בס"ד

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

TORAH LESSONS

FOR THE HOME

PARSHAS BAMDIBAR

BRINGING OUT THE BEST IN SENSITIVE CHILDREN

In this week's *parshah*, Bnei Yisrael are counted, and we learn that, "*Veyisyaldu lemishpechosam lebeis avosam*," they were counted according to their patriarchal lineage.

The sefer *Tzitzim Uferachim* brings a *vort* from the Arugas Habosem, based on the Midrash which relates that when the Yidden were *mekabel* the Torah, the other nations became jealous and angry that the Jews were getting preferential treatment. Hashem silenced them by saying, "Show me your lineage as they did. Who are your ancestors compared to their ancestors?" It is because of our ancestry that we deserve to receive the Torah. Why would that be?

When it comes to secular wisdom, each succeeding book tries to disprove the theories of those that came before it. Each scientist, artist, inventor tries to prove that he understands things better than anyone has before. In a sense, they're right, because the secular world does advance in many ways as new technology supersedes old; however, this is the exact opposite approach to Torah wisdom.

When we learn Torah, each of the *mefarshim* seeks to understand what came before, not to undermine it. What did the Tanna mean? What were the Rishonim saying? We know that we are so far removed from their greatness that we have to struggle to grasp their teachings. And if we don't succeed in understanding, we accept that *lo zachinu lehavin*, we didn't merit to. It's obvious that we're trying to build on what came before.

That's how Torah works. Torah works with a *yichus*, a lineage, a connection to those who preceded us. When we presented our *sefer hayichus* showing our ancestry, we demonstrated our connection to the past and thereby proved that we are deserving of the Torah. The nations of the world don't connect to their lineage. They can't connect to the Torah either.

When it comes to *chinuch*, we have to remember that we're not here just to *teach* children. We can teach children knowledge and skills, but that isn't *chinuch*. It's even possible to teach something we can't do ourselves if we know how to give over the instructions. But when it comes to Torah and *mesorah*, it's not enough to teach. If you don't do something yourself, not only is it wrong, but it's not going to work. *Chinuch* is transmitting our *mesorah* in such a way that our children see that we are part of the chain and themselves want to be part of it.

As we approach *Kabbalas HaTorah*, we have to remember that *we* are accepting the Torah and showing what has to be done, and only then can we try to inspire our children to do it right as well.

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THANK YOU FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION, AND TIZKU LMITZVOS!

QUESTION

DEAR RABBI GRUEN,

We listen to your lectures on TorahAnytime. Thank you for bringing clarity into my life!

We need advice on how to handle our child's controlling nature. It's making things very hard for us and for him as well. In general, he's complicated and confusing to us. Just a few examples for you to understand what I mean:

If I wake him in the morning, he'll throw a tantrum and close all the lights. But if he wakes up early, he might surprise me and dress himself.

If a sibling has something that he doesn't have, he'll aggressively grab it for himself. But if one of the kids asks him for something "nicely enough," he'll share even things that would have been hard for him.

If one of the kids doesn't notice him entering the house after school, he might later ignore him/her with the excuse that "she didn't tell me hello so I won't answer her now."

He has a beautiful nature, but only if he's leading. I want to bring out his potential. How do we go about it? I know he's still young, but this can be a real problem in adulthood. Thanks so much.

ANSWER

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN RESPONDS

The description of this child makes me think that your son is not so much a "controlling" child but rather a sensitive child, which I refer to as a UV personality, who does very well when he feels good about himself, but finds it very hard to handle things when he doesn't feel so good.

Of course all children are hypersensitive, especially in comparison to adults. All children are much more emotional and less logical than adults. If a parent notices illogical or unreasonable behavior in a child, they should understand that it's *emotional* behavior, which is relatively normal for children, and simply has to do with how the child is feeling. It may not make sense or be nice, but it's based on emotions.

Beyond this, there are children — and adults too, for that matter — who are inherently more sensitive. This adds intensity to how they feel. In a child, this will create a double hypersensitivity that doesn't respond well to logic or rational thinking.

In my book *Get Along With Everyone* I discuss at length the various characteristics of this nature and the best ways to interact with a sensitive person, but here I'll try to come up with a more general five-step formula that can be helpful with such children.

1. Acknowledge the good

Let's start with the *yemin mekareves*. Praise the good aspects. This child is doing many good things. He's dressing himself — sometimes. Sometimes he shares with his siblings too. He has a lot to offer. These good aspects may not be consistent, may not be good enough, and compared to other children may not even seem *so* good at all (maybe he takes a very long time getting dressed, or turns his closet upside-down in the process), but you should still acknowledge them. Don't be afraid that he'll become satisfied with a low level of good. Children know what's good and what's better. Praise whatever good he does, and hopefully it will lead to more.

When you praise your child, generalize the good. Instead of saying, "This morning you got dressed so nicely," you can say, "You are a boy who gets dressed so nicely!" "You share so nicely with other people!" Praise the child himself, and let him identify with the good within him, not just the good thing he did that one time.

Praising a child can be tricky. Not all children know how to take it, and some may dismiss or reject a generalized compliment, and refuse to accept that you're being genuine. If that happens, you should revert to praising the specific behavior. "You shared that toy so nicely." "You got dressed so fast this morning." Don't kill a compliment with a qualifier: "If you could share your crayons today, why do you sometimes…" When you compliment, don't talk about the past or mention what you would like to see in the future.

It's easy for such children to fall into the "I'm anyway no good," feeling, or to despair of ever pleasing you. Sensitive children often get stuck in black-and-white thinking. They're either *very* good and feel you appreciate *everything* they do, or — if you even once show that you don't appreciate something — they feel you don't appreciate anything at all. They think they're the worst and that you hate them.

You may give the child six compliments and three words of criticism, and in your child's mind, you never compliment him and you hate him. If you want your child to believe that you see his good aspects, your ratio should be closer to 9:1. That's why praising the good is the most important thing for such a child.

2. Ignore the bad

Some things can be completely ignored. If a child closes the lights, it can be stressful and frustrating, but that's an example of something you can choose to overlook. Don't just *not* react. Realize that it's nothing major, even if it's wrong for him to do it. If you emphasize the good and overlook the bad, it transforms the atmosphere, and your child won't feel that he did so many bad things that day.

If he did something that can't be overlooked, try to stay with the *least reinforcing reaction*. If you get frustrated or give in, you're showing that his negative behavior worked. Subconsciously, he's trying to get something out of his negative behavior. Your reactions may show him that it's working and he'll do more of it. The least reinforcing reaction is staying calm and paying the least attention you can.

3. Preempt the difficulties

If you know that a negative behavior might be triggered because it's happened in the past, don't wait for it to happen again. It's hard to deal with a child who's already worked up and emotionally challenged. It's important to avoid what can be avoided, and often this can be achieved by figuring out the patterns. It's a shame to keep falling into the same predictable difficulties if being a few steps ahead could help everyone deal with things in a more logical manner, when they're less emotionally worked up.

If you can tell your son in advance, "I like it when you get dressed in the morning even before I ask you to. If you do that tomorrow, I'll give you a treat," that makes it easier for your child to comply because he's not yet feeling challenged. It also leaves you the option of giving him a reward. But if you wait till the morning when he's already screaming and you tell him that you'll give him a candy if he stops, you're rewarding bad behavior.

4. Deal with the intolerable

Enforcing consequences is not a method of controlling children to make sure they do what you want. Consequences teach children what's okay and what's not. You don't need to impose a consequence for shutting the light, but you should do something if he breaks the window.

If you know in advance that something specifically intolerable may happen, you can let your child know what the specific consequence will be. "If you do X, Y will happen."

Talk about it at a time when the child is calm, not during the challenge itself. And if you said you'll do something, do it. Don't threaten a consequence you can't or won't carry out, such as, "I won't take you along on the family trip."

If possible, a consequence should be cause-and-effect. If a child breaks the window, you may use his savings to pay for the repair. The more related the consequence is, the more your child will internalize the impact of his behavior.

5. Understand your child's nature

It's okay for a child to be a natural leader. It's okay for a child to enjoy getting attention. You don't always have to give it and the child is not always justified in the way he's asking for it, but it's important not to try to change his nature. (But don't allow him to be a leader at the expense of others or by hurting others.)

Even if a particular aspect of a child's nature presents him with challenges, the solution is not to try to alter his nature. Instead, try to resolve the issue by working *with* his nature, and as you do so, teach him how to use his unique strengths to overcome his specific challenges. Be realistic: You won't solve a tense person's anxieties by telling him to become calm. It doesn't work and he'll just become disillusioned. Work along with nature. This is the essence of *chanoch le'naar al pi darko.*

And never compare the child to anyone else. "Why is it only you who…?" "Why can't you be like…?" This is damaging for any child, but even more so for sensitive children.

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Chinuch is not about short-term results, nor is it about restricting or changing your child. It's about him learning and growing into the person he can become, with all his unique potential, and therefore *chinuch* requires lots of patience and perseverance. You have to let things happen, even as you remain focused on the goal and doing the right thing.

As much as the focus is on the long term, it's important not to get anxiety-ridden about what might happen in the future. The current behavior may resolve itself simply with the passage of time. Be calm and patient and work along with the child's age and nature.

Another important point I often mention to parents when dealing with a *chinuch* challenge is to be careful to avoid turning it into a *shalom bayis* issue. Sometimes, when parents disagree on the best approach to take, it makes it harder for the child. A child shouldn't get the impression that, "This doesn't work on Totty, but I can get Mommy to…"

When parents are on the same page with regard to the needs of their children, everything goes so much more smoothly. If they're not on the same page, they should work on getting there.

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And finally, never underestimate the importance of a parent's relationship with his child, regardless of how challenging it may seem. I recently dealt with a painful situation where a *melamed* told a child that he shouldn't be so close to his parents and that the *melamed* could do more for him and be there for him. He caused a lot of damage. Prior to this, the child had had a good relationship with his parents, and knew they believed in him. He was even able to admit to them when he did something wrong. But afterward, he became more *chutzpah'dig* and far less accepting of their ideas, and stopped sharing with them. No friend, therapist, or any well-meaning person should underestimate the importance of a healthy parent-child relationship for the growth of the child.

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

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