

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

CAN OUR CHILDREN BE LIKE OUR GRANDPARENTS?

In this week's *parshah* we learn that if an item that a person was looking after for someone is stolen and not recovered, the person who was looking after the item is obligated to swear that he wasn't the one to perpetrate the crime. The wording of the *passuk* regarding this is: "*Venikrav baal-habayis el-ha'elohim im-lo shalach yado bim'leches rei'eihu*—the homeowner shall approach the judges [to swear] that he has not laid his hand upon his neighbor's property."

The Rebbe R' Meir Premishlaner *ztz"l* uses this *passuk* to reveal a fundamental insight in *avodas Hashem*. He explains: "*Venikrav baal-habayis*—even a *baal-habayis*, a *poshute Yid,* can become close *el-ha'Elokim*—to Hashem, *im-lo shalach yado bim'leches rei'eihu*—as long as he takes care not to harm his fellow man."

Aside from the simple meaning of his words, R' Meir is perhaps also telling us that Hashem allows each and every Jew to achieve *deveikus* according to his abilities. Why should that be? After all, Hashem gave us an entire Torah with many *mitzvos*, none of which are optional — and yet here he seems to be saying that *deveikus* can be achieved even if a person only does what he can and is careful about what's truly important. However, the Gemara tells us that Hashem does not wish to impose great hardships on His creations. Knowing our natures and the *nisyonos* we face, He takes it all into consideration and allows us to please Him based on our capabilities.

If Hashem can be so considerate of us, despite the fact that we owe Him everything and are obligated to serve Him, how much more so must we make allowances for other people who don't owe us anything compared to what we owe Hashem. Although we cannot know conclusively what others are capable of doing and what not, we should give them the benefit of the doubt and assume that if something is truly very hard for them to do, perhaps they are not actually required to do it perfectly (even though they should still try to do their best).

This is an issue that often comes up between spouses, when one very much wants the other to do something and the other seemingly just cannot comply. Accepting other people's limitations applies very much then, just as it does in our interactions with our children, especially as we are explicitly told, "*Chanoch le'naar al pi darko*," to educate each child according to his nature. It's important to recognize when what we want is beyond a person's capabilities, and to refrain from making requests that they might have real difficulty fulfilling.

When we accept that others are just as limited as we are, we'll find it easier to make allowances, to be satisfied with less than perfection, and to make each other much happier.

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Parshas
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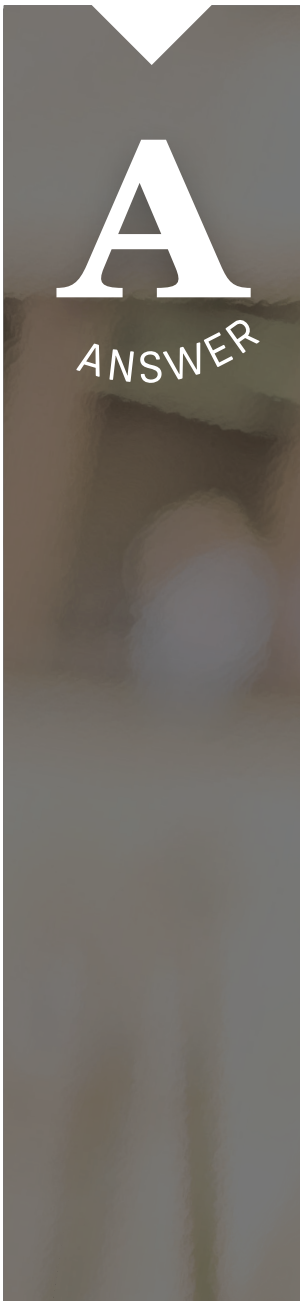
Dear Rabbi Gruen,

I would like to ask a question on *chinuch habanim*. We see in Chazal that Yosef Hatzaddik had a big *nisayon* since Hashem made him so beautiful, and previous generations made a big deal of this, stressing how much we shouldn't try to beautify ourselves or pay too much attention to our appearances.

My question is, how can we talk about this today?

My son used gel to keep his *peyos* tidy when he was younger, but recently he started using it again, even though at this point the other boys in his class don't any longer, as far as I know. He says that this way, they stay nice all day. I'd like to know how to talk to him about Yosef Hatzaddik, how to get him to realize that his appearance really isn't important — and how to give over the *hashkafos* and principles of previous generations to our children.

Thank you



At first glance, this fundamental principle that you mention, of not beautifying oneself or obsessing over one's image, applies to all of us. No one should accord physical beauty so much importance or be preoccupied with his appearance. Certainly in previous generations people seemed to be less concerned about their appearance than many people are today.

The question of how we can instill sensitivity in this issue in ourselves and our children is nonetheless less straightforward than might appear, because beauty is not actually a negative thing. It's not a bad character trait that should be worked on. It's a gift from Hashem, and it really is a gift, because Chazal tell us that in certain areas, beauty is something that contributes to *harchavas hadaas* (as the Gemara teaches with regard to a beautiful wife, home, and *keilim*). Beauty is something real and can be used positively. A *bachur* I was once speaking with mentioned that he feels that due to his unusual good looks, people try to befriend him and copy him. I suggested that perhaps he could utilize this gift that he has, to exert a positive influence on the people who are drawn to him.

Beauty is not, however, something to be sought. Certainly men and *bachurim* should not busy themselves with trying to make themselves physically attractive, and even women should take special care only to beautify themselves appropriately. But if a person is blessed with good looks, it is a blessing. Additionally, everyone, naturally beautiful or not, should always make sure to be presentable. Being unkempt, dirty, or scruffy is certainly no *mitzvah* at all.

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When it comes to teaching our children not to be obsessed with good looks, however, one has to take several factors into consideration. Whereas some children will readily accept such a message, others will find it more of a challenge. Without knowing more details regarding the situation here, it's hard for me to give specific advice, as so much depends on the community,

the family, and the nature of the child. However, I would like to introduce some ideas that are applicable in many situations.

The first thing to bear in mind when dealing with a child is this: He's a child. While challenges in this area of beautifying oneself can also apply to adults, with children, we have to remember that depending on their age, they may not be mature enough to grasp the concept.

By way of an example, no one would tell a five-year-old that playing with a ball is *bittul Torah*, because he can't relate to the idea. The only result of trying to instill concepts that are beyond his grasp is the child feeling bad about himself and getting frustrated and angry. Instead of being motivated to sit down to learn, he'll just internalize the fact that you're not happy with him and feel discouraged about his ability to please you.

It's important to realize that when we make demands of people that are beyond them, it's not just that we'll be disappointed with the lack of results. We may actually end up making things worse. This applies to all aspects of *avodas Hashem*. Some children's books are actually age-graded, because people recognize that a six-year-old, for instance, isn't ready to learn about not envying other children. That doesn't mean that you can't introduce the idea; of course you can, and should. What you shouldn't do is expect the child to implement it right away. *Chinuch* requires a great deal of time and patience.

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In general, *chinuch* doesn't even mean a lecture or a verbal message. A large part of how we are *mechanech* our children is via osmosis. Our children learn most and best from how we live, not what we tell them. They also learn from what we don't do, as well as what we do. If a father, on the way to shul with his son, points excitedly at his neighbor's new car, he's teaching his child what he thinks is important. If he points to a house on the way to shul and says in awe, "Do you know whose house that is? Dayan Cohen, the biggest *talmid chacham* in our neighborhood, lives there!" then he is also imparting a very strong lesson.

I imagine that a parent concerned enough to write about not emphasizing externals certainly sets a personal example in this area. All of us would do well to consider what messages we are conveying to our children even without speaking, to make sure that they're actually getting the message we want them to receive. Children are very perceptive, often far more than their parents realize, and they almost always know what their parents care about and what they think is unimportant or bad.

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Even if we are giving the right messages and setting the right example, however, it still doesn't mean that our children will follow precisely in our footsteps. Perhaps a certain parent naturally doesn't care too much about his external appearance, other than being neat and tidy. That doesn't mean that he won't have a child, or several, who cares very much about his appearance, for any number of reasons. Some children, especially the more sensitive ones, are often quite self-conscious and worried about what others think of them. Trying to get such a child (or adult) to stop caring about being so immaculate is unlikely to be met with much success.

This was true even in previous generations, when many *ehrliche Yidden* (and perhaps even society in general) cared far less about how they looked than we do today. Our grandparents had different *nisyonos*; for them, it wasn't such a big deal to wear a coat of faded material, a hat that had seen better days, and so forth. No normal parent today would expect his child to feel comfortable going to school with large patches on his pants and shirt, but once upon a time, that wasn't anything to get excited about.

If your child is going to a *cheder* where the boys dress in the latest styles, for instance, then you do have to expect your child to want to fit in, and it's not reasonable to demand that he keep to a different standard. If the other boys are dressed in a way you want your child to emulate, then it is reasonable to ask him to do so, and much easier for him to comply. If, for whatever reason, you have no choice but to send him to a school where most boys dress very differently from what you want for your child, then you will have to insist on higher standards. This should be achieved not via demands, but instead by instilling in your child a sense of pride in doing things in a better way.

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We would all like to be doing things in a better way, more like things were "once upon a time." And yet, virtually none of us is living the way our ancestors did. Most of us don't know anyone who breaks the ice on a frozen river to *toivel* before *davening* on a wintry morning. And most of us don't feel bad about not doing that, either.

However much we might long for the old days, when things were simpler, it's just not possible to go back. When it comes to instilling that same longing in our children, however, we have to know how to go about it. If your son waits till a certain *mikveh* opens at seven a.m. because it has warmer water, telling him off and comparing him to your great-great-grandfather who broke a hole in the ice isn't likely to inspire him. On another occasion, you can tell him about Zeide and his *mesirus nefesh* for *tevilah b'mikveh*, but don't expect anything practical to come of it. Maybe your son's *mesirus nefesh* for Yiddishkeit expresses itself in another area entirely.

Do you know what that area is? If not, try to identify it, because most people have a natural inclination toward one or several *mitzvos* which they enjoy doing and where they excel. Giving them a good feeling about what they're doing right is the best way to inspire them to do more things right and those things better.

We really don't have any control over the innate inclinations of our children; we can only hope and *daven* to influence their general attitude toward Torah and *mitzvos*. We must also accept as a fact that our children will, in general, do less of whatever good thing we are doing. A father who learns eight hours a day should expect his sons to learn six, or less. And if your son just learned an hour, of course praise him for what he did and use examples to give him a positive feeling: "Wow, you remind me of my grandfather! Zeide loved to learn, and I can see that you really do, too."



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At the end of the day, you may have to come to terms with the fact that this particular child feels that looking impeccable is important, even though he knows that you don't share his feelings. He's not going to change his nature simply because you call him out on using gel or whatever else he might be doing.

As for the reason he gave for why he wants to use gel in his *peyos*, it's impossible to know whether he's telling the whole truth or not. Perhaps he really does want to spare himself the hassle of tending to his *peyos* throughout the day. And perhaps he is ashamed to tell you how much he cares about how he looks. What I can say is that the natural reaction of anyone when told that they're doing something wrong or not to someone's liking, is to justify it. When we think about it, it's really obvious. Did we really think that when we told a friend, "You really shouldn't do that," they would respond, "You know what? You're right!" But the bigger problem with justification is that the person using it often comes to believe it, himself, even if at first he knows it's only an excuse.

Don't push your child into a corner. Accept his nature just as you accept your own. Understand his limitations, and notice the things he's doing right and focus on them, instead. A gentle approach, lots of positivity and compliments, and setting the right example will help us *besiyatta diShmaya* to bring up our children to serve Hashem *be'simchah*.

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