Torah Lessons for the Home

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

| Parshas Shemos |

Countering Insanity

PARSHAS SHEMOS: DON'T BE COUNTERPRODUCTIVE

At the beginning of this week's *parsha*, Pharaoh and his advisers are faced with the great problem that many other gentile governments faced throughout history; The Jewish Problem. The solution they hit upon is found in *passuk* 11: וישימו עליו שרי מיסים למען ענותו בסבלותם "They appointed taskmasters over the people in order to burden and torture them". What does the next *passuk* tell us? וכאשר יענו אותם, כן ירבה וכן יפרוץ, "The more they were tortured by the Egyptians, the more they increased and multiplied".

Not only was the Egyptian solution a failure, but it actually caused the exact opposite of their hoped-for result. The increase in Jewish numbers was directly proportionate to the proposed "solution". There is a lesson that can be gleaned from this: Don't be counterproductive! Always assess whether the strategies you are implementing are actually accomplishing your desired results.

WHAT IS INSANITY?

There's an old quote: "Insanity is repeating the same action and hoping for different results!" Insanity is unfortunately overly common according to this definition. We so often endeavor to get someone to change, but our very urging is what is holding up the change. It's like pouring kerosene on a fire in the hope its flames will be doused, or the Egyptians striking at the great frog only to keep producing more.

So if you're doing something over and over again, chances are that it's not working! A school principal once called Rabbi Ronnie Greenwald *z"l* for help with a tough "case". "We have a rule in our school that girls must keep their top button closed. For the past three weeks we've been punishing this girl for keeping her button open, yet every day she returns with her button open once again!" Rabbi Greenwald asked "How long is this going on for? Three weeks?! When will you realize that it's not working? Why do you keep trying the same method over and over and over again?"

We sometimes get so involved in our "solution" that we lose focus of our true goal. This "solution" is only a means to an end, so it's important to ask: is this bringing me closer to my goal or not? This is why it can sometimes be valuable to get an objective third party involved, someone who can accurately gauge your situation and provide valuable feedback

as to the direction you should be taking.

STOP MENTIONING IT!

Yesterday someone spoke to me. He's been trying to get his wife to lose weight, and yet כאשר יענו אותו כן ירבה, it's just not working. Now, whether or not it's appropriate to insist that your wife lose weight is a subject of its own, but let's look at what happened. He brought up this issue with his wife so many times already and it seems to fall on deaf ears. Perhaps it is his very strategy that is his undoing. So again, if your strategy doesn't seem to be working, it may be time to rethink your strategy.

There are so many examples of this. I know a man who felt that is wife yells at his kids too much. So he was a thought-through fellow and he wasn't about to begin yelling at her, he used different "subtle" hints. One day he brought her a magazine clipping on "how to put your kids to bed calmly" the next day he bought her a gift, a book on "calm parenting". Then he signed her up for a parenting class. Finally completely frustrated he turned to me asking what was wrong, why was nothing working.

The truth is that why it wasn't working is irrelevant. The point is that it's not working. And when you notice that something isn't working, scrap it. Try something else. Maybe it really is impossible for this woman to get through bedtime herself without yelling and if she would have some help from her husband, bedtime would be calmer. Perhaps you should actually help her with the kids instead of signing her up for parenting classes. I'm not saying that being subtle doesn't work, however, in this case it evidently didn't work; so move on.

YOU NEVER APOLOGIZE

And then there's the wife that wouldn't apologize. No matter how wrong she was, she just couldn't bring herself to apologize for any wrong that she did. Her husband couldn't bear it, he asked me "Is this normal? A person who can't apologize?" I assured him that it wasn't normal and so he got to work trying to make his wife "normal". He, of course, turned to insanity…

He mentioned to her again and again that she never apologizes. It came up in every argument, and there were many, "and besides, you're never wrong, you never apologize". It came to the point where the wife herself would bring it up! "And now you'll say that I never apologize". Mentioning it was clearly not working, yet he couldn't take the step back and see that his method of getting his wife to apologize was not working. He kept trying the same thing and expecting different results.

A SUCCESS STORY

I can tell countless such stories, and I'm sure you can as well. As mentioned, we're all insane to a certain extent. We're all blind when it comes to our own interests, and it's hard to notice when we fall into the trap of retrying and expecting different results. But I'll offer one success story before we conclude. A woman called me up about her teenage daughter: While this woman got busy putting the younger kids to bed after dinner, her teenager would lounge around, yapping on the phone. The mother really felt that the daughter should help her more, and she said as much to her daughter, yet nothing would get the girl off the couch.

The mom pleaded, begged and screamed; she explained to her daughter how upsetting it was to come downstairs, drained from bedtime, only to encounter a mess. She pontificated on the great *mitzvah* of *kibbud eim*, yet the teenager sulked and phoned another friend. Finally, realizing that her method wasn't working, the mom tried something else. Instead of berating her daughter for speaking on the phone, she allowed her daughter the freedom to choose her actions and just mentioned to her that "it would be a great help if you could straighten out the kitchen while you talk on the phone".

And it worked! The daughter began cleaning up after dinner. So often there's a tiny change that makes all the

difference. Yet not realizing the fallacy of our methods, we ignore that change and persist in our insanity. It is always imperative to take a step back and ensure that we are not acting like the insane Egyptians and that our methods are not counterproductive.

CHINUCH: BE SUCCESSFUL

Some people are not so adept at changing their methods, and they're not very keen on the idea either. Suppose the mother in the previous example would have said "why should I change my method? Shouldn't my daughter change? What's wrong with telling her to clean up and to take responsibility a little? She's not a baby anymore, when will she learn?

Yes yes, very good points, and one hundred percent right. But like I always say: Do you want to be successful or do you want to be right? Actually in *chinuch* you don't have the choice of being right. In marriage maybe you can make the choice of remaining miserable and "right". But when it comes to children, you have a responsibility, not to be right but to raise your children successfully. It is therefore so important to look at what works, and what works for "this child". You must constantly review your strategies – are they passing muster? Are they indeed working for you? And hopefully, with *siyatta dishmaya*, we will succeed at our most important job; raising the next generation.

-Q&A-

Please feel free to send any questions, on this topic or any topic to RabbiGruen@Lehair.org

Question: I married off my son recently and I feel like he completely disconnected from me. It always bothered me that we were never particularly close, but now that he's married it's like we don't know each other. What can be done to improve this relationship?

Answer: I have often received feedback about the answers in this forum; people take issue with something I said, or offer different resolutions. So I want to make the following clarification. Every situation is different. There is no one-size-fits-all or one answer that applies to all. These answers are written with a knowledge of the specific scenario. But I publish them, despite their being uniquely tailored to the individual situation, because something can be learned from each situation. Precisely the fact that each situation calls for a different approach is a lesson in itself.

In this case I want to say that sometimes we need to use the old truism: "If it ain't broke, don't fix it". Sometimes people get caught up in unrealistic romanticized ideas of what a relationship is supposed to be like and they fail to realize that, in fact, there is nothing wrong with their situation. In this case, speaking with the father I learned that he himself had had a similar relationship with his own father! And although *his* father would have appreciated a closer relationship, he had simply always felt more comfortable sharing things with his *rebbe*, or his mother. It's just a matter of personality and sometimes you have to be able to accept certain facets of someone's personality that may not be exactly the way you would like.

So of course from your end "offer" communication and relationship, but as long as your relationship is not "bad" or specifically problematic – you may need to accept that your child isn't as close to you as you'd like. There is still much you can relate about and relate with even without the "closeness" you would have preferred.

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