RABBI
SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the home

PARSHAS NASO

WHEN A CHILD IS CHALLENGED

In this week's *parshah*, we learn about the *korbanos* of the Nesi'im. From a simple reading of the *pesukim*, it appears that they each brought exactly the same *korban*, and yet, the offering of each one is described separately. The Shelah Hakadosh teaches that although the actual *korbanos* may have been identical, they were not at all the same. The *kavanos* of each Nasi and the thoughts and feelings they had as they made their offerings differed from one another, and this affected the essence of their *korbanos* and made each one distinct, deserving of its own description.

The Rachmastrivka Rebbe *shlit"a* notes that this is why, when we say the *Yehi ratzon* after reading the *parshah* of the *Nesi'im* in the month of Nissan, we ask that the *kavanos* of the *shevet* read that day should have an effect on us. This too highlights that although outwardly their deeds may have looked the same, the effect produced each day was unique.

People often talk about something they did and wonder why it didn't have the expected effect or wasn't taken well. They may even add - as if to prove the point - that they were only copying what some other person did, or what they themselves had done on a different occasion, so why didn't they get the same result? But as we learn from the *korbanos* of the Nesi'im, it's not necessarily what you do, but why and how you do it. You can try to copy something that someone did for his spouse or child and fail to get the same results, simply because you did not convey the same underlying feeling or subconscious message. Furthermore, you yourself may have done something similar in the past and gotten different results, for the same reason. It's important to infuse your actions with the feeling you want to convey in order to achieve the outcome you're aiming for.

This principle also applies when you do the same thing for two different children and get a different outcome. This is not only because your thoughts and feelings differed, but also because of the different identities of the recipients. It's not enough to do something that *you* feel is a nice gesture or a meaningful action, even if you mean well. We also have to ensure that the gesture or deed befits the recipient and is something that they are likely to appreciate. When we incorporate both aspects - infusing our deeds with correct intent and fitting them to the person on the receiving end - we are most likely to achieve the results we're looking for.

This lesson can serve as a backdrop to the following question. This is a painful topic and I hope people will find the discussion helpful in less challenging but comparable situations.

This week's essay is dedicated by

a close friend and a loyal supporter

in honor of the Chasuna of Rabbi Gruen's daughter

May we all be able to share in many Simchos together and see much Nachas from our children iyH!

Question:

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

My son, a (UV) sensitive personality, is almost nine years old. In general, despite his sensitivity, he's also a tough kid behavior-wise. Unfortunately, he's not interested in doing anything related to Yiddishkeit such as washing, benching, waiting after eating *fleishig*, washing *negel vasser*, etc. It's happened many times that he's turned lights on or picked up his iPod to play with it on Shabbos. He says he just doesn't care. I told him if he wants to do such things, he has to take care that the other children don't see.

After he does something wrong, he says, "Hashem hates me, right?" or, "You must hate me when I do this."

I always tell him that Hashem loves him regardless, and tell him the story of Menashe (from the Navi).

Interestingly, my son is obsessed with Gedolim. He is awed by them.

How would you recommend I handle this situation?

Thanks a lot.

Answer:

Although I've unfortunately heard such stories many times, it's not the typical situation and certainly requires one-to-one guidance. Tips and ideas from a *shiur* or column can be helpful, but whenever we're dealing with an exceptional situation (even if not unique), it's important to get the individualized help it requires.

In general, the situations you mention are more common with teenagers than with nine year olds, which is a point worth taking into consideration whenever comparing your particular case to anything you may have heard in a *shiur*. But I have heard from several professionals that the main difference between the challenges we face today and those we saw years ago is the age of the children concerned. Today's youth exhibit behaviors that teenagers a generation ago barely had the audacity to try.

The good news is that since your child is still so young, many of his challenges may be rooted in his immaturity. If you deal with things the right way, hopefully you will be able to solve these problems before they become entrenched.

Before going into the particulars, I would like to explain a bit more about the UV personality. I am assuming that you have either read about it in my book *Get Along With Everyone* (recently published in Yiddish too), or heard me describe it in a lecture, but for those who are less familiar, I'd recommend listening to the *shiur* on TorahAnytime, "The Fragile Child." The term UV (short for Ultra-Violet) is the one I use to describe someone who is naturally hyper-sensitive. This sensitivity can become more pronounced when it goes unrecognized or isn't dealt with correctly. Understanding the fragility and sensitivity of such a child is key to dealing with these situations. A fragile child needs to be (read: feel) taken very seriously. He needs to feel good about himself. He is extremely limited in his capacity to tolerate being challenged, criticized, or blamed. He cannot tolerate feeling controlled. While few people appreciate criticism or being controlled and everybody enjoys and can benefit from feeling good about themselves, sensitive children lack the inner resources to deal with the feeling of being even slightly targeted.

A sensitive child may appear more macho and give the impression that he wants to do everything on his own and even thinks he's capable of doing so. It may look like he thinks he's smarter than everyone

else, but this show of confidence is really just a façade for low self-esteem and even a feeling of brokenness. It can be so tempting to try to crush an inflated ego, but such a child is not as strong as he seems. It's his low self-esteem that makes him vulnerable to being offended more easily, and what prompts him to become defensive. In such a situation, the "macho" child who is *mechalel Shabbos* then expresses his brokenness by claiming that Hashem hates him.

Children can react differently to such situations. Some will answer back. Some will stomp off. Others may give you the silent treatment. This is all par for the course with the UV child at age nine. Some children will progress to the next level and become totally defiant. This can signify that you have lost your grip on him.

When dealing with such a child, you want to be very careful to take his feelings into account. You're aiming to achieve what may seem impossible - making him feel good about himself. Don't debate him or put him down. Try not to tell him what to do too much. This doesn't mean that you can no longer parent him. But you definitely need to tweak your message and make sure that whatever you say is given over with care and sensitivity so that he can handle it. It's a tricky balance.

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When it comes to defiant teenagers, experts generally recommend not to be tough or controlling. Why? Aside from the fact that it may be the wrong method in general, the simpler reason is that it doesn't work. We know that it's a *mitzvah* to give rebuke that will be accepted, and it's also a *mitzvah* to refrain from giving rebuke when you know it won't be taken well. With older teenagers who have clearly conveyed the message that they will not take instruction from you, your only option is to back off and be nicer and softer.

Nicer and softer doesn't mean that you will cheer your child on as he plays with his iPod on Shabbos. It does mean that you won't tell him how bad he is or try to hide his device as a way to control him. That won't work. But you do have to be firm in your beliefs and clearly communicate that such actions are wrong, while still allowing your child to make his own decisions. You also have to let him know that you love him and are there for him regardless. Show him that you're not there to fight him, put him down, or prove how unacceptable his behavior is.

Of course this is not the prefered method of *chinuch* to be used for all children. The well-known story of a man whose young child turned on a light on Shabbos illustrates this well. When a rav asked the father why he didn't tell the child that it's forbidden, the father replied, "He's just a child." A moment later, the child picked up something fragile to play with and almost broke it - and the father yelled at him to put it down. The rav then told the father that it would be better if he yelled at the child for being *mechalel Shabbos*, and understood that "he's just a child" when it came to playing innocently...

Sometimes, when "standard" *chinuch* methods appear to have failed, it may be relevant to look back and try to figure out how a child reached the stage of acting in an unacceptable manner. Perhaps a certain message wasn't given over properly at some point and should be communicated clearly now. If you have never tried telling your child firmly that a specific behavior is unacceptable in your home, try it. But if you already *have* tried it ten times, then saying it for the eleventh time is unlikely to help. At this point, it's better to try to figure out what to do next.

Since your child is a sensitive child, he probably needs you to be softer and more loving *outside of this Shabbos issue*. Show him how much you love him, how much you want to give to him, how much you want to be there for him. Boosting the self-esteem of a fragile child will help to prevent his negative feelings from leading him to do stupid things.

But if your child asks you if it's okay for him to act in unacceptable ways, you must tell him that it's not. It's not okay, and I love you anyway.

Turning for a moment to what you wrote: "I told him if he wants to do such things, he has to take care that the other children don't see," I would stress that this approach is only permissible if your rav has told you to adopt it. Even in cases where you know that it won't help to tell your child what he may or may not do, it is still important to tweak your message so that it isn't interpreted as your being okay with it. For instance, using a gentle, non-confrontational manner and without saying anything about where your son *can* play with his iPod, try telling him that, "When the other children see you playing with an iPod on Shabbos they may think it's okay and I really don't want that to happen."

Here you could also focus on the additional pain your child is causing you to feel by being *mechalel Shabbos* in public, and he may choose not to inflict that on you. In general, especially with a younger child (as opposed to an older one who has adopted a new set of rules...), bear in mind that your child knows that playing with an iPod on Shabbos is not allowed. Instead of reminding him, you can tell him how much it hurts you. I suggest using the word "hurt" instead of telling him how bad he is, as it introduces the idea of the wider impact of his actions, which leads naturally to what he himself was asking you: "Hashem hates me, right?"

Now you have the opportunity to address Hashem's love for your son. "Hashem doesn't hate you. Because He loves you, it hurts Him when you do things against His will. I understand your challenge and I love you, but it's still hurtful to me when you do something I don't want you to do. If Hashem hated you, He wouldn't care what you did. But Hashem loves you no matter what. And I also love you for all your good parts *and* for your challenging

parts. At the same time, it would mean so much to me if you could try harder."

You can also address specific difficulties on a more practical level: "I guess you must be very bored. Let me know if there's anything I can do to help with that." However, take care not to turn this into a co-dependency where your child will only keep Shabbos if he gets something in return. "You didn't buy me a book this week and now I'm bored so I'm going to play with my iPod." You have no obligation to cover all his bases or make sure he can't find a single excuse not to keep Shabbos. But do show him that you understand and that you want to make it easier for him.

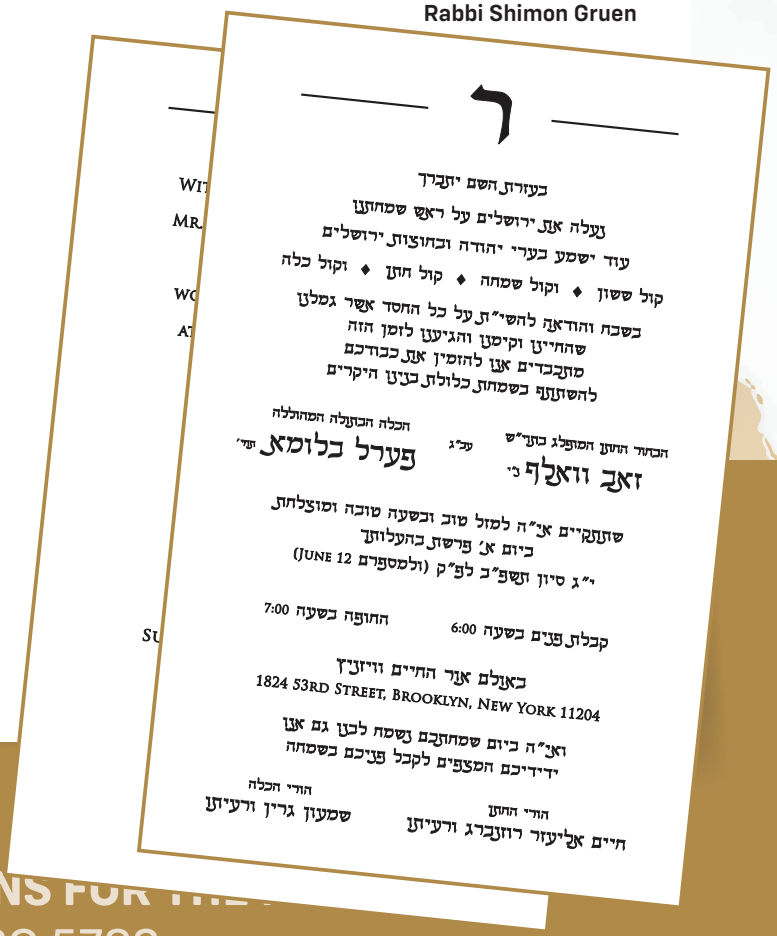
All children need us to catch every little good thing they do, but for the sensitive child, this is perhaps even more crucial. Help him realize that you see the good in him, and don't give him the impression that you expect him to slip up. Make him feel like such a good child that it won't make sense for him to act out.

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You mentioned that your son is awed by Gedolim. Use that to your benefit, and take him to visit Gedolim more often. Maybe they can give him some attention, and maybe you can even encourage him to discuss his challenges with them. If the feeling of awe comes from him, then taking him to Gedolim will not come across as you exerting control over him.

Sensitive children who have reached a stage of defiance may ask tough questions. "Who says...? Why can't I...?" You don't always have to have the answers, and sometimes, if you don't, it lends more importance to the question and the child feels validated. You could even take him to a Gadol to try to get answers to these questions. You may want to give the *rav* some background before you go, but it can only be beneficial for your child to get positive attention at the same time as he gains clarity. It may be challenging for your child to accept an answer from you, but when he feels that he has a connection with a Gadol, it may open his heart.

Rabbi Shimon Gruen


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