RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

TORAH LESSONS

FOR THE HOME

PARSHAS TAZRIA METZORA

THE MYTH OF THE AVERAGE CHILD

The Dubno Maggid asks why a *metzora* was required to be brought to a *kohen* who would declare his lesion either *tamei* or *tahor*. He explains that when a person speaks *lashon hara*, it's often because he doesn't appreciate the significance of his words. Whenever a person says something, it has a huge effect. One of the key differences between man and animals is that a person is a *medaber*, capable of speech. Nonetheless, people often think that they "only *said* something; nothing happened." The Midrash tells us, however, that "Hashem says: 'You should know that I send a *malach* who stands next to you and writes down what you tell your friend.'"

In order to convey the power of speech, the *metzora* was obligated to go to a *kohen* who would declare him either *tamei* or *tahor*, using either of the two words to determine his status. Suddenly, the person came to understand the power of even a single word. The whole world could see that the person had a *nega*, but until the *kohen* declared it *tamei,* he was not impure. In fact, if he happened to be a *chassan* in the middle of his *sheva brachos*, the *kohen* would not declare his *nega tamei* until after the celebrations were over, even though his *nega* was clearly visible. Furthermore, if a *nega* was found on the wall of someone's home, his possessions were removed before a *kohen* declared it *tamei*, to avoid a situation in which all the possessions became impure as well. The same applied in reverse when the *nega* disappeared. Even if a person's skin was obviously clear, until the *kohen* pronounced the word "*tahor*" the person remained *tamei*.

So much about relationships boils down to the words we use. Sometimes we hurt people with words that are "*tamei*," by saying what shouldn't be said. If we are wise, we build people by using words that are "*tahor*," complimenting them and encouraging them. The Torah teaches us to be sensitive to the effects of our words, to build rather than destroy. And if we want to build effectively, we have to speak the words out loud, not just think them or assume that "they know how I feel." The Zohar on this week's *parshah* tells us that even worse than saying something negative, is withholding saying something positive.

THIS WEEK'S ESSAY IS DEDICATED IN HONOR OF THE ENGAGEMENT OF

YEHUDA & RACHELLI FRIEDMAN

MAZEL TOV TO MR. & MRS. ELI FRIEDMAN

MAY THEY SEE ONLY NACHAS FROM ALL THEIR CHILDREN!

QUESTION

DEAR RABBI GRUEN,

My daughter's school is asking me to teach my daughter how to be *geshikt*, to do things much more quickly. She has a good head, b"H, but she's very laid-back. I don't think a 5–6-year-old needs to be so efficient and fast-paced yet. Any tools?

Thank you, and thanks so much for your *shiurim*.

ANSWER

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN RESPONDS

Before answering the question, I want to be clear that I don't have any more details than those that are written here. Any suggestions I can offer will depend on the details I am provided with, and sometimes a seemingly small detail can make a big difference in the approach needed. "Normal" and "standard" are relative terms that can be misleading, and there can be more to the situation that may need to be taken into consideration and addressed. Following are a few ideas that can be applied to this and other situations in general.

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When you say that the "school" is asking you to teach your daughter certain things, it's important to clarify who the "school" is. Is it the principal? Was there a meeting of staff members at which it was decided that you should be approached? Is it simply a comment from one inexperienced teacher? It's difficult to elaborate on how each of these options can and should be addressed, but it does make a difference on how you should respond and how concerned you should be.

One of the main ideas of Pesach is "*K'neged arba'ah banim dibrah Torah*." The Torah talks to all four types of sons and provides us with four different ways of approaching them. Children can and should be treated differently. "*Chanoch lenaar al pi darko*" means teaching each child according to their nature and level.

This brings us to the understanding that the idea of "average" and fitting children into a certain mold is often misleading and incorrect. Rabbi Ronnie Greenwald once quipped that we can only use the cookie-cutter method when raising children if we're ready to acknowledge that there are round cookies, square cookies, "star" cookies… and tough cookies!

People often assume that *all* children should reach the *average* level. However, the concept of "average," especially when it comes to grades, is not that *most* children reach that level. Average is nothing more than a number in-between all those above and below. There may not even be a single child whose grades are precisely "average." And the fact that these are not statistics relating to apples and oranges, but real children, with different capabilities, natures and styles, should be enough to tell us that there's no reason to even expect that all will be the same in the first place. That's just how people are.

It's important to compliment and accept each child for who they are without trying to *average them out*.

The well-known article called "Animal School" illustrates this point very nicely. It describes a teacher who tries to teach different animals the same skills, so that the duck will learn to run as well as the rabbit, while the rabbit learns to swim as well as the fish, the fish to climb trees like the monkey, and the monkey to roar like the lion. That resonates with the quote incorrectly attributed to Einstein: "Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by

its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid."

It's important to understand the innate qualities of a child and work with them. What's easy for one can be hard for another. While there are ways to help children achieve more, not everyone can reach the same level in every area. That's to be expected, and should be accepted without issue.

While it's true that in a class, there may have to be a certain standard or level of achievement that is aimed for and used as a guideline to decide what and how to teach, the idea of "averages" and what children "should be able to do" can be very misleading, and needs to be applied correctly within a group to incorporate understanding of the individual.

Another interesting mistake some people make is taking a child's strengths and weaknesses into account and then only complimenting him when he achieves something that was hard for him. Why should he not be praised and appreciated for his qualities too? Each child deserves to be appreciated for what he's good at, even if it comes naturally. And if this is true for those who achieve things via effort, how much more so for those children who never even make the average, let alone accomplish things that they find challenging — meaning that they never get complimented at all?

I remember once getting a call from my son's *rebbi*, who told me that my son's reading from the Siddur was a quite a few words-per-minute slower than the class average. I asked if his reading was fluent and accurate, and the *rebbi* confirmed that it was. While there are certainly times when slow reading is a true concern, as mentioned earlier, all that "average" means in such a context is a center-point that half the class falls above and the other half, below (more or less). To humor the person who called me, I told him that the Tosher Rebbe *zy"a* read from the Siddur slower than my son. (Years later, I wish this son would slow down a bit with his davening…) The point is that it's not always important to read — or do anything else, for that matter — exactly the way most children do. If a child is not experiencing any practical or significant difficulty, it's not important to speed him up. Not everyone will fit into that number, bracket, box or mold that you design for them.

I think it's fine if we accept children for what they are. Some are quicker, some are slower. The averages are there to give us approximate guidelines for what's normal and how to aim for it, but trying to "average children out" can lead to problems.

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During the COVID lockdowns, I spoke to someone whose child actually enjoyed sitting on the couch doing nothing. Yes, it can be a problem if a child sits on the couch *all day* and does *nothing* else, but it's okay for a child to *like* klutzing on the couch, even if most children the same age enjoy doing other things. In fact, it was during the lockdowns that we saw how some children who thrived in school had a hard time being home, while others who had a hard time in school thrived at home. For some the telephone classes were a savior, believe it or not. They learned better and felt great. It doesn't mean that telephone classes need to be an option, but it does shed light on how each child has his own way of doing things, and needs different circumstances in which to thrive.

I mentioned the four sons, so allow me to share a silly joke I heard. Someone mentioned that with today's lingo, instead of the wise, wicked, simple, and one who doesn't ask, it's more accepted to refer to children as gifted, behaviorally challenged, learning-disabled, and Asperger's. It's a cute joke, but I think that today's political correctness is misleading and that we would do better to simply accept, as we once did, that yes, there are four "types" of children and it's okay for them to be different from one another. Differences are not "issues" that need to be sugar-coated — they're normal and to be expected. Why can't we just accept that Hashem gives us four types of children? It's only the wicked child we try to *change*. This isn't about complacency, or resigning ourselves to the simple *tam* always remaining simple. We hope that each child will move up in level. But meanwhile, we must accept each child at the place where he is, and address him there. Praise accomplishments, encourage them to move forward, use incentives, but don't base your approach on "progress."

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We know that Man was created to break his nature, as the Rebbe Reb Elimelech of Lizhensk famously writes. Often, we try to do that for others

because it's too hard to do it for ourselves. It's important to recognize that working on oneself becomes easier as we get older. Young children need a lot of help and encouragement to overcome their natural inhibitions. They need a lot of love and compliments to grow up healthy enough to want to challenge themselves. When *we* challenge them, instead of challenging ourselves or allowing *them* to challenge themselves one day, we actually make it harder for them to grow.

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Often, when I get questions about young children, I guess correctly that it's the questioner's oldest child. When parents are desperate to know how to address a three-year-old's tantrum, it's likely that their oldest child is three. When you have a 15-year-old, you're less concerned about the normal challenges of a toddler.

I know of an experienced *menahel* who will not hire a *melamed* for a grade if the *melamed* himself doesn't yet have children of that age. He feels that if a teacher's oldest child is ten years old and he teaches 12-year-olds, he'll think his students are grown-ups. Once he has a 12-year-old of his own, he'll realize how young that really is and look differently at the children.

The child you asked about is five-to-six years old. There are things that should be worked on even at this age, skills to be learned and developed, and more. But in the big picture, for a young child like that, it's less important to get your child to be quicker, and more important to make her feel good about herself. Unless the issue is significant and impedes general progress and growth, let it pass. You'll accomplish much more by trying to connect with her and making her feel like a million dollars, than by trying to fix her.

If you're not sure about the extent of the issue, it could be helpful to discuss it with someone who knows your daughter and can tell you if this is something she's likely to outgrow or if some gentle intervention now could help.

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One more important point: Don't fight the school or the teachers. Don't set out to prove them wrong. Thank them for their advice and suggestions and try to appear appreciative.

A parent once called me for advice. His daughter's teacher had called him after the very first day of school to complain that his daughter was very obnoxious. What should he tell his daughter?

I advised him to tell her that her teacher had called to say how wonderful she is and how highly she thinks of her. Within a few days, the teacher called back to report on the remarkable metamorphosis.

Respect the teacher and the principal, take their words seriously, and weigh them together with your own knowledge of your child. Whatever you end up doing, always remember to work with your child's nature and happily accept her for who she is.

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

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Thank You & Tizku Lmitzvos!