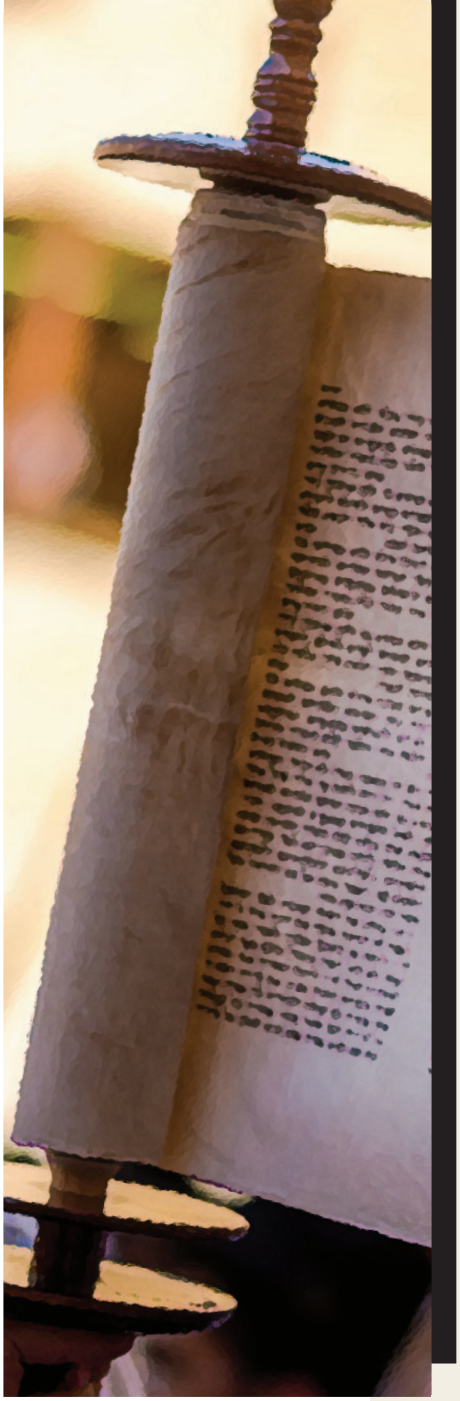


RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

CHILDREN ARE CUTE — BUT HOW MANY?

Before Hashem destroyed Sedom, He informed Avraham Avinu of what He was about to do, saying: "Should I hide anything from Avraham ... I have known him that he will instruct his children..." The Chasam Sofer asks why Avraham couldn't attain the knowledge of what was about to happen to Sedom without being directly informed — was he less worthy than all the Nevi'im who knew what would happen to other nations via prophecy?

The Chasam Sofer answers that of course Avraham Avinu was no less worthy than any Navi; however, he was fully occupied with educating his children and spreading the light of Torah to all those around him, and he made this a priority above communing with Hashem via *nevuah*. Therefore, Hashem told Avraham of His plans so that he should not remain ignorant of what was about to occur — so that he shouldn't lose out on anything due to devoting himself to the supremely important task of educating the next generation.

Many people today often feel overwhelmed with the challenges of having large families and may sometimes find themselves thinking, "I could learn so much more if I wasn't so busy helping my wife with the little ones..." "I would be able to focus so much more on *avodas Hashem* if I wasn't so preoccupied..." "I would be able to *daven* Shacharis if I didn't have two babies under the age of three at home..."

Hashem will certainly ensure that no one loses out on anything of any genuine importance if he or she is occupied with bringing up His children to be *ovdei Hashem*. Nothing could be more important than emulating Avraham Avinu and spreading the light of Torah to the next generation.

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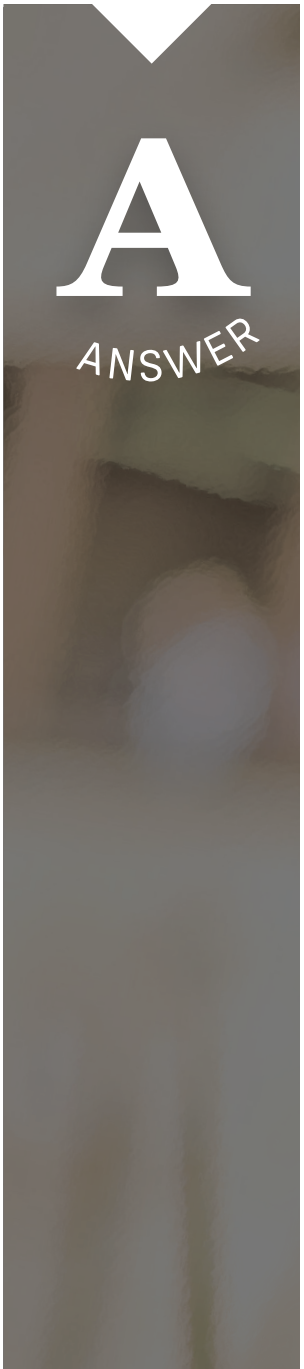
Dear Rabbi Gruen,

First of all I'd like to thank you for your *shiurim*, which I've been enjoying for years. I wish you much success with them in the future.

I don't find it easy to write long letters, but I decided to take a few minutes to write. After hearing a recent *shiur* of yours, with such a genuine Torah *hashkafah*, I thought it might be a great idea for you to elaborate more about what you mentioned, and present in a nice way more on the beauty and *zechus* of having a large family.

So often I hear *ehrliche* people, friends and relatives, talking about the "question" of whether to have a lot of children. They just don't see it the right way. In previous generations it wasn't a question — it was taken for granted. I know it's hard to speak in public about this issue, but I'm sure that just talking about the great *zechus* in a positive way could make a big impression.

Thanks again for your *shiurim* and *hatzlachah rabbah*.



This is an incredibly important topic and it's normal to want and need *chizuk* in this area. While it needs to be addressed with sensitivity, it must be addressed as it's so relevant, and many are in need of the right guidance and encouragement.

I'm not going to discuss the halachic aspects as I am not a *posek*. It's important, however, to know the rules, the exceptions to the rules, and to not confuse the two. Unfortunately, many people relate to the exceptions as if they have become the standard, which is wrong and harmful. There is a time and a place for exceptions which should be handled with expert, Torah-based guidance.

There are people who will ask a rav even basic questions in *kashrus*, but when it comes to the question of children and building a family, they rely on "what I heard from my sister," or "what so-and-so said." This often reveals a lack of sensitivity to the topic in general, and perhaps a lack of appreciation of what it means to have children and establish the next generation.

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Setting one's priorities in life can obviously only be done if we know which things are more important and which are less so. As the Chasam Sofer explains, Avraham Avinu gave up on what could seem like the greatest achievement in life — speaking to Hashem, face-to-face — in order to devote himself to raising and educating the next generation. Everything else paled in comparison.

Each of us can name things we give up in order to be *ehrliche Yidden*, and list ways in which we willingly and happily undertake difficulties in order to live a Torah life. It's important to acknowledge and accept how unquestionably worthwhile it is to forgo time, money, space etc., in order to have children and devote ourselves to them.

The Medrash describes how the Avos begged Hashem to have *rachmanus* on the Yidden when they were about to go into *galus*. Avraham Avinu came before Hashem and asked for *rachmanus* in the merit of the Akeidah, when he showed his readiness to sacrifice his son. Yitzchak Avinu came before Hashem and asked for *rachmanus* in the merit of the Akeidah when he showed his readiness to be sacrificed. Then came Yaakov Avinu, after seeing that the tremendous *zechusim* of the Akeidah had not been enough to sway Hashem; what argument could he possibly offer?

And what did Yaakov say? He asked Hashem to have *rachmanus* on the Yidden in the merit of having raised a large family with many children and of the *tzaar gidul banim* he had endured.

The Nesivas Shalom explains that while raising many children may not seem to compare to the sacrifice of the Akeidah, apparently it is even greater. Indeed, the Ramban relates that Yaakov did not engage in spreading Torah throughout the world because he was engaged in something more important: bringing up his children.

On a similar note, the story is told that when the great rebbe the Ostrovster *gaon* married off one of his children, his father-in-law, Reb Naftuli Melitzer *ztz"l,* arrived to participate in the *simchah*. The Ostrovster had only a few children and thousands of chassidim; his father-in-law had far fewer chassidim, but had 14 children! In the middle of the festivities, the Ostrovtzer looked around at the thousands of guests and then glanced at his father-in-law, wondering

how he would feel in his place, seeing his son-in-law with so many more chassidim than he had. Reb Naftuli noticed his glance, correctly deduced its meaning, and approached his son-in-law and said: Avraham Avinu and Yitzchak Avinu were tremendously great and showed extraordinary *mesirus nefesh*, and yet it was Yaakov Avinu who is considered the *bechir sheba'avos* — why? Because he raised a large family of children. Apparently that was prized above everything else.

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Having children and raising them is hard. This was one of the two curses given to Adam and Chavah: He would have to work hard to support himself and his family, and she would go through the suffering involved in bearing and raising children. For some reason, people don't protest nearly as much at the curse of working for a living as they do at the curse of the suffering inherent in building a family. Some even enjoy overexerting themselves in their jobs, surprisingly, and don't stop even after covering the bills. Perhaps the *yetzer hara* invests special effort in making the amazing *mitzvah* of having and raising children seem like an impossibly difficult task.

Without Torah, and for someone who only considers the pleasures of this world, having children can seem like a hardship that one would prefer to avoid. Why would someone who thinks that this world is all there is want to give up so many years of his life for other people, even if they are his flesh and blood? Without any sense of fulfilling a purpose and doing Hashem's will, having children certainly could feel like a burden.

Unfortunately, even people who do have *emunah,* will often still get confused when it comes to applying that faith to building a family. They make all sorts of calculations such as: "I can afford to pay tuition for four children, but no more." "I can pay for six *chasunos,* but not seven." "I can deal with the mess of a child every three years, but no more closely spaced than that." They really seem to think that they can control how much struggle their lives will entail, how hard things will get, how much money they'll have to spend on each child…

The Steipler Gaon *ztz"l* stresses in a famous letter that no one can alter the amount of difficulty — or contentment — Hashem has destined for him. Even on a practical level, a person who has seven children won't necessarily have to work any harder to keep the home running than someone with three. But on a deeper level, no one can alter (other than via *tefillah*) the amount of *nachas* and the amount of *agmas nefesh* he will have, by adjusting the number of children he brings into the world. People shouldn't think that they can decide what will cause them to have more blessing and peace of mind.

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People who trust in Hashem in this area of life, just as they trust in Him in other areas, receive special *brachah*, as this powerful story related by Harav Shmuel Wosner *ztz"l* illustrates. After a terrible accident that virtually wiped out an entire family — father, mother, and six children — Rav Wosner was *maspid* the family at the *levayah*. "I must tell this story," he said, "because it would be an *aveirah* not to make this known." Rav Wosner then revealed that around a year before the accident, the father had come to him with a *she'ilah*. A doctor had told his wife that it would be dangerous for her to have more children, and he wanted to know what the Torah required him to do.

Rav Wosner investigated the issue and then told the father that *al pi Torah*, there was no justification for not having more children — there was no reason for concern. The father listened and the seventh child, just a baby at the time of the accident, was born not long afterward. This was the only child who survived. Had it not been for the father's determination to act according to Daas Torah, his entire family could have been wiped out without a trace.

In fact, we have another illustration of this concept in the Torah, when Amram returned to his wife Yocheved after separating from her, and Moshe Rabbeinu was born. The Torah tells us that Yocheved was already old when this happened, but in the merit of her desire to bring another child into the world even at such a time when Pharaoh had decreed death on all newborn baby boys, her youth was restored.

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At first glance, it can seem like an immense challenge to jump in, trust Hashem, and have more children when someone feels and decides on their own that it's simply too much. Of course, there are exceptions, as mentioned, that need to be addressed responsibly, and a "feeling" that it's too much should be addressed too. But how does one know when the feeling is genuine?

A couple of years ago, someone gave me a ride in his car, which turned out to be a Tesla self-driving model. As we sped along the highway, I suddenly noticed that his hands weren't on the steering wheel! This was new to me, and I commented: "You really trust this car." After a second of thought, I realized that everyone trusts their cars, not only those people who have these fancy self-driving ones. After all, we trust that the steering wheel will function, that the brakes will work, that the gas tank won't explode… It dawned on me that trusting the functioning of a self-driving car was just adding another few features rather than something entirely new.

The same applies to our relationship with Hashem. We trust Him in so many areas: that we'll get married and have healthy children, that we'll have *nachas* from them, that we'll be able to provide for them — but then some people think: "Well, Hashem can give me enough for four children, but five…?" Maybe people don't consciously think this way, but it's important to realize how nonsensical this would be.

Rav Wosner (in *sefer Shevet Halevi*) records a question a certain father once sent to him and which he responded to as an urgent and important matter. This father already had eight children and was 44 years old. He wanted to know whether the Torah's instruction "not to cease from having children into your old age" applied to him, as in the area where he lived, there was no suitable school for his children and he didn't know whether he should bring another child into the world in such circumstances.

Rav Wosner replied by giving the example of Chizkiyahu Hamelech, who knew through *ruach hakodesh* that the child born to him would be a *rasha* — and yet Yeshaya Hanavi told him that nonetheless, he was to have a child. "I am penning this letter to you, in order that people should stop making this mistake," Rav Wosner wrote, stressing that the father should not make his own calculations regarding whether he would or would not be able to bring his children up properly. His business was to have children and do his best and trust that Hashem would take care of things. And, he added, when a person sets out to do Hashem's *ratzon*, he receives *siyatta diShmaya.*

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There is an additional aspect in this regard, one that needs to be addressed. When a husband and wife are confused and conflicted, it's always a good idea to consult with someone objective who can help them figure things out. Where it's a question of logic, of black-on-white facts, the case is simpler and a straightforward matter of asking Daas Torah how to proceed. I often stress how important it is that a couple has a rav — *one* rav — whom they consult with and whose advice they always follow.

Just as one approaches any other *she'ilah* in *halachah* with the desire to find out what the Torah requires and to do it, the same should apply here. No one should "shop around" looking for the answer they want; no one should think, "From what I was told, with these questions one goes to Rav Ploni because he's the most lenient..." We wouldn't ever do that for a life-and-death health issue, so why would we do that in this area?

Furthermore, it's important to build a relationship with a rav who then becomes familiar with your family and unique circumstances, knows to ask the right questions, and can give a personalized answer. So much strife can be averted by having one rav who answers all the family's *she'ilos*, instead of having each spouse pulling in a different direction.

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Submitting to Daas Torah can solve many problems, but perhaps not all of them. When emotional issues are key to the conflict, it can help a great deal to figure out what exactly is bothering the people involved, instead of relying on just the final ruling.

In an interesting Q&A session, Rav Avigdor Miller *ztz"l* was once asked by a woman, whose husband didn't want any more children, what she should do. Rav Miller replied that she "should disobey him, and have more children. If it means fighting, then it's worth fighting for a child. Each and every child is a new world, as the Rambam says: 'Bringing a new Jewish soul into the world is like creating an entire world.' That's for just one more child, and of course, having many more children is a tremendous success. If we're capable of childbearing, our success in life is measured by the number of children we have."

I highly doubt that Rav Miller was suggesting or encouraging fighting on this issue, and he certainly didn't mean to imply that any woman in such a situation should make such a decision on her own. What he meant was that if something is important to you, you don't just give up and say, "I'd love to have more children, but my husband objects, so what can I do?" It's worth persevering, explaining, arguing, cajoling, begging... for the privilege of bringing another child into the world.

Of course, issues should be addressed respectfully and responsibly. Maybe the husband is worried that the wife won't cope with running the home and that she won't have time for him. Maybe it's the wife who's concerned that her husband will work even longer hours outside the house and that she won't get the help she needs and he'll be stressed about their finances. Whatever the issue is, they should discuss it and not allow unaddressed issues to decide the question of whether to have another child or not. In general, in such cases, refraining from having another child won't solve their problems anyway.



I would like to stress that husbands should understand that having children is a joint responsibility and it's his duty to help with them too. When Leah Imeinu had her third child, she said: "Now my husband will accompany me," which some explain as meaning that when a mother has her third child, she needs the constant help of her husband to manage.

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Other people can of course also help; at the very least, they should not hinder. Sometimes, unfortunately, the parents of a husband or wife, even with the best of intentions, feel compelled to intervene and suggest that their child "take a break" for "their own good". While it can be hard to step back and let one's married children make their own decisions (and sometimes their own mistakes), it's so important that parents refrain from mixing in.

Sometimes, it's other "well-meaning" people who make thoughtless or careless comments that give young couples doubts as to whether they're doing the right thing. Even a "light-hearted" comment such as: "Wow! You have six children under the age of eight?!" can make a young mother feel looked down on. Often, people who make such comments are either jealous or feel guilty about taking measures to keep their own families small. But the effects can still be harmful and people should take care of how they speak.

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For those who are blessed with large families, they should feel proud and grateful to have so many merits. If people can be proud of their large houses or fancy cars, how much more so should we feel proud to have large families, one child after the other, and to be raising them to serve Hashem.

The truth is that having children is really the greatest gift in life, regardless of the hard work it entails. I don't believe that people with smaller families are any happier. In fact, many parents of just a few children might be a lot happier with more children to worry about. Then they would have less time and energy to worry about silly things, or to be so self-absorbed and concerned about "whether they are happy enough..."

Each child is a blessing, and when we dedicate ourselves to this blessing, and feel good about our life's mission, Hashem will *iyH* give us the strength to accomplish it properly to the best of our ability.

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME: VAYEIRA 5785

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