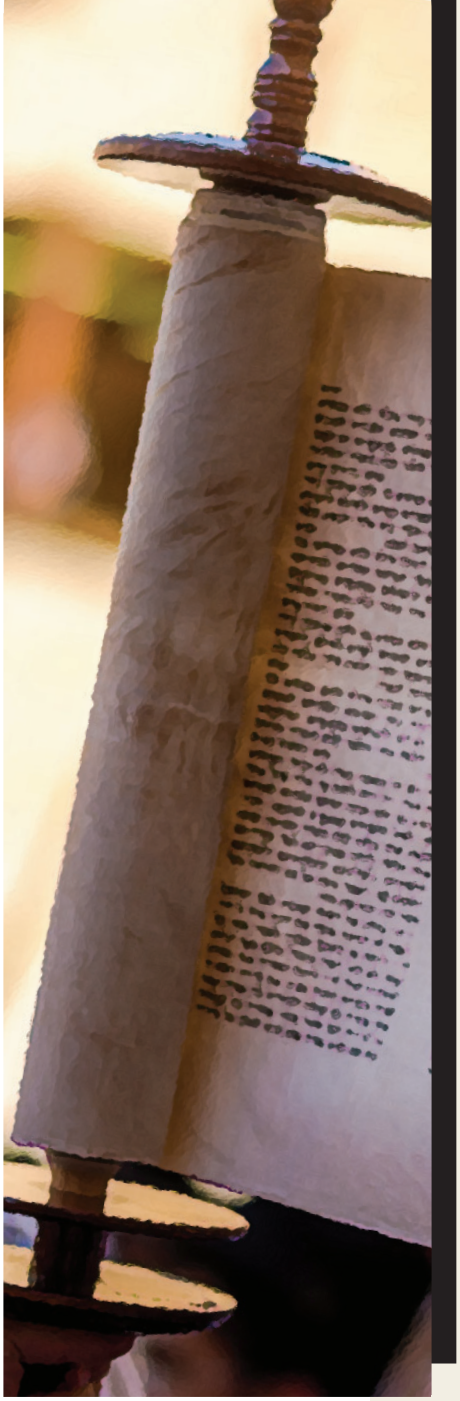


RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

WHEN SECOND-BEST IS PERFECT

In this week's *parshah*, Yosef reveals his identity to his brothers, immediately adding that they should take care "not to be depressed or troubled" about their previous deeds that brought them to this situation.

Commenting on depression, R' Shlomo Karliner *ztz"l* would say that while he can tolerate a person who is immersed in physical pleasures as long as he's happy, it's very hard to be around a person who is sunk in depression.

Along the same lines, the Divrei Emes *ztz"l* quotes the Ari Hakadosh *zy"a* as saying that being depressed actually impedes a person's ability to make spiritual achievements and comprehend Hashem's wisdom. Fundamentally, a person who allows himself to sink into depression can only do so by ignoring or dismissing all the blessings Hashem has bestowed upon him, and this is certainly an obstacle to seeing the world clearly.

It is also an obstacle to succeeding in one's relationships with other people. When a husband or wife despairs of their *shalom bayis*, they stop investing in anything that could improve things. Furthermore, they will likely end up tolerating behaviors in their spouse that should not be ignored, enabling the other person to continue acting in a way that harms both of them and their underlying relationship.

In general, being around a person who is chronically pessimistic is emotionally exhausting and anyone who is able to will stay away. When a parent is depressed, children may decide, whether consciously or not, that there is little point in adopting the parent's views and lifestyle if all it leads to is misery. As the Belzer Rav *zy"a* would say, if you want people to emulate your good behavior, it's crucial to be happy!

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Keep up the great work!

Parshas **Vayigash**

VOL. 7 | ISSUE 11



Hi Rabbi Gruen,

I have been a regular listener to your weekly podcast for a while and appreciate your take on things. I would love to hear your opinion on this question I have.

I generally feel very frustrated at the way our school and yeshivas are run, or at least at the decisions that are being made which affect us and our kids. It makes me full of negative energy when I see all the injustice. The problem is that I don't see a way out of it (unless I opt out entirely, but obviously I'm not about to do that).

Is there a way to at least disengage? That might have some issues — but at least I wouldn't find myself on an emotional roller coaster the whole time. I'm the kind of parent who likes to be very involved when it comes to my children, and I don't like half-jobs.

Thanks in advance for your response.



Your letter doesn't make entirely clear what you are referring to, but I won't deny that problems exist in our *chinuch* "system." I believe that any system has its problems that nobody will deny, not even the people in charge as well as those who keep things running (such as staff, administrators, and community leaders). One can pinpoint all kinds of issues, such as the influence of money, obsession with "image," excessive focus on academic achievement, unwritten agendas...

Obviously, you're not the first person to have realized this, neither will you be the last. Over the years, many people have not only seen the issues but tried to do something about them. And yet, here we are with the same system in place, more or less, and the question is, why?

I would suggest that perhaps, with all its failings, the system we have is the best possible way of doing things given the circumstances in which we find ourselves. Perhaps people tried to make improvements and found that they didn't work. Perhaps they did make improvements in one area that did help, only to find that problems then arose in another area and on the whole, it almost wasn't worth it.

When people are young, or starting out, it's common to want to fix things so that we and our children don't suffer from the failures of any given system. Over time, people generally become resigned to the way things are. Sometimes, that resignation is due to having tried and failed to implement the fixes, and at other times it's because experience gave them a more informed perspective.

Not long ago, I attended a meeting of professionals at which various *chinuch* issues were discussed. I raised a number of questions (as did others) and I was surprised to find that people in the line had good answers to many of the issues raised. No one claimed to have implemented a

perfect solution to every single problem, but in the majority of cases there was a reason for why things were being done as they were, and it was instructive to find out how many of the obvious fixes have already been tried — unsuccessfully.

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Another interesting point is that "systems" tend to evolve over time, seemingly on their own. While it's easy to criticize (for example) excessive focus on academic achievement which leaves some children feeling left behind, this focus wasn't (usually) something that administrations or principals actively decided on. It's far more commonly the result of what some or many of the parents want for their children, reflecting people's preferences.

Would a new school that publicizes itself as different in this (or any other) aspect succeed, or would parents be hesitant to send their children there? There have been experiments done in doing things differently and in general, they haven't turned out well, which is why we are left with the system we have. It's what many people want and in general it's the way of doing things that has proved itself over time.

Second-best becomes best when "best" isn't an option, and what this means in practice is that sometimes it's preferable to reach a certain level of acceptance of the status quo, unless we have concrete, well-advised ideas on how to implement positive changes. "Perfect" isn't usually one of the options available in the world in which we live, and pursuing it regardless can leave us in a worse position than we would otherwise have been in. R' Hershele Ostropoler *ztz"l* illustrates this well with an amusing story of a man who goes out to the store to buy a piece of meat.

"I want very soft meat that's easy to chew," he tells the butcher.

"Sure. I have just the thing," the butcher replies. "This meat here is excellent, so soft it almost has the texture of fat, not meat."

The man thinks for a moment. "Ah, soft like fat! So perhaps in that case, buying fat itself would be better." He thanks the butcher for his suggestion and makes his way to the grocery store.

"I'm looking for top-quality fat," he tells the grocer. "Do you have any?"

The grocer smiles. "Yes, right over here. Best quality fat. It's so smooth that it's almost like oil!"

The man frowns. "In that case..." He leaves the store and heads to the oil merchant. "Do you have oil?" he asks. "Please show me the best oil you have."

"Why, of course. Right over here. Top quality oil, so pure it's almost as clear as water!"

The man shakes his head in frustration. "Water..."

He comes home with a jug of clear, fresh water drawn from the well in the courtyard...

There are people who, even with the best of intentions, set out to achieve "the best" and end up very far away indeed from what they were looking for. In the best-case scenario, they find their way back to where they started. The worst-case scenario could turn out to be a disaster for them and their families.

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Another point to keep in mind when "settling" for second-best is that it's crucial not to complain or discuss issues in front of our children. Virtually every child can find something to complain about at any school, and if we add fuel to that fire, they will tend to focus solely on what's wrong and overlook all the many things that are not only right, but so much better than anything on offer everywhere else. Even more than adults, many children tend to think in black-and-white terms, and as parents, we need to help them realize that things aren't usually as bad as they may seem to them.

With all that said, I hope it doesn't sound like I'm advocating ignoring problems or settling for less than what can realistically be achieved. If you become aware of an issue that others don't seem to be taking seriously or dealing with effectively, you should discuss it with the relevant authorities and look for ways forward.

Sometimes, the solution proposed by those in a position to implement it may seem inadequate. Don't dismiss it. Very often, change can only be implemented in small increments. Perhaps resistance to change needs to be overcome

gradually. Perhaps there are other reasons why a problem can't be solved in one fell swoop. With patience, small changes made over a long period of time can result in a totally different way of doing things.

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Very often, it's important not only to know *what* can be done, but also *how* to do it. Criticism, especially if expressed aggressively, will get you nowhere and only provoke opposition. So much has to do with the attitude and tone in which you discuss the issue you would like to see addressed.

The Chofetz Chaim *ztz"l* describes the different approaches of Calev and Yehoshua when dealing with the *meraglim*. Yehoshua opposed them openly and parted ways entirely with them. Calev, while equally opposed, chose to appear to be going along with them and was able (to a degree) to influence them from within.

There are times when Yehoshua's approach is still the correct one, but in general, when a private individual confronts an institution, he must respect the system before suggesting improvements of his own. There are so many details he's not aware of; he must approach those in charge with humility, as well as with recognition and gratitude for all the many good things they do. Only then should he gently raise an issue and ask for advice before perhaps offering some ideas of his own.

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Going back to the example of the *meraglim*, we can look into the Torah and find so many instances of problems that originally arose thousands of years ago and which still exist among us today. People still get depressed, jealous, angry... people still care too much about what other people rather than Hashem think of them.



I think it would be fair to say that the failings of our systems are really just a reflection of our own failings; after all, "we" built those systems. It's so common for people to blame "the way things are today" without realizing that most of the really big problems are the eternal problems of human nature. If we can't fix those problems in ourselves, how can we expect to fix them on a community-wide scale? If we find it difficult to recognize and address our own personal issues, how do we think we will persuade an entire community of people to unite in a difficult mission and make fundamental changes in their lives?

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Every person has a unique perspective from which to see the world and figure out what's missing, what's wrong, and what needs to be done. If we can make a positive contribution, that's amazing. Meanwhile, just seeing all the good around us, all the blessings and contributions so many people make, already makes the world a better place. One person noticing a problem isn't always effective or impactful, but one person's compliment can achieve a tremendous amount.

We can choose to see things negatively, to focus on all the mistakes and everything that's wrong. But if we want to attract people to our way of seeing things and really fix the world, we should start by seeing the positive and being grateful and happy.

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME: VAYIGASH 5785

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