

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

OBVIOUS PROBLEMS, HIDDEN SOLUTIONS

In this week's *parshah* the Torah describes the copper snake that Moshe Rabbeinu erected on a pole, and how those who had sinned and had been bitten by a snake had only to look at this copper snake and be healed.

The Meshech Chochmah points out that when describing how "whenever a snake bit a man..." the Torah uses the word "*vehayah*—and so it was. Chazal teach us that the word "*vehayah*" generally describes something positive and happy. What is positive about a person being bitten by a snake, even if he is eventually healed? Would it not have been better if the man had never sinned, never been bitten by a snake, and never needed healing in the first place?

He answers that the Torah states that "everyone who was bitten by a snake" was healed, which includes people who were already sick with some illness before sinning and being punished with a snake bite. When they looked at the copper snake, they were healed of their previous disease as well, and this was reason to rejoice.

Many families, perhaps even most, have at least one "challenging child," who has a variety of issues that aren't always easy to deal with. With one it can be an academic challenge, with another it's behavioral, and so on. Sometimes, when dealing with one issue, parents find that the other issues suddenly clear up too, even though they'd had no idea how to solve them. Sometimes a child who is getting "help" for a known challenge actually ends up being helped more by the additional attention now being given to him, and the concern everyone is now showing for his welfare, which then leads to a vast improvement in all other areas of his life as well. Indeed, a new problem can be a blessing and reason for happiness. We must trust in Hashem and believe that every challenge is for the good.

This week's essay is kindly sponsored

Le'iluy Nishmas

Yechiel Tzvi ben ע"ה Yitzchok

Berger

יאה"צ ט' תמוז



Dear Rabbi Gruen,

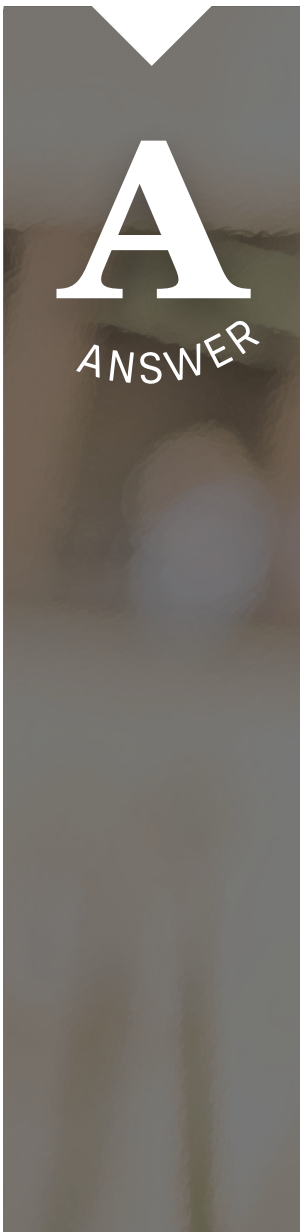
My wife and I listen to your *shiurim* a lot and enjoy them very much — the great advice you have, and the clear way in which you present it.

I would like to ask your advice on one of our sons. We have a large family with lots of boys, *bli ayin hara* — the oldest boy is 13, the next one is 11, the third son is a bit younger, and then there's his younger brother, who's 7. The older two are great boys with good *middos* and who learn well. But our third son has learning problems and his behavior is problematic too.

I'd like to ask you what we should do about the way this son treats his younger brother. I think that it's because he feels jealous that this brother (like the older ones) is strong in learning and other areas, and he knows that he isn't. He's never said anything but that's what it looks like. He acts out his jealous feelings by hitting his little brother and generally behaving horribly to him, whenever he gets the chance. We don't know what to do about it.

Could you also give us some advice for a different child who sometimes comes home from *cheider* and tells us how another boy was bullying him? What should I do, other than talking to the *rebbi* (which I already did)? Should I speak to the principal?

Thank you



The father writing this letter describes a family blessed with many children very close to one another in age. These days, there are unfortunately some people who will see that as part of the problem (although this doesn't seem to apply here). Blaming problems on "too many children" is not a Yiddishe mindset — aside from the fact that in the overwhelming majority of cases, problems aren't caused by having "too many children."

In fact, the opposite is usually true. Children who grow up in large families often have to learn social skills in order to live harmoniously and become much better adjusted adults. While sibling rivalry and jealousy, and even not having "enough" privacy, are all genuine challenges that come along with a large family, the skills children acquire when dealing with these issues will serve them extremely well later in life.

Children who grow up without siblings are missing out; while they may learn to be independent, an attitude of "I don't need anyone" is hardly healthy. It's like a wealthy father, who buys a large house for his married son in a certain part of town. When his friend asks him why he chose that neighborhood — after all, there are no young families living in that part of town — the father scornfully replies, "My grandchildren won't need neighbors. They'll have all the toys and games they could want without needing to borrow from friends."

When people see others as no more than tools to supply them with their needs, they're missing the point of what human interaction is all about.

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Now to address the question. Virtually all families have at least one "challenging child." Virtually all parents feel at least sometimes that, "Life would be so much simpler if I didn't have to deal with this one child's issues." While it's natural to see the situation in that light, there is a better way of looking at things, one which holds the key to finding a solution.

The story is told of a certain *gadol* who was asked by a father of a "problem child" whether he could send that child away to live with another family, as he felt it was just too difficult to deal with him. Why should the other siblings suffer from the boy's bad behavior?

The *gadol* replied: If you're contemplating sending children out, send away your well-functioning children. They can deal with being sent away without being devastated by it. This "problem child" needs you!

When you look at this boy who is causing aggravation and heartache, it's important to see not (just) how difficult he is, but rather how badly he needs you.

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Raising challenging children can be exhausting. The heavy weight of responsibility can feel overwhelming. Having the right perspective can make all the difference. Harav Shimshon Pincus *ztz"l* would say: Parents don't have to be "*moser nefesh*" for their children. Seeing parenting as a sacrifice will only weigh you down. Rather, parents should see it as a mission in life, their calling, to bring up children to be *ehrliche* Yidden.

As an aside, a father or mother who feels that they can't go on any longer without a break, should take that break. This isn't a case of selfishly putting their own needs first and doesn't detract from their dedication to their children. Rather, it's simply another aspect of doing one's best job at raising healthy children.

There's nothing wrong with taking a break from dealing with a challenging child's issues once in a while, and there are creative ways to do so. Parents can go away for a day or two, or have a grandparent invite the child to stay with them for a few days. Of course this should be done in a manner that doesn't suggest that you're trying to get away from your child, and you should certainly never mention needing a break from him.

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Of course, challenging children need more than just not feeling like a burden. They need to be drawn close and given extra time, attention, love, and patience. They need all of that in order to thrive, and they really can thrive when they get what they're missing.

While that will mean giving more to such a child than his siblings are getting, parents must still do their best to avoid the impression of favoritism. This won't be completely possible, but it's often safe to assume that the other siblings, especially older ones, will understand. Of course there will be times when any normal child resents a sibling getting more of anything, but that's usually not so terrible and often just part of family life.

The same concerns apply to a *rebbi* dealing with a difficult *talmid*. Frequently, a *rebbi* will be worried about how the rest of the class will react to the "problem *talmid*" being given special privileges, such as bringing the *rebbi* a drink. I often reassure teachers that the other boys in the class have already figured out what's going on and don't resent the special attention being given as much as one might think.

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That said, it's extremely important that extra time, attention, patience, and love is given in a way that builds up your son, rather than making him feel like even more of a loser.

It's not unusual for children with issues to form a self-image of "failure" which proves very hard to reverse. That's why parents have to find ways to highlight such children's successes, and also reassure them that doing less well in other areas doesn't mean that they are looked down upon.

Parents often find it hard to think up ways of achieving this — especially at tense moments when they're feeling more like giving a punishment than a compliment. The key is to prepare when things are calm, when you're alone and thinking clearly.

The Rebbe Rashab of Lubavitch *ztz"l* would say: "Just as we are commanded to put on *tefillin* every day, we are commanded to spend at least a half an hour each day thinking about our children's *chinuch*." Parents are obligated to take the time and make the effort to come up with the best ways to bring up each of their children, according to their unique needs. Children who are already struggling are even more in need of parents who are prepared to spend the extra few moments every day thinking up ways to build them up so that the challenges they face don't drag them down.

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Approaching *chinuch* in this way often requires parents to totally readjust their way of doing things. It's only natural for a father to respond to these ideas with, "I don't want to be patient and understanding with my son, and take him on nice walks. He should be learning, not wandering around feeling good about doing nothing!" This kind of parent wants what's best for his son no less than a parent who happily spends time doing jigsaw puzzles with his child. It's just that he doesn't realize that "wasting all this time" is what's going to give his child the tools he needs to succeed.

Parents often underestimate the impact their patience, devotion, calm attention, and unconditional love have on their children.

Parents may also resist adopting a new way of doing things due to a mistaken concept of what *chinuch* is. *Chinuch* doesn't mean telling a child what to do, showing him how to do it, reminding him to do it, and punishing him if he fails to follow through. *Chinuch* means instilling in our children the desire and ability to do the right thing.

All children want to please their parents. But not all children are born with the ability to do so. Some children need an extra helping of love and attention to give them the boost to get moving in the right direction. All the "extras" and "wasted time" aren't wasted. They're the fuel these children need to develop the confidence to do the right thing without worrying about failing. That's what real *chinuch* is about — not just guiding our children in the right direction, but also enabling them to move along the right path under their own steam.

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In Pirkei Avos, the Mishnah describes four types of people who go to the *beis medrash*: Those who go to learn and actually learn; those who go to learn but don't learn when they get there; those who don't go to the *beis medrash* but still learn, elsewhere; and those who don't go anywhere and don't learn anything.

The Yaavetz asks why the Mishnah refers to "four types of people who go..." when actually only two of the types go anywhere. He replies that as children, we all go to the *beis medrash* — all children go to *cheider*, to *yeshivah* — but the question is: What happens next?

If you want your child to be among those who "go to learn and actually learn," you have to give them the *cheshek* to learn and the ability to devote themselves to it. For fragile, sensitive

children, that means giving them more love and attention than you give to "non-problem children." That's part of their *chinuch* — that's giving them what they need to thrive.

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This is a lesson that applies in many areas of life. Too many people focus on results and "getting someone to change," when what really matters (and the only thing that works) is enabling the person to make the change for themselves.

Imagine the following scene:

Husband: Why are you always trying to change me?

Wife: I love you, so of course I want what's best for you, and for you to become the best person you can be.

Husband: I thought unconditional love was about accepting a person the way he is.

Wife: Well, I don't know about that. Look at the baby. She's really cute. But do you want her to stay the way she is forever?

Both husband and wife are wrong and right. If you really love someone, you *will* accept them as they are. That doesn't mean that you have to give up on them changing, for the better, but you can't *make* them change. No one can make another person change. All you can do is give them the ability and desire to make the changes for themselves.

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Once you're putting all these ideas into practice and noticing your child gain in confidence and feel more secure, you can and should focus more on what not to tolerate. That's not to say that beforehand you permit any kind of behavior, but you're less likely to have success in enforcing proper boundaries unless there's love and security in the relationship.

What you need is for your son to clearly hear both halves of the message: "You're great — you're doing so well, and I love you so much. And this behavior with your little brother is out-of-bounds."

As for the seven-year-old who's getting the short end of the stick, all you can really do is make sure he knows that you're looking out for him, that you see what's going on, and that you're sticking up for him and protecting him whenever necessary.



It's so important that all our children feel protected by their parents, that we're interested and involved in their lives, and that we take their issues seriously.

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You also asked about a child who comes home reporting being bullied. In any such case, it's even more critical to show him that you want to know what's going on and that you'll be taking all the necessary steps to deal with it.

That means never belittling what a child is enduring, listening with patience and sympathy, and then taking action. If speaking to the *rebbi* hasn't helped, then you may have to speak to the principal. If speaking on the phone isn't enough, you may have to pay a visit to the school and make it absolutely clear that bullying must not be tolerated and that the principal and the *rebbi* are responsible for your child's safety while he's in school.

A child should never lose trust in his parents because they didn't stand up for him.

When it comes to practical advice for the child, it can be more complicated. Teaching a child who's being physically attacked to "just fight back" risks turning the child into someone who is aggressive and doesn't hesitate to use physical force himself.

Instead, tell your child that he should run away and not submit to being bullied. If he can't, he must defend himself as best he can. But the child should never be left to deal with the situation on his own.

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With love, attention, and a great deal of patience, we can expect *be'ezras Hashem* to see our children make the changes they need and begin to thrive. This can take time, but we should never despair — not of our children, and not of ourselves, as parents, either. So much of our investment in our children will only bear fruit years along the line. Sometimes, it can seem that a certain problem just will not resolve itself — and then, suddenly, years later, we realize that it disappeared, all on its own.

Many problems do clear up simply by our children growing up, although that doesn't mean that we can sit back and wait for it to happen. As parents who want the best for our children, we need to make constant effort and invest countless *tefillos* in their success. Hashem should help that we all see the fruits of our labors and have so much *nachas* from all of our children.

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME: CHUKAS 5784

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