

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

SOME THINGS NEED TO BE SAID

This week's *parshah* distinguishes between the "hidden things" which are Hashem's concern, and the "revealed things" which are for us to deal with, as we fulfill the words of the Torah throughout the generations.

The Maor Vashemesh brings the words of the Ari Hakadosh on the *passuk* in Tehillim, "*Lecha dumiyah tehilah Elokim ... shomei'a tefillah*—Silence is praise to You, Hashem ... You, who hears prayer..." and notes that any praise we offer Hashem can never fully express His greatness. Silence may be the right response to our inadequacy; nonetheless, we should express praise out loud when we daven, and part of the reason why we do so is to inspire those who hear us, because when it comes to our duty to affect others, we set aside our deficiencies and do our best.

The Ahavas Yisrael *zy"a* makes a similar point, saying that while a person should not fool himself or others and behave in a manner that is loftier than his true essence, there is an exception to this rule. Parents should behave in ways that are "above" where they're truly holding, so that their children should see and be inspired.

Words and deeds are what leave the biggest impression on children. While we may feel our love and concern for them so strongly, we must also make sure that our children sense our feelings, by expressing them in words and in actions.

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Q QUESTION

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

I have a dilemma with one of my children, as I know that parents have a tendency to react emotionally when it comes to their own children and it's hard to know what's the right approach to take.

My son recently came home from cheider with a black-and-blue mark on his chin. I asked him about it and he shrugged it off. I asked another few times and when he refused to reply I gave up. But a week or two passed and then he came home really upset over a few things that had happened in class, and it all spilled out — how the black-and-blue mark had been made by the *menahel*.

My son had been due to give a small presentation in class and while he was preparing it, another boy started pestering him and wouldn't stop, and then he hit him really hard. My son was so upset, and just then the *rebbi* came into class and he asked the *rebbi* for permission to go and phone his parents.

The *rebbi* said no, and my son was so upset that he ran out of the classroom. The *rebbi* went after him and told him to go to the *menahel* for disobeying him. I don't have any complaints against the *rebbi* as he has to deal with a large class and it can be hard to maintain discipline.

Anyway, my son went to the *menahel* but he was so upset that he couldn't speak. The *menahel* didn't try to calm him down or wait till he pulled himself together. He just pinched him really hard "for being *chutzpadig*."

Once my son had told me all of this, I asked him why he didn't tell me right away and he said, "Because I knew you wouldn't do anything anyway." That upset me more than anything. I do try to support my kids, but I also try to defend the cheider as well, and help my children see the other point of view and realize that it's hard to maintain discipline in class. So it seems I got the balance wrong.

I told my son that when anyone hurts him or mistreats him, of course I will take action. And I did — I approached the *hanhalah* and told them what happened, but their response was really disappointing. They said that the *menahel* "is much better than he used to be." They also said that they would raise the issue with the *menahel* and get back to me and my husband, but they haven't been in touch since.

My husband and I feel that after so many years in the cheider, if the *menahel* is still behaving like this to a boy who he knows is usually well-behaved, then maybe he's in the wrong job. My son is traumatized and really hates the *menahel* now, especially as he sees him behaving in a similarly nasty way with other boys too.

What should I do? Should I ask for another meeting with the *hanhalah*? Or should I just let it go? I want to make sure that this doesn't happen again. I really don't believe that Hashem wants a *menahel* to behave in such a way.

Thank you

A ANSWER

While this is a painful situation and while the only information I have is what is provided here, I feel it's well worth addressing this incident, to ensure that people are aware that such situations do occur. Parents need to know that these things happen and that if they hear anything similar to this story from a child, it needs to be addressed and not shoved under the rug with the assumption that it can't possibly be true. As for school administrations, they too need to know that such cases must not be overlooked or brushed under the carpet. They should be dealt with competently and courageously.

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I think it is noteworthy that the mother writing this letter stresses that what upset her most about the entire incident was her son's refusal to tell her about it because he didn't believe she would take action. Our responsibility as parents is to do our best to make our children feel comfortable sharing whatever they need to with us. We can't always smooth their path through life as much as we would like, but what we can do is offer all the support possible in dealing with difficult people and keeping them safe. Ensuring that our children feel heard and understood probably helps more than any direct action toward the cheider (necessary as that may be).

That said, it's certainly not true that every time a child doesn't want to share something, it's the parent's fault. Even when a child says, "I knew you wouldn't do anything," he may not mean it literally. That's just a child's way of expressing himself. But our children do need to know that whatever they tell us will be taken seriously. That means hearing them out without interruption, validating what they say, and following up.

Validating a child doesn't mean believing that what they say is necessarily one-hundred-percent true. It may be a narrative coming from their way of seeing things, it could be exaggerated — and the story may also be very incomplete. Nonetheless, they deserve to be heard and to feel understood. Even if the story sounds a little suspicious, a parent should never make it obvious that he doesn't believe it or that he suspects the child of hiding the other person's side of the incident or of twisting what actually transpired.

There's a very fine balance between making a child feel understood and believed, and still not reacting in haste based on nothing more than the details they report. You can clarify that you feel terrible about what happened and appreciate being told, and add that you will be making some calls so that he knows that you're taking care of it. There's no need to say or even hint that you'll be checking to ensure that his version of events isn't missing something important, or to give him the impression that you doubt the truth of his account.

Even if you know from experience that this particular child has a tendency to exaggerate or leave out details (and even if you know certain details about this particular incident which tells you that your child is, purposely or otherwise, misrepresenting it), it's still important that you first give him the feeling that he's being heard and understood.

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In general, it's easier to focus on the guiltier party in any story, which is why, before taking things any further, parents must make sure they aren't contributing in any way to the situation. This means recognizing that just as children's perspective is by nature skewed, so is the natural and instinctive reaction of a parent. We often discipline our children, feeling that the potch or telling-off is justified in the current situation — but then if we see someone else giving a potch, our instinct is to jump to our child's defense (and quite rightly so).

Within the cheider framework, there are obviously circumstances in which disciplinary actions are completely justified. I do not mean to weigh in on the kind of physical punishment described in this letter, but some forms of discipline are appropriate and necessary. We have to make sure not to tie teachers' hands so tightly so that they can maintain proper discipline and teach the class effectively.

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After hearing a child out, we have to reassure them that we will take steps to protect them in the future. In such a case this means speaking with the *hanhalah* and clarifying the circumstances. Getting to the bottom of what happened is more likely to happen if the parent isn't so aggressive that it puts the *hanhalah* on the defensive. A parent can simply say, "I have heard my child's account of events and I'd like to hear from you what happened."

In a case of serious physical abuse one should not accept attempts to defend such conduct with claims that the child's behavior was so bad that he deserved it. Abusive behavior is never justified. You don't have to argue over the chain of events, as plenty of things could have happened in the lead-in to the incident that the boy omitted from his account — for any number of reasons. Perhaps he was actually *chutzpadig*; perhaps he did say something to the *menahel*; perhaps he had already been warned in the past about running out of class. Arguing over these facts distracts from the main point which is that a child shouldn't be treated this way.

When a parent is polite, and yet remains adamant that such behavior cannot be tolerated, the *hanhalah* is much more likely to treat the issue with the gravity it deserves. It's only when parents are too quick to forgive, or too hasty to condemn, that they create an opening for the *hanhalah* to brush their complaints aside.

However, it is very important to be open to hearing the details of the incident in order to place things in their proper context.

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It's even possible that the *menahel*, realizing that he behaved wrongly, apologized to the boy and the boy

preferred not to mention it, as he wanted to present him in a bad light.

While physically harming a student is unacceptable, there are occasional cases where otherwise calm and balanced teachers and principals "lose it" and immediately regret their behavior and apologize. If the case was truly an isolated instance, there is room for a parent and the boy concerned to accept the apology and move on. (Without such an apology, the boy will understandably feel unable to respect the *menahel*, going forward). Therefore, parents should insist on some form of "closure" and stress that otherwise, the boy's *chinuch* will unfortunately be undermined. If possible, the parent should also tell the boy how much the *menahel* regrets his actions and how highly he thinks of him. This should be done, even if the *menahel* hasn't been especially forthcoming in showing remorse.

In this case, however, it's quite clear from the response of the *hanhalah* that the *menahel* is known for such or similar behavior (and even worse). Responding that "he used to be much worse" is no response at all. Even if the *menahel* were to apologize it would still be inadequate, given that his behavior was not a onetime occurrence, but typical for him.

The *hanhalah's* response seems to suggest that they are too intimidated to take action. They are aware of the problem and are choosing to do nothing about it, which is unacceptable. Just as the government needs to have checks and balances, any organization, and especially one that is responsible for young children, should have some kind of built in system of accountability. Making the decision to fire a *menahel* who is unsuited to his task is a big responsibility — but so is leaving such a *menahel* in his position and accepting the likely consequences for the *cheider's* students.

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I was recently involved in the process of hiring a new *menahel* for a certain *cheider*, and was pleased to observe that the most important consideration for the selection committee was finding someone of good character who has an instinctive ability to connect with students. Naturally they also wanted a *menahel* who is a *talmid chacham* and has a number of other credentials, but his *middos* were more important to them, and this is as things should be.

That said, students should also have a sense of awe toward their *menahel* to some extent. A *menahel* isn't just someone who hands out lollipops with a smile. However, especially in our generation where so many children are sensitive in many areas and also need more encouragement, the awe should be properly balanced with affection.

It's also very important that parents properly appreciate the pressures that teachers are under (as the mother writing this letter clearly does). Keeping a large class of children under control and also teaching them is no easy feat. If a *melamed* is so intimidated by parents threatening him with dire consequences if he so much as raises his voice against a student, he won't be able to teach at all.

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Many parents don't like to complain too much lest they be labeled the "complainers" and are then themselves viewed as the problem. Finding a balance between complaining too much to the *hanhalah* and dismissing real issues is challenging, but when done judiciously and buffered by compliments and nice feedback whenever possible, it can be achieved. When we approach problems with a genuine desire to uncover the truth from all sides and take action to ensure that our children grow up to love Torah and *mitzvos*, *be'ezras Hashem* we will succeed in fulfilling our duties as parents.



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