

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

WAKING UP BEFORE THE BELL

A person stricken with *tzara'as* must undergo a long and arduous process in order to become pure again, the Torah teaches us. After the painful and embarrassing experience, the person must appear before a *kohen* to be pronounced clean. Yet, this is not the end of the story, as the person still needs to bring a *korban* in order to receive a *kapparah*. The Chasam Sofer asks why the suffering the person has already experienced was not enough atonement for him to be forgiven and cleansed.

He answers by describing the difference between a person who makes a *cheshbon hanefesh* and comes to the conclusion that he has sinned; and a person who is unaware of where he has gone wrong and needs to be woken up by the affliction of *tzara'as*. Even if a person only does *teshuvah* out of *yirah* — in order to avoid being punished by Hashem — that *teshuvah* is enough to achieve a *kapparah* if it comes from him, unprompted by any message from Shamayim. However, if a person makes no *cheshbon hanefesh* and continues his life unaware of and unconcerned with where he may have slipped up, he will need to be woken up by Hashem. For such a person, simply undergoing the suffering associated with *tzara'as* is not enough for him to become pure again. He will also need to bring a *korban* in order to receive a *kapparah*, because he lacked that level of awareness.

Trying to become aware of where things need improvement before disaster strikes is always wise. Resolving issues when they are still minor, just hints of trouble to come, is so much simpler than dealing with full-blown problems that have been allowed to get out of hand.

Too often, people sail blithely through life unaware of all the people they are upsetting and hurting and only wake up when relationships start falling apart all around them. This applies with either a spouse or a child. Sometimes, all a child needs is a bit more time and attention, on a relatively consistent basis, for things to start moving in a more positive direction. That's much easier (and cheaper, I sometimes add only half-jokingly) than paying for therapy later.

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Parshas
Tazria-Metzora
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Dear Rabbi Gruen,

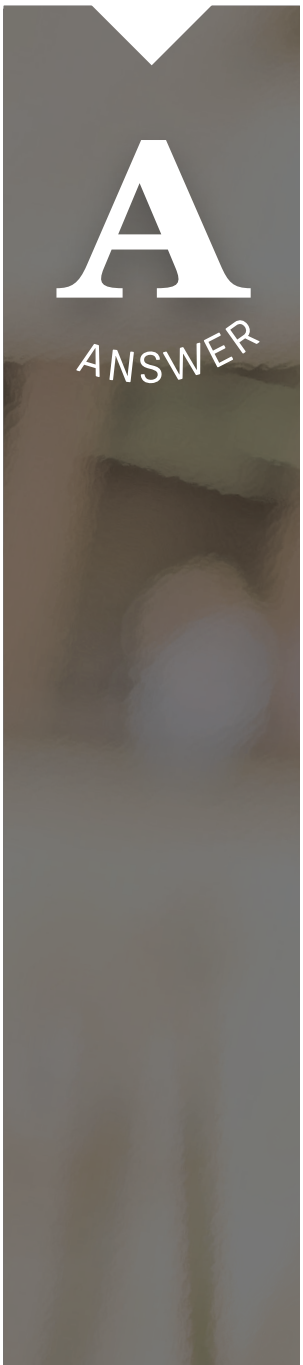
I have a question about my teenage daughter that I would like some help with.

I have a number of children aged between 19 and 4. My 14-year-old daughter doesn't really play an active role in the family. She doesn't have many obligations (helping out at home etc.), and yet she always has an issue when she's asked to do them. She has no problem completely ignoring me when I tell her to do something. My other daughters have come to resent her as they feel that she gets away with murder.

Additionally, I feel resentment toward my spouse as I have asked him for help so many times — I want him to approach her, and also for her to know that he is on the same page as me. My kids don't ever get that message from him and it bothers me.

What can you suggest?

Thank you



You can be sure your problem is a common one and that you're in good company. So many parents could have written a similar letter about at least one of their children.

Nonetheless, I do believe that the issue you're describing isn't truly the underlying problem. You seem to be describing merely the symptoms. They are troubling symptoms, certainly. Parents are always concerned when a child is disobedient and doesn't seem to behave (or feel) like part of the family. Yet, this behavior doesn't come out of nowhere.

Perhaps the signs of trouble to come were subtle and easy to miss — that's definitely possible. Generally, a child who doesn't want to contribute to the family, who resists doing what her siblings are doing, isn't simply being rebellious. Far more often, the problem is that she doesn't feel good about herself or comfortable with her place in life, and her "rebelliousness" is one of the ways in which her feelings are being expressed.

But now that things have reached a further stage — you're upset at her, her sisters resent her, and you and your husband are divided on how to deal with her — the problem has become deeper. From being simply unhappy with herself, she probably now feels misunderstood and even treated unfairly too.

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This in no way means that you genuinely don't understand her or that you don't treat her fairly. It doesn't mean that you're a bad parent or that you love her any less than your other children. Children almost always see things differently from the way their parents see things, almost as a matter of course. But this isn't a question of right or wrong. Nothing will be achieved by proving that you're a great mother. This is about your daughter's inner, emotional world and no amount of logic will dent her emotional experience.

I don't know if you see your daughter as being more sensitive than her siblings but what you describe is typical for what I call ultra-sensitive (or UV) children. Their behavior is determined by their feelings, and they often don't realize the extent to which their feelings control them. For these types of people, feelings are reality; what they are feeling inside is so much more important and consequential than whatever is going on outside. When your daughter "ignores" your request to tidy up, or whatever else it may be, she isn't really responding to your request —

she's responding to her inner sensations which may be telling her, "I always get picked on," or, "Why can't people understand how I feel?"

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For you, what this means, in a nutshell, is that instead of asking, "How can I get my daughter to start acting like a part of the family?" you should ask, "How can I make my child feel better and happier?"

Usually, this does not happen when you expect less of your daughter or make it easier for her to opt out. No one gains from such an approach. Your daughter's objections to doing her chores probably don't stem from laziness or from feeling resentful about having to exert herself. It's possible she isn't even fully aware of why she reacts as she does whenever she's asked to do what she knows she should.

You could force her to listen and obey (if that's at all possible) and only make her feel worse inside; you could give up on her and "let her get away with murder" which would be damaging in a different way. If those were the only two options, we would have a big problem, because neither of them is helpful.

Allowing her to opt out would give her the message that you can actually manage fine without her. That's not at all what she, or any child, wants to feel. Rather, she is longing to feel like part of the family, to feel wanted and treasured and that her contribution is noticed and appreciated.

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There are many things you can do to help her achieve that feeling. One of them is hinted at in your letter. In one place you write that she "has an issue when she's *asked*..." to do things; later, you write that she sometimes ignores you when you "*tell* her to do something."

I do realize that many parents instinctively object when I suggest that they ask their children to do what they are obligated to do, rather than telling them. Asking implies that the child is free to say no and here we really are talking about obligations, including the most basic obligations of *kibbud av va'eim*. Nonetheless, a parent can actually ask without giving the message that, "It's up to you whether you say yes or no and any reply is okay."

There is a form of asking that is a courtesy, that tells a child: "This is what I would like you to do; please can you do it." When you add, in words, how much you would appreciate it if she could do the chore promptly, that's even better. Everyone appreciates being asked rather than told to do something, and most people obey far more willingly when they don't feel that they are being controlled.

This isn't a magic solution — don't expect that suddenly, when you avoid telling and only ask nicely, your daughter will become a different person. Change doesn't usually happen overnight. But if you are consistent, then change will usually happen gradually. And even if you don't see the change in your daughter, you may start to feel a change in yourself. Asking rather than telling is simply a better way to communicate, and greases the wheels in all kinds of relationships.

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You might also want to ask your daughter what would make a difference for her. Even without asking, try to imagine to yourself what she would reply if asked to comment on your complaints about her. You might assume that she would immediately become defensive and deny refusing to help out. But it's possible that at least some aspects of her response would have some truth to them.

Might she, perhaps, claim that, "Even when I do help, I never get any appreciation"? Even if she doesn't feel appreciated that doesn't necessarily mean you aren't appreciative. It could just mean that this particular daughter needs more expressions of warmth than your other children, more reassurance that she's seen and valued.

Or perhaps she would protest that, "I'm happy to help — but when it's a good time for me, not *davka* this very instant!" If she objects to doing a certain chore at a specific time, maybe that's something you could be more flexible about. If you're the one to suggest doing something "now, or in an hour," then that might be easier for you than feeling pressured into agreeing to her demand for your flexibility. Often, it doesn't matter too much when the chore is done.

Of course, some of her responses to your complaints might not have any factual basis whatsoever. Perhaps she feels that you unfairly single her out. There's really no point in getting into a debate with her about who's right on this point, or any other. Getting stuck on right and wrong is almost always the wrong approach when dealing with children (and in many other relationships too). The point is that she feels singled out and may need a bit more warmth, a bigger smile, a more emphatic, "Thank you! You really did a great job!" than your other children do.

And, let's just add that while with sensitive children this approach is virtually a basic necessity, most parents would do well to be warmer and more appreciative with all of their children, whether or not they're highly sensitive.

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Turning now to your question regarding your husband; it could be that you're right and that if your husband would

be just as insistent as you are on what needs to change, your daughter would become more obedient. While you can ask your husband to give that a try, you don't have the right to impose your opinions on him or force him to do things your way.

But I'd like to remind you that just as your viewpoint on what will or won't help with your daughter is valid, so too is your husband's point of view. While you believe that if only he would present a united front with you, with both of you insisting that your daughter should be doing her share, he may not agree at all. Perhaps he has been watching your lack of success with your daughter and wishing you would try a different approach instead.

And — what if your husband is right, and it's the approach that's the problem and not the fact that you're not both on the same page? There are cases (and I have witnessed them myself) where one parent takes a failing approach that only aggravates a difficult situation and the child is "saved" by the other parent taking a different approach. Sometimes, a child may feel that, "Mommy doesn't understand me but at least Tatty gets me a little bit," or vice versa.

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I don't mean to imply that having both parents on the same page isn't important. It is *very* important. It's also important that both parents agree about being on that page, of course. Just as it's important that children see their parents as united in their views, it's important that they see a genuine alliance and not one parent forcing their opinions on the other.

You're dealing with a *chinuch* issue, and it's vital that you keep it a *chinuch* issue and don't let it spill over into *shalom bayis* territory. As with the problem with your daughter, this isn't necessarily a question of who is right or wrong. Disagreeing and disrespecting the other person's view is, however, wrong, even if you think you can "prove" why your way of doing things is better.

If you and your husband discuss the issue and still can't find a united way forward, you may have to involve an objective third party, ideally your rav, in order to solve this problem. One or both of you may have to compromise, and your children should know nothing of this.

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Once you and your husband turn the page on your dispute, you can take a fresh look at the situation and see what you can do to tweak the methods you've been using in the hope of better results. Remember that you're aiming for more than sullen compliance or passive obedience. You want your daughter to feel and be a happy and productive member of your family, and when you keep that goal in mind, you may find it easier to find creative solutions.

That doesn't necessarily mean that you'll be able to solve this problem entirely, as teenagers can be complicated and difficult, even if the myth of the impossibility of the teenage years is overblown. But it is true that teenagers are complex and often struggle to reconcile their growing independence with still being a child in the family home. Pushing too hard is something to be very careful about, as *halachah* recognizes. Sometimes, you may have to take a step back and accept that it's not working precisely as you would like, and that's okay too, as long as you can honestly say that you're doing your best.

Even though your daughter is clearly obligated to listen to you, if you've done what you can, then at some stage you will have to accept that the onus is now on her to respond appropriately. Hopefully, when you look at the situation from a new vantage point, that of seeing the person rather than the problem, you will have the *siyatta diShmaya* to find new approaches that will help you and your daughter build a better relationship.



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