

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

KNOWING WHEN (AND WHEN NOT) TO BE A NOTHING

This week's *parshah* begins with Hakadosh Baruch Hu telling Moshe Rabbeinu to count Bnei Yisrael in such a way that "there will be no plague among them." The *sefer Emes l'Yaakov* explains the words of the *passuk*, "*Ki sisa es-rosh Bnei-Yisrael … venasnu ish kofer nafsho…*" as a lesson in how to help one's fellow Jew do *teshuvah*. A person who is absorbed in his ego and sees himself as perfect is simply incapable of engaging in the self-examination needed to mend his ways. A person who sins very often becomes arrogant, and a person who is full of *gaavah* cannot see what he needs to correct. Therefore, if you want to uplift such a person, you sometimes need to break him just a little first. Ridding oneself of *gaavah* is the work of a lifetime, but it's necessary in order to do *teshuvah*.

The story is told of how R' Yonasan Eibeschutz was once davening in a certain shul and noticed a man repeating over and over to himself the words, "*Venafshi ke'afar lechol tihyeh*—my soul should be as dust to everyone." Later during davening, this man was given a certain *aliyah* and from his expression it was obvious that he resented not being given a greater honor. R' Yonasan approached him and asked him in mock wonder: "But I heard you repeating what a nothing you are…" The man looked surprised. "That was between me and Him. But between me and that *galgan*—that's something else entirely!"

Being humble enough to admit that you're wrong is not easy. I once heard from an old Yerushalmi Yid, quoting his *melamed* from many years previously, "Sometimes, you'll hear someone say: 'You know what? You're right.' But you'll never hear anyone saying: 'You know what? I was wrong…'"

Being unable to admit that you're wrong isn't always just arrogance, however. People with very low self-esteem are just as unable to look honestly at their mistakes, because they feel that admitting to the slightest flaw makes them totally worthless. We have to know that it's okay to make a mistake, that doing the wrong thing isn't the end of the world, because we can apologize, feel regret, and fix things.

נתנדב לרגל ההילולא קדישא
של רבן של ישראל

הרה"ק רבי אלימלך
מליזענסק זי"ע

ע"י ולזכות נכדו
ישראל דוב בן שרה

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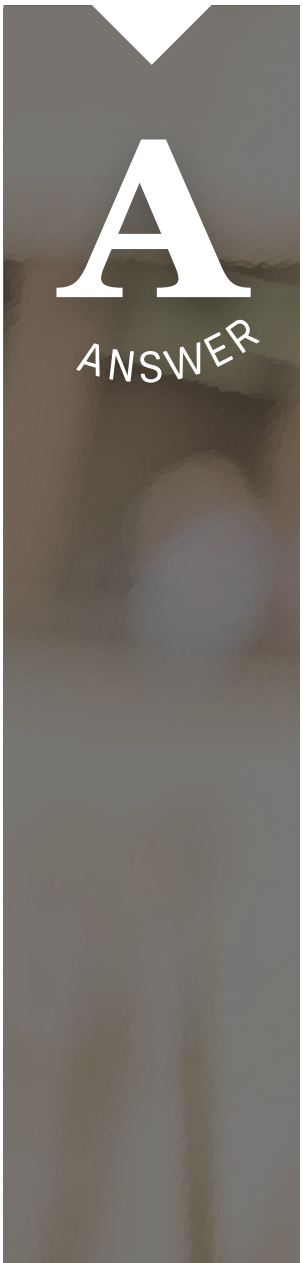
Dear Rabbi Gruen,

My question is about one of my children, who has a slight disability. My wife wants our family to take advantage of the many organizations that help families with disabled children, and join them on Shabbos retreats. But I feel that it's better for our son to feel like he's a regular person and I'm worried that making him feel so different from his friends could end up causing more damage than the illness itself.

How can I know whether it's better to go, or to stay home?

And, what about the effect on our *shalom bayis*? How should I react when my wife tells me she's taking the kids to a Shabbos retreat with one of these organizations, even though I don't want to go?

Thank you



I feel I must begin with a disclaimer that I know nothing about this family other than what is contained in the question as printed here. I have no idea what kind of disability the child has, how severe it is, or any other detail that would help me to answer this question appropriately. All I can do is offer some general observations based on the very limited information I have been given.

The husband is presenting, on the face of it, a fairly common situation in a marriage, where one parent adopts one kind of approach to dealing with problems and the other prefers another type of approach.

In general, there are four ways of approaching any problem, two of which are okay, and two that are clearly not. I'll elaborate on this using an example of a child who wakes up in the middle of the night with a fever.

In the morning, even though the child seems better, the mother still wants to rush off to the doctor just to make sure everything really is okay. The father, on the other hand, says, "Oh, the fever's gone down and he seems alright. Maybe let's just wait and see how things develop." Both these approaches are relatively fine and normal, even though they conflict. Both of the parents are being fairly responsible; they just have different ideas about how to deal with such issues.

However, if a child wakes up in the night screaming in agony and won't calm down, and in the morning is still complaining of excruciating pain, a parent who says, "Well, he's awake and aware... let's wait and see," is being irresponsible and even neglectful and abusive. By the same measure, a parent who insists on rushing to the ER with a child who "says" his head is hurting is also being unreasonable, though in a different way.

It's fine to have opposite but healthy attitudes towards difficulties, and it's absolutely possible for a husband and wife who do have such differences to respect each other's opinions and find ways to compromise without having an argument each time they disagree. Unfortunately, many parents are insecure,

have great difficulty in respecting an opinion different from their own, and need to constantly feel completely in control. There are also parents who are too insecure to protest when their spouse is being abusive or neglectful, and allow their child to suffer without speaking out. Opinions need to be taken seriously and different perspectives must be taken into account, all in a peaceful and respectful attitude, with neither spouse feeling stifled or disregarded.

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With that said, however, in general I do believe that as much as it's irresponsible to leave things unaddressed, or to neglect looking into how a child can be helped to overcome any given challenge, it's still usually best to avoid making a big deal out of an issue, as much as possible. Children should grow up feeling normal, even if they have significant challenges. People are so quick to assign labels today, and often disregard the advice of a teacher who, judging by their knowledge and experience, assures them that "it's normal, and they'll grow out of it." It's hard to give blanket advice that could be applied inappropriately, but in many cases, schlepping a child to therapy appointments or other kinds of "help" isn't nearly as helpful as we think it is — and then there are the added challenges that can come along with it.

Of course parents should give each of their children the support, love, and encouragement to thrive and achieve what they are capable of — and some children will need much more love and support than others. However, very often this can be done without giving children the feeling that they are "less than" or "different."

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Many families have at least one child with some "issue" or other that should be addressed. Many families even have a child with genuine physical or emotional limitations. But it's sad when something relatively normal or trivial gets turned into a major upheaval. Some people are experts at taking a minor issue and blowing it out of proportion. (Dr. Marc Feldman, to whom I'm grateful for being the first person to endorse my book *Get Along with Everyone*, elaborates on this in his books *Patient or Pretender* and *Dying to Be Ill*.)

I am not hinting or assuming that this applies to the particular question here, as by no means do I have enough information to make any such assumption. I am just pointing out that in such cases, the parent is not really thinking about the welfare of the child at all and may actually be harming the child quite significantly. It's important to make an accurate assessment of any problem before allowing it to become a major ongoing issue.

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With regard to children with genuinely serious issues, in almost all cases they should be encouraged not to settle for less than they can be. I recall speaking to a person who faced significant physical and emotional challenges in his younger years, and who was inspired to develop his potential to the fullest by parents who refused to give in to a "disabled" label. As a young man, this person was actually quite resentful of his parents' attitude, and he would relate with some bitterness that, "I was brought up to believe that I was normal. But I'm not. I'm not 100% capable of doing so many things."

One cannot judge such a person, who is clearly in pain and distress. But after hearing about the situation from him and viewing it objectively, I still believe that his parents did what was the best for him. Allowing him to grow up and seeing himself as disabled would have led him to achieve 20 percent of his full potential, rather than the 60 or 70 percent that he did attain. (And, who is 100-percent successful in any case?)

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Addressing the second issue raised in this question is much simpler in comparison to the challenges of raising a child with disabilities.

Without having more information, it's not possible (and would be irresponsible) to give tailored, specific or detailed advice, but from the information provided it does sound like the husband feels stuck with the decisions his wife makes for the family, which is an issue that should be dealt with.

When a wife or mother "decides" that she's going to do what she wants, regardless of her husband's feelings on the matter, and without giving him a say, is not the way things should be. Clearly the Torah approach to running a home is that a husband should be setting the tone for family decisions, and having significant input. But even setting that aside, it's unacceptable in any home that one spouse should be

making decisions on his or her own without taking the other spouse's views into consideration.

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Reaching a compromise in an area where husband and wife disagree is almost always possible. It could mean sometimes going on a Shabbos retreat with the family, and sometimes staying home. It could mean one parent going with the child with the issue, and the other parent staying home with the other children. And it could mean going to one retreat and passing up on the next. There are usually ways of considering everyone's feelings, as long as there is mutual respect.

I won't elaborate here on the different methods that can be used to resolve such an issue to the satisfaction of both parties. Aside from a simple compromise there are other potential solutions, but it must be stressed that the starting point for any solution is both parties recognizing and accepting the fact that they both have a say in the matter and that neither of them should feel neglected or controlled.

Reaching a level of agreement begins with the husband telling his wife that while her opinion is valid and significant, his is also, and that he is not comfortable with her going ahead and making decisions without considering his feelings and opinions. Of course he should speak gently and avoid giving her the impression that he thinks she is wrong. He can stress her *mesirus nefesh* for the welfare of the family, and tell her how much he values everything she does. And then he must add that he feels strongly that going on such a Shabbos retreat is not the best option for the family, and that he hopes she will understand and respect his opinion. With that, the decision is closed to further discussion.



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Very often, a husband or wife will try their best to avoid going this route, in the mistaken belief that backing down and allowing their feelings to be trampled on is "good for *shalom bayis*." This very rarely works. It's usually only a matter of time before the trampled feelings explode into an angry outburst. It would have been far better to address things calmly before that happens. Thinking that "I'll put my child's welfare first" is also mistaken, because the worst thing for a child to see is their parents fighting over something. Children will usually figure out that their parents disagree, even if they do their best to hide it.

Of course, that doesn't mean that the husband in this situation will have an easy time explaining to his wife that they won't be going to the Shabbos retreat after all. She may be very upset, especially if she has already started making plans and looking forward to it. That's unfortunate, but it can be dealt with. The husband can tell his wife how sorry he is that she's upset, and can even ask how he can make her feel more comfortable about his decision. However, at the end of the day, he is not responsible for her hard feelings, if he has done his best to speak respectfully, show understanding and agree to a compromise.

Very often in marriage couples allow themselves to fall into patterns they know to be destructive, because continuing in the familiar way is so much easier (in the short-run) than making difficult though necessary changes. May Hashem give us the ability to look at our situations as objectively as possible, see our faults, and have the courage to fix them.

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