

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

PREPARING OUR CHILDREN

This week's *parshah* contains powerful lessons on how to stay strong in the face of the challenges that life presents us with. The *passuk* says, "And you shall keep a stake [*yated*] ... and it shall be, when you sit down outside, you shall dig [*chafarta*] with it..." The Be'er Mayim Chayim explains that *yated* implies grounding oneself and *chafarta* can imply embarrassment (following the meaning in Sefer Yeshayahu). This hints at the necessity of attaching ourselves firmly to Hashem before we enter the outside world and confront its *nisyonos*. Each and every one of us, he writes, needs to ground himself with both *ahavas Hashem* and *yiras Hashem* so that when we "sit down outside," we will be embarrassed to do *aveiros*.

Only a strong attachment to Hashem at all times gives us a fighting chance at overcoming the inevitable challenges we'll face in life; without that attachment, we are almost certain to stumble and fall, again and again.

This lesson applies not only to us but also to preparing our children for life. *Chinuch* isn't just about the here and now of getting children to comply with demands and behave well. It's about the big picture of being *mechanech* them for years ahead. We don't know what challenges they will encounter, but we do need to know which tools to give them. It's vitally important that we protect them as far as we can and shield them from inappropriate and damaging influences; at the same time, we need to do what we can to encourage them to attach themselves securely to Torah and those people who embody its teachings, so that when they encounter life's inevitable challenges, they are armed and ready.

Would you like to sponsor an edition of Torah Lessons, to help enhance the Chinuch Habanim in so many homes?

Please email to parshalessons@lehair.org, and your donation will be most appreciated.

Parshas
Ki Seitzei
VOL. 8 | ISSUE 42

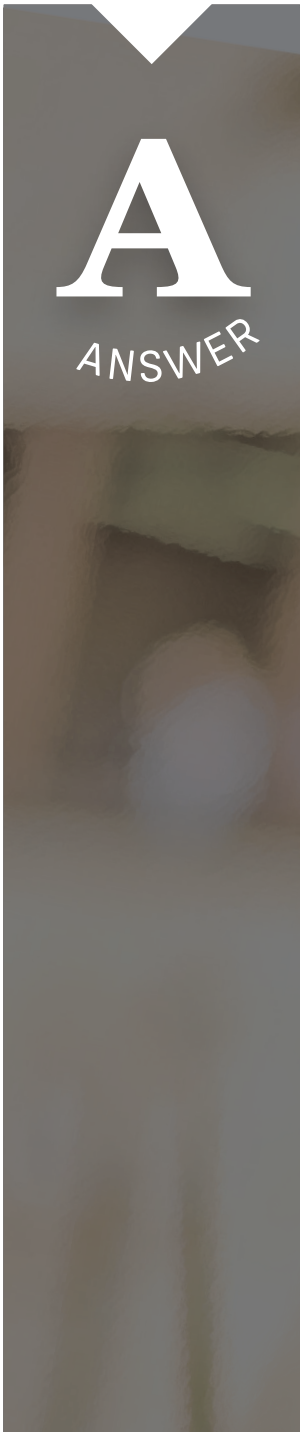


Dear Rabbi Gruen, thank you for taking the time to read my question.

First of all, I listen to your *shiurim* all the time and I really appreciate your clarity on whatever topic you discuss.

My question is regarding my oldest son who will *iy"H* be bar mitzvah in a few weeks. I was discussing the topic of bar mitzvah with a friend and she mentioned that her husband discusses body changes with her bar mitzvah boys. My husband says that his father never discussed these things with him and it's not important and doesn't need to be mentioned. My question is, in the chassidish world is this something that is discussed with *bochurim* at any point? Do I leave it up to my husband to decide?

Thank you



You write that you have one question — in fact, you have two. Your first question is on what, if anything, to discuss with your son; your second question is about how you and your husband should reach a decision.

On your first question, I'm not going to tell you if or what you should discuss with your son. There are, as most people know, various opinions on how to approach this very sensitive issue. And, as with any question related to Torah (and which question is not?), my first question to you is: What does your Da'as Torah say?

You describe being prompted to consider this question following a conversation with a friend who told you how her husband, personally, approaches this issue. It's possible he consulted with his Rav and was told to do things this way, which is fine. It's also possible that he does things this way due to his own experiences as a young *bachur*, his relationship with his father, the personalities of his sons... in short, for all kinds of reasons, some better than others.

What's important for you to note is that the way your friend's husband does things has absolutely nothing to do with you. Hearing what other people do may awaken all kinds of doubts and feelings within you, but that in itself is not a reason to act. Our knowledge and emotions are meant to inform us, but not guide us — they are only part of the picture. People who tend to follow whatever they hear from others end up with more confusion than before, locked into a neverending quest for the next idea that will resonate instead of charting a clear path. You may admire this particular friend, and her husband might be a tremendous *talmid chacham*, but that still doesn't mean you should emulate her in this aspect of your life or indeed in any other.

• • •

Going back to your Da'as Torah — there are indeed varying opinions on whether and how to speak to boys of this age. There are also a good many misconceptions on whether a particular approach truly protects our children. To give an example: I once heard it quoted from an *adam gadol* that parents should make sure to hug and kiss their children even as teenagers, because "we all need physical touch, and if people don't get it from their parents, they'll get it elsewhere."

I'm not suggesting that this *adam gadol* is wrong. His words could contain a kernel of truth or more. But too many people who hear such a statement, made so categorically, assume that if they follow this advice, their children will be protected from seeking out inappropriate relationships. This is an assumption that breaks down the moment we look at it critically. Does anyone really think that in those

communities that conduct themselves in such a manner (not because they were told to, but because that's what comes naturally to them), the children are vastly less likely to end up in the wrong places? Do we see epidemic numbers of teens from more chassidish backgrounds desperately searching for physical touch because their parents supposedly didn't give them what they need? Some may believe so; I don't.

My point is that while many ideas and approaches sound like they should theoretically produce better results, it's extremely hard to determine whether they actually do. Moreover, trying to verify the value of alternatives will itself create new challenges.

• • •

Your question actually reminds me of what the Ahavas Yisrael *ztz"l* of Vizhnitz would say: "Hashem shows each Rebbe that his *derech* in *avodas Hashem* is the right one. The smart ones realize that other Rebbes also got a similar message..." While some approaches you'll hear about are not Torah-based, there is more than one Torah-based way of doing things. That doesn't have to concern you. All you need to know is what's right for your family and your son.

I have read and heard what those who believe in being more open with young *bachurim* have to say, and I'm impressed with the amount of thought that has gone into their approach, and the sensitivity with which they deal with it. Nonetheless, to answer your question: It is indeed the accepted approach among Chassidim and other communities not to explicitly "prepare" boys approaching the age of bar mitzvah in the manner your friend describes. Instead, they rely on what we tell very young boys about inappropriate touch and other broader ideas and don't encourage them to think about it any more than necessary. This relates to the general case, when there isn't reason to be concerned about anything specific; obviously if that isn't the case for a certain individual, concerns should never be ignored and must be addressed.

Furthermore, even in those *chadarim* where some limited mention is made of this topic, it is done with exceptional refinement and modesty and usually by someone who knows exactly what to say and how. It's typically much better for that person to be someone experienced in addressing this topic. While some may think that a father discussing things with his son is the ideal, and can strengthen their relationship, this only applies if their relationship is already strong and more importantly, if the father actually knows what he's doing. And even then, many boys will find it much easier to ask any questions they have to someone other than their father, especially if the "bar mitzvah *rebbi*" makes it clear that many or most boys have questions and that's perfectly normal.

• • •

Now let's look at your particular situation. You write that you have doubts following a conversation with a friend; your husband has told you that he wants to do things the way his father did and that he sees no need to think about another approach.

What's not clear from your letter is whether you also had doubts before speaking with your friend. If you were already concerned and her words brought that concern to the fore, that's one thing. But if you were perfectly at ease with the idea of letting your husband decide in this area until you discovered that others do things differently, I don't see why what your friend's husband does should affect your way of thinking in the slightest.

As I noted above, even if it works for your friend's family, that still doesn't mean that what he does is appropriate for your family. How much more so if her husband is simply following his own instincts or intuition, or influenced by his own experiences and possibly going too far in the opposite direction. It's an unfortunate fact that many parents who suffered from their own parents in a certain area try to do things precisely the opposite way with their own children, without ever approaching the issue objectively and trying to figure out the right way to do things irrespective of their past.

In short, if you trusted your husband to make the decisions in this area before speaking with your friend, continue to trust him afterward.

• • •

If, on the other hand, you have genuine concerns related to your specific case, taking into account the personality of your child and any other relevant factors, you should address them. It's not for you to decide on "how things should be done" in a general sense. But if you think that for your family, specifically, something different could work better, then by all means discuss this with your husband.

Given that this topic is obviously somewhat alien to you, the best way to go about things is to, very gently and respectfully, ask whether your husband would mind discussing things with his Rav, just so that you can feel more at ease with what he decides. Emphasize that you respect his approach and understand why he feels as he does, and add that he's probably right. Then you can say that you'll feel so much better if he could tell you what his Rav says on this issue.

And then, as I often stress in any question related to one's children, don't allow a *chinuch* issue to turn into a *shalom bayis* issue (or vice versa). Remember that you and your husband are on the same team, united by your wish to do what's best for your children. Don't let a friend's different way of doing things derail you.

• • •

It's common for parents in such a position to be somewhat concerned as their children approach the teenage years, so don't worry that your feelings are abnormal, especially if this is your oldest son. Try to remain calm and reasonable about the challenges that your son will face, and don't panic and assume that unless he is "prepared" for what is about to hit him, he'll also panic and end up who knows where.

You should also guard against going to the opposite extreme, assuming that everything will turn out just fine regardless of what happens and that you don't need to be alert to anything that comes up. Keep a balanced perspective, doing what your Rav tells you is right and davening that your son will weather this transition in a healthy way.

Even without saying a word to your son on this issue, you can transmit so much *chizuk* that will stand him in good stead over the coming years. Focus on his strengths and let him know that you notice all the ways in which he demonstrates that he's an *eved Hashem*, trying to do the right thing. He needs to know that you believe in him, not that you are trembling lest he fall.

• • •

The story is told of the Spinka Rebbe, R' Herschele *ztz"l*, who was once in his shul when he heard a commotion. Looking around, he saw that his own son was at the center of it, arguing vehemently with some older chassidim. R' Herschele was holding a Sefer Torah at the time, and he swiftly handed it over to someone else and hurried over to see what was going on.

To the surprise of those looking on, R' Herschele leaped to the defense of his son while trying to calm everyone down. In fact, he acted just as any father would with his son... which is how he explained things afterward. Yes, as the Rebbe in his shul he felt an obligation to guard the dignity of the older chassidim, he said. On the other hand, his son only has one father — and if that father doesn't stick up for him, who will? Later, of course, he did speak to his son in private and address what needed addressing.



R' Herschele knew the importance of a child feeling secure that his father will come to his aid, no matter what. It's this sense of security that creates the basis for their relationship for years to come.

• • •

Your son may come to you or your husband with questions and that's fine. Don't push him off if he does, and let him know that having questions is normal and healthy. If you feel capable of answering him in a straightforward and reassuring manner, that's great. If not, do the best you can and find someone who can take things further with your son in a professional and sensitive manner. Don't ever leave him hanging.

Your son may also prefer not to discuss things with you. Know that it's normal for children and certainly teenagers to confide in a mentor other than their parents, so don't take it as a negative verdict on your relationship if that happens. Sometimes, discussing things first with a mentor makes it easier to open up to one's parents at a later stage. And sometimes, children simply need their privacy and that's okay.

At this momentous time in your life, I wish you tremendous *hatzlachah* in bringing up your son and all your other children to Torah and *avodas Hashem*. Be prepared for challenges to arise, and daven that Hashem should give you the *chochmah* to know how to address them.

With Hashem's help, we can all give our children what they need in advance of the inevitable challenges of life, following Da'as Torah with confidence that we are treading a well-established path that leads to serving Hashem in the best possible way.

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME: KI SEITZEI 5786

To contact Rabbi Gruen please call **718.841.6557** or e-mail **rabbigruen@lehair.org**
To subscribe to receive the weekly essay, please email **parshalessons@lehair.org**

Please feel free to send any questions, on this topic or any topic to RabbiGruen@Lehair.org