desire to *not* conform, try and figure out why that is and if there is something you can do to help.

Wishing you much hatzlacha
Rabbi Shimon Gruen

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