

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

DERECH ERETZ WITH LOVE

In this week's *parshah*, the Torah lists the descendants of Noach, including Nimrod, who is described as a "*gibor tzayid* — a mighty hunter," adding that, "*al kein yei'omar keNimrod gibor tzayid* — therefore, it is said: Like Nimrod, a mighty hunter..."

The Imrei Noam, citing the Mesorah, notes that this is one of only three times in the entire Tanach where the word "*yei'omar*" is used, and based on this, he teaches us something amazing about how to use the *middah* of *ga'avah*. Clearly, Nimrod is not someone we want to emulate, and Chazal tell us that "*kol hamisga'eh ke'ilu oved avodah zarah* — anyone who is arrogant is as if he is serving idols." However, there are times when we need to be *misgaber* on the *middah* of *anavah* — sometimes, we need to purposely make a display of a good trait in order to benefit others.

One example would be demonstrating wisdom, since "*kinas sofrim tarbeh chochmah* — the envy between scholars leads to an increase in wisdom." There are many other examples, such as taking care to present ourselves as respectable and respected people, making it easier for our children and our *talmidim* (where relevant) to give us the appropriate respect. The Imrei Noam relates this idea to the other two *pesukim* where the word "*yei'omar*" is used: "*Al kein yei'omar b'sefer*..." and "*UleTziyon yei'omar ish ve'ish yulad-bo*..." Making a demonstration of one's *gadlus* can be done in the manner of Nimrod, when it could bring us to *avodah zarah*, but in specific cases, such as in learning or when relating to children or *talmidim*, revealing our *gadlus* can definitely be *leto'eles*.

A certain father I know regularly puts this concept into practice. Usually, he is someone who runs away from *kavod*, but once I saw him in shul accepting a *choshuve kibbud,* and when I expressed my surprise, he told me that he doesn't want his children to think he's a *batlan* — that all the other fathers are getting *kibbudim,* but he isn't.

Children and *talmidim* are required to respect their parents and teachers regardless of whether they make an open display of their *gadlus* — that's not a question. However, we should also try to be deserving of *kavod* by behaving in ways that garner respect, which makes it easier for them to fulfill their obligations. Sometimes, people think that this kind of behavior was only relevant once upon a time and that nowadays, it's better to be a friend than a respected father or teacher. The Torah makes it clear that this isn't the right approach.

This week's essay is kindly sponsored
לזכוי הרבים
לעילוי נשמת מרת געללא בת מוה"ר מנחם מאיר ע"ה

Parshas
Noach
VOL. 6 | ISSUE 1

Q

QUESTION

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

Thank you for your deep and powerful *shiurim*.

I would like to know how important it is for young children aged four or six to learn proper *derech eretz* for their father according to *halachah*.

For example, children sometimes like to sit on "Tatty's chair," so I'd like to know if I should let them, or teach them that it's not proper *derech eretz.* And if one can let young children sit on their father's chair, until what age would that apply?

And if a younger child is allowed to sit on Tatty's chair, or gets a treat etc., how can I explain to older children who complain that it's "not fair"?

Thank you

A

ANSWER

These days, especially with so many people listening to shiurim and reading books or articles about chinuch, it's quite common for people to comment critically on the chinuch they themselves received. Some criticize their parents as having been too strict: "They didn't let me do xyz." Others think their parents were too lenient: "They didn't have proper rules and it didn't work out well," and so forth. In general, while it's impossible to establish the "perfect" method or specific application of chinuch concepts that works across the board, it is possible at least to say that extremes are virtually never good — neither too strict nor too lenient.

That said, I would like to suggest that in some, perhaps even many cases, the underlying complaint isn't the strictness or leniency, even if the person himself thinks it is. Often, in a home where there's enough love and the children feel it, even if they would objectively say later that their parents were strict or lenient, they won't complain about it. In a strict home, if the child feels seen and heard, he can handle the strictness. In a more lenient home, if the child feels that the parents didn't establish proper rules because they didn't care enough and couldn't be bothered, that's a problem.

When we hear people complaining about the method of *chinuch* they received, I would suggest that what it really could mean is that they didn't feel enough love, or the sense of being taken seriously as a person in their own right. This doesn't mean that we should accept every such account at face value. It's just a starting point for trying to understand what is really troubling someone, even when they're talking about it as if the method or the approach was the issue and nothing else.

• • •

That said, the Torah does provide clear guidelines for many aspects of *kibbud av va'eim,* and where the *gedarim* exist, we must remain within them. No one should ever think that he can be smarter than the Torah, *chalilah*. While some parents think that what applied once upon a time is no longer relevant due to changing circumstances or for any other reason, there's no question that today's children are obligated to show their parents the respect the Torah demands. Within the Torah's boundaries, there is plenty of room to exercise our own judgment regarding precisely what words to

use, the expression on your face, and so forth, as well as to tailor your approach to each child's character. But stepping beyond those boundaries is not an option.

One area where things are quite clear is the general structure of the relationship. Your child is your child, not your friend, and that applies at all times, in all places, no matter how old the child or the parent is. That doesn't mean that you can't sometimes play a game with your child (and in fact the Gemara in Shabbos 155 discusses this) or tell your child a story. It does mean that parents have to preserve a certain sense of distance at all times, and no one should be *mevater* on this.

This is perhaps more of a challenge these days when the outside world has lost all sense of *kavod* for parents, and the only advantage a parent might be left with is that he or she is bigger or stronger (and even that doesn't last). But we always have to preserve the *kavod* and also the *morah* — the awe a child should feel for his parents.

Chazal also stress the idea of balance in the relationship between parent and child (or *talmid*), referred to as *smol docheh* (discipline and respect) *veyemin mekareves* (love and closeness), with the *smol docheh* mentioned first. As much as the *yemin mekareves* (being loving and close to every child) is a vital component, it must be balanced and perhaps even prefaced by the *smol docheh,* which connotes the discipline and authority provided by the parent and the respect a child is obligated to show. One explanation I have heard for why the *smol docheh* is actually mentioned first is that there is no comparison between the feeling engendered when a respected person draws you close, and when a friend demonstrates the same level of closeness. When a revered *rosh yeshivah* or a strict *mashgiach* is *mekarev* a *talmid*, it means so much more than when a friend gives the same compliment or encouragement; when the firmer side is established first, it creates the background against which the softer side stands out. This can and should also apply in the parent-child relationship.

What this means in practice is that if your child does something disrespectful, you are obligated to address the issue and not overlook it. A parent should of course always try to stay calm, especially when dealing with younger children who aren't yet *mechuyav* in this *mitzvah.* You're still just teaching them how it works, but you should clearly point out what went wrong: "That isn't *derech eretz* — stop doing that," and so forth. You can clarify that you know they didn't mean anything bad, and reaffirm that you love them, but parents should not tolerate or enable chutzpah or anything else that goes beyond the boundaries which the Torah sets forth.

• • •

Like anything else that you teach your children, you should keep in mind that it takes time for them to catch on. For example, you might need to keep reminding your child, "That's Tatty's chair. You can't sit there — it's not *derech eretz*." Because "*yetzer lev ha'adam ra mine'urav* — a person's character is evil from his youth," respecting parents is naturally a challenge for any child. Since young children don't yet have a *yetzer tov,* they automatically want to do what they're not allowed to, and you have to tell them to stop. You can even *expect* them to want to do what they're not allowed to, and accept dealing with this as an aspect of the *mitzvah* of *chinuch*.

It's also important that you shouldn't ever take it personally. Your five-year-old doesn't want to sit on your chair because he is intentionally disrespecting *you*. It's just that he wants to sit on "Tatty's" chair and you happen to be the Tatty in question.

All the same, there are times where it's hard for a parent to remain calm when provoked, because after all, it's his child, and he recognizes his obligation to steer him onto the right path. That's why in regard to certain aspects of *chinuch*, such as learning, there's nothing wrong with sending your child to learn with a tutor, who will find it much easier to be patient until he *chaps* the Gemara, not because he's more patient than you but because it's not his son. If there's a simple solution to a nerve-racking problem that is hard for you to deal with, there's nothing wrong with using it.

• • •

Another point that can help parents remain calm is remembering that many of the struggles that occur when children are small will eventually and naturally evaporate as they grow older. You don't usually see eighteen-year-olds trying to sit in their parents' chairs and having to be told to move. This doesn't mean that parents can do nothing and rely on things happening by themselves — the *mitzvah* of *chinuch* still applies — but seeing things in this light can help parents not despair or become frustrated by having to repeat their messages again and again.

Of course, with challenges that children won't naturally grow out of, parents have to be more determined, because *kibbud av va'eim* isn't optional. Children have to be respectful toward their parents no matter what. Nonetheless, parents should try to make it easier for their children to respect them, and one of the ways in which this

is achieved is by the parents taking care to present the image of a person who is obviously worthy of respect.

To give a concrete example, a certain *melamed* had his nephew in his class, and there was no problem with that. However, when the boy's mother had a baby, she asked her sister to look after her son for a while, and the sister's husband — the *melamed* — wouldn't agree. He explained that he didn't want his *talmid* to see him lying on the couch on Shabbos afternoon with a newspaper (his words).

This *melamed* wanted to ensure that his *talmid* continued to view him with the proper respect, and he felt that it wouldn't be the same once he saw his "respected rebbi" behaving in a way that he might think was incompatible. I'm not passing judgement on whether it's okay or not for a rebbi to read the newspaper on Shabbos afternoon, but it does suggest the concept of not demanding more respect than you deserve. Of course a parent or teacher should not consistently practice hypocrisy in order to obtain respect — however, it's important to at least be aware of the areas in which you might be making it harder for your child to fulfill this *mitzvah*.

• • •

Chinuch demands a great deal of patience, and a large part of it is osmosis, long-term seeping-in of ideas and behavior, as well as teaching by example. There are many things we can do to instill proper *kibbud av va'eim* — and at the same time, we have to remember that as much as we have to put in the effort, it's not our efforts that produce the desired results, certainly not in the short-run, where we don't usually see significant results at all. Aside from saying the right thing, and being patient, a huge part of hatzlacha in *chinuch* is of course *tefillah*. Everything is *tefillah* but in *chinuch* this is really very obvious and important to recognize. As children get older and their issues become apparent, we already know what to *daven* for. When they're younger, we often just *daven* that they should "be good," but we should also *daven* that our *chinuch* should be internalized and that our children should learn the right things in the right way.



• • •

With regard to your question about children who challenge us and accuse us of being "unfair," of course Chazal teach that, "*Le'olam al yishaneh adam ben bein habanim* — A person should never treat one child differently from his [other] children." We should always make the effort to be fair, and we should never openly favor one child over another.

That said, it's not always possible to treat all children exactly the same and when that happens, what can we do? Do we start explaining, "The two-year-old gets the jelly beans because he helped so nicely; you don't because..." No, this is usually unproductive and doesn't go over well at all; there's no end to it, and the explanations don't help. The child doesn't want logic — he wants emotional understanding, and that's something you *can* offer. You don't have to and shouldn't let your child dictate what you should do, but you also shouldn't respond by saying, "I'm the Tatty, so be quiet." Instead, say, "I understand that you also want a prize, and you'll get one at the right time. Tatty feels that now your brother should be getting the prize. Tatty will look out for when you can and should get one too."

This is the same idea of *smol docheh* and *yemin mekareves*, as every form of authority and discipline with children should be applied in loving and patient terms, no less than a compliment or a reward.

B'ezras Hashem, if we do our best to treat all our children fairly with love and understanding, and use Torah wisdom to teach *derech eretz*, we will be iy"H be *zocheh* to see much Yiddishe *nachas* from them.

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME: NOACH 5784

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