

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

MAKING ROOM FOR TREASURES

In this week's *parshah*, Klal Yisrael donate all the materials needed for the building of the Mishkan; they donate so much that Moshe Rabbeinu announces that everyone should stop bringing items as they were "sufficient ... and surplus."

The Ma'adanei Hamelech asks the well-known question: How can the amount of donated items be both "enough" and "too much"; aren't those terms contradictory?

He explains by describing what transpired in the Beis Hamikdash where, as the Mishnah tells us, people stood crowded together with no room to move and yet, when it came time for them to bow down, miraculously there was enough space to do so. This mysterious ability of the place where the Shechinah rests to contain more than its natural capacity applied to both the Mishkan and the Beis Hamikdash, and even to the city of Yerushalayim too, in the days when Klal Yisrael was *oleh regel* and "no one said to his friend that it was cramped when they went up to Yerushalayim." This miracle originated in the Mishkan where everything seemed merely "enough" and yet there was simultaneously space for even more.

Even now, when we no longer have the Beis Hamikdash in our midst, the Shechinah can rest within our homes, in the *mishkan me'at*, the miniature sanctuary that we build with our families. There, too, Hashem miraculously provides enough and also more than seems naturally possible for all the souls He sends down to us, one child at a time.

Although we may feel at times that it simply can't be done — that there's not enough money, not enough space, not enough peace of mind — the space can open up in a supernatural way, if we allow it to and if we really want it. The Gemara tells us that each child arrives in the world with "a loaf of bread in its hand," together with everything its parents need to supply him with. Learning to seek and find that blessing is something we can all aspire to, allowing new channels of *shefa* to miraculously enter our homes.

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R' Yoel Schlesinger & family

May it be a Zchus for much Nachas and Hatzlacha!!

Parshas **Vayakhel**

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Dear Rabbi Gruen,

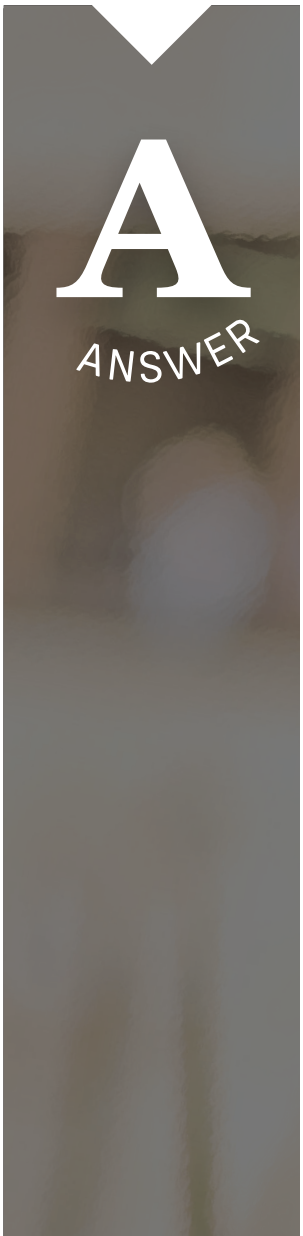
I gained so much from a recent *shiur* in which you were discussing the struggle for *parnassah*. You mentioned how, in general, people who have a great deal of money are respected for their wealth whereas people with a large number of children are not respected for the size of their family. Especially in this day and age, having children too closely spaced is seen as "*nebach*" and such parents are pitied for being overwhelmed with all their children. Meanwhile, being stressed over acquiring material goods is seen as something admirable.

In my own life, I feel like I need to make a U-turn in my way of thinking if I want to start seeing busy mothers of many children as heroines, who have true *mesirus nefesh.* I would really appreciate it if you could give me *chizuk* in this area and more understanding of the *chashivus* of each and every child. I know it's also a matter of priorities, but making the right things one's priorities in life isn't always easy.

I also wanted to understand how it was that in the times of the Gemara, there were at least two years and nine months between children, whereas things are different today — and what does that mean? Does Hashem give us more *koach* today to have more children? I have asked a Daas Torah about this, but the answer I got didn't really help me so much.

In general, I feel like I need help to be able to be proud of seeing things the Torah way, even though the world is so very far from that. I also would love to have a positive influence and help other people to see things in the Torah light.

Thank you



This is a very sensitive topic, and my intention certainly isn't to dictate to people what to think or do. Resistance to ideas that conflict with our way of seeing things, especially in such sensitive areas, is common, which is why people should seek advice from those they trust and feel comfortable with.

Nonetheless, encouraging people in their adherence to Torah ideals and giving *chizuk* is still a very worthwhile endeavor, and I commend you for recognizing that you need *chizuk* (as we all do) and for reaching out to find it. I hope that anything I can offer you will benefit others as well.

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As you correctly note, having a large family these days is not something that is universally admired, to put it very mildly. And yes, having a huge amount of money does usually garner a person a great deal of respect. This has nothing at all to do with the intrinsic value of either money or people, as anyone sensible can recognize. Hashem set up the world in such a way that people decide for themselves what to value and what to degrade.

To give a different example: In the olden days, people were more respected if they were on the heavy side, both men and women, as it signified a level of material prosperity that wasn't as common as it is now. Today, we associate being overweight with a whole set of assumptions, none of them positive, and no one is admired for being on the heavy side.

The values of the Torah are unchanging, and for those of us who reject the ever-shifting value system of the outside world, this can be a comforting thought. We can make our own decisions on what to respect or despise, based on intrinsic and everlasting truths. We can also decide who to admire, based on their adherence to those truths — and we can choose to dismiss the opinions of those whose lives lack meaning. The more convinced we are that only the Torah path is valid, the easier it becomes to brush off the criticism or scorn of those who don't deserve our attention at all.

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In America, people commonly use the expression, "How much is he worth?" but no one would seriously place a value on a person's life. And yet, that's what people effectively are doing when they accord respect to someone wealthy and take his opinions and views seriously as a consequence. When he loses his money, or is involved in a scandal, suddenly no one cares what he thinks about anything — and this illustrates so clearly why it's ridiculous to put so much value on wealth.

It's also worth stressing that although rich people are often envied and perceived as leading tranquil lives, the truth is very far from this image. In fact, such people are

frequently racked with anxiety regarding their possessions, and obsessed with maintaining and enhancing their status. While it's natural for us to aspire to a life of material plenty, as Torah Jews we are expected to realize and remind ourselves that there is so much more to life, despite the influence of secular culture and the pressure to acquire more and more and more...

As you write, it absolutely is a question of priorities, of pursuing eternal values rather than fleeting illusions. After all, wealth and all the pleasures it brings are all temporary; they are only important as a means to an end. Children, however, are forever. So, do we want children or vacations? Children or a nice house? Children or fancy furnishings (that little kids won't break)? The choices are not usually so stark but when it comes to setting our priorities straight, it is important to see things for what they are and make the right decisions.

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What if no one shares our aspirations? What if we are ridiculed for having large families when "life could be so much easier" with less children? We might not be able to change people's minds, not even the minds of those we care about. But we can carry Hashem's flag with pride and be happy ambassadors for the truth. We should never be apologetic for living according to the Torah's teachings.

This idea applies in many areas of life where we try not only to swim against the tide but also to inspire others to join us. If someone asks you, for example, where you're going to be for Pesach, you might be tempted to mumble that you "really wanted to go to a hotel but..." If, instead, you answer with enthusiasm about your grand plans to prepare a beautiful Yom Tov at home and invite guests, you're giving a very different message, one that may even inspire others to enjoy Pesach without trying to work around it.

Therefore, when someone asks you how many children you have, smile and tell them how lucky you are to have *baruch Hashem* been blessed with many wonderful children. The delight we radiate when living Torah lives and fulfilling the *mitzvos* can achieve far more than any number of lectures. And as we start to value our own choices and respect ourselves, we need the respect of others much less — and the respect of people unlike us, not at all.

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That said, it is natural to want to make an impact in the world and influence others to do what we know is right. Quite a few years ago, I approached an *adam gadol* and asked him for advice on the best way to spread ideas that I thought would help many people. This was long before anyone knew who I was or cared for my opinion, but I felt an urgent need to come up with a way to share concepts with as many people as possible. I was expecting him to suggest ways to achieve this, but he surprised me.

"Never forget," he told me, "that it doesn't work like that. All you can do is tell one person, and then another, and then another. Those people will then tell other people and slowly, slowly, ideas spread. It takes time, and one needs a lot of patience."

Over ten years later, I can say that he was right. I have *baruch Hashem* thousands of people who listen to my *shiurim* and read my articles, but it happened slowly, but initially it evolved one person at a time.

Each and every one of us can impact others, but it starts close to home and only grows gradually. If you have a neighbor with a large family, compliment her. If you see someone in the park with lots of children around her, tell her how blessed she is and how much you admire her. This is the only real way to influence others.

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But before you begin doing that, it's important to gain a true appreciation of what even a single child accomplishes, and how fundamentally each and every soul literally impacts the universe.

A person once visited the Lubavitcher Rebbe and told him how discouraged he was. He had organized, with great effort and expense, a Torah class on *taharas hamishpachah,* but only one woman showed up.

"And how many mothers did Moshe Rabbeinu have?" responded the Rebbe.

The famous story about a person throwing washed-up starfish back into the sea expresses the same idea. "What difference can you make?" asked his friend, watching as he made his way down the beach, picking up one fish after the next and tossing them into the waves. "There are hundreds of fish dying on the shore!"

The man bent down, picked up another fish, and threw it far out into the water. "I made a difference to that one," he said.

Imagine if "all" we achieved with giving compliments and tentatively expressing our ideas, was that one woman decided she could have another child. That one "extra" child is an amazing achievement; each *neshamah* has infinite potential. We can and should take immense pride in every additional child we bring, or cause to be brought, into the world.

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In general, we can't expect such a concept to be accepted by the secular world. However, when our ideas are scorned by those within our own communities, it can be much harder to deal with, unless we are absolutely grounded in Torah *hashkafah*. After all, at the very beginning of the Shulchan Aruch, we are told not to be afraid to do the right thing, even if people think we are crazy.

We do know for certain that Hashem wants us to populate the world; this is the very first *mitzvah* of the Torah. It's so important that the Mishnah tells us that if an *eved* is owned by two people, one of whom frees him, the other owner is obligated to free him as well, to enable him to marry and have children. This overrides the property rights of the owner who paid for his *eved,* and yet he must now relinquish him so that he can fulfill his fundamental purpose in life.

Too often, people get stuck on questions such as, "Is this the right time to have another child?" or even, "Can we afford another child right now?" Without our priorities straight, answering such questions becomes a mine-field. Once we start to clarify our priorities, the questions become clearer: "Do I want to have the freedom to go out twice a week with my friends and not be stuck at home with a baby?" "Can we go to Florida this winter, or..." "Will I still be able to afford all the extras I have become accustomed to and can't see myself managing without?"

Such questions are only dilemmas because we forget the purpose of luxuries, vacations, and evenings out. All these are merely means to an end which obviously should not take precedence over the ends themselves.

A person once approached Rav Belsky asking him whether he should move to a certain neighborhood.

"Are you happy with your children's schools in the neighborhood where you're living now?" the rav responded. The man said he was. "And you have *parnassah* there?" The man said he did.

"Hashem gives *parnassah* for a reason — to provide for your needs," Rav Belsky said. "Foremost among those needs is the *chinuch* of your children. So, the first thing to consider when deciding where to live is where your *chinuch* needs are met. Then, you look for the house to make it work, and a way to find *parnassah*. Not the other way around."

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It's unfortunately very common for people who are and consider themselves *ehrlich* to not have their priorities straight when it comes to having many children.

A *kallah* once went to a prominent rebbetzin for a *brachah*. Although she didn't ask for anything specific, the rebbetzin gave her a *brachah* that she should have a child in her first year of marriage.

"I'm not sure that's what I want!" the *kallah* replied.

The rebbetzin was taken aback, and told the *kallah* that having children was her life's mission and she should want to fulfill it at the earliest possible moment.

Deciding to "postpone" having children even "for the sake of *shalom bayis*" is something that has become acceptable in many circles. While there are specific instances when this may be advisable, these are certainly not the majority of cases and no one should make such a decision without consulting Daas Torah and being absolutely honest about one's motivations.

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And now for the flip-side. Consulting Daas Torah shouldn't ever become something we do only when seeking leniencies. There will be times when circumstances actually require a family to take certain steps, and no one should try to become a "martyr" in the mistaken belief that this is what Hashem wants of us.

With regard to your question on family size in the times of the Talmud, there are varying opinions on what this means for us today, and it's certainly appropriate to raise any questions you have with your family's rav, who will ideally be familiar with your situation and can guide you accordingly.



I would also like to stress that all such questions should be posed by both spouses and not just one. If this issue overlaps with *shalom bayis* in general, then of course that should be addressed as well. It's obviously crucial that both spouses should be on the same page in this area.

When both husband and wife are secure in their belief that Hashem will provide for as many *neshamos* as He grants them, it is far easier to overcome challenges both in this area and in many other areas of life. Sometimes people just don't seem to realize that financial security — indeed, all forms of security — is entirely in Hashem's hands. Just as only He decides how much disposable income a person has, so too only He decides how much money will be needed to bring up our children. I personally know of many large families of well-behaved children who do well in school — and of smaller families where several of the children need expensive intervention and therapies of all kinds.

Unfortunately, it is common for people to consider parents of many children "irresponsible" for not taking steps to limit the blessing in their lives. The truth is that so much in life is unpredictable, and it isn't irresponsible to admit that fact and put ourselves in Hashem's hands as we do our best to fulfill His *ratzon* and trust in Him to make things turn out all right.

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Every day of our lives, we make decisions based on our priorities. When we manage to fit in everything we want, it makes things much simpler — but that's not always the way it works out. Often, we have to give up on some of our plans in order to focus on others. The choices we make tell us a lot about our values in life.

Knowing what to prioritize isn't always straightforward and often we will need to seek out Torah guidance. Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach *ztz"l* once arrived at a *simchah* one evening, even though it was clear that he wasn't feeling so well and had struggled to make the journey. He told the *baal simchah* that he hadn't even gone to shul to daven that day but for a *mitzvah* of *bein adam lechaveiro* he was making the extra effort.

When we make that extra effort to try to discover what Hashem really wants from us at each and every moment, in the small decisions we make every day and the bigger decisions that we confront, we will receive *siyatta diShmaya* to overcome the challenges of the outside world.

May we all be zoche to build homes full of Hashem's bountiful blessings.

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME: VAYAKHEL 5785

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