

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

CARING FOR THOSE UNDER YOUR CARE

Yisro arrived in the camp of Bnei Yisrael shortly after Kriyas Yam Suf and it was then that Moshe Rabbeinu related to him everything that had happened since they left Mitzrayim and how Pharaoh and the Egyptians had been punished. In response, Yisro exclaimed: "Now I know that Hashem is greater than all the gods...!"

Why only "now"? Rashi explains that Yisro was saying that while he had already recognized Hashem's greatness, now he saw it even more than before.

The *Imrei Noam* reads an additional meaning into these words. He explains that the nations of the world only do *teshuvah* when prompted by *tzaros*, as we see from the *makkos* in Mitzrayim and later, events in Ninveh. When times are good and food is plentiful, instead of being grateful they pursue empty and even evil lives and only improve their ways when forced to. Not so the Yidden; Yisro noticed how they served Hashem with such dedication despite their lives of comfort. The Dor De'ah had all their needs met, and yet their level of connection to Hashem was firm. They didn't require discomfort or punishment to cause them to turn to Him. "Now," when everything was calm and their enemies had been defeated, the Yidden did not slacken in their *avodas Hashem* — instead, they enhanced it, and this was what so impressed Yisro.

Unfortunately, Hashem often does have to wake people up and prompt them to do *teshuvah* via *tzaros*. While that may be the method that finally succeeds in reaching them, this doesn't mean that when we see a fellow Yid struggling in life, whether with emotional or physical difficulties, we should leave them to flounder. Our response should always be to help them extricate themselves from their plight rather than to help them cope with it.

Encouraging someone to endure a painful reality rather than try to improve things is almost always wrong. Few situations are truly so hopeless that they leave no option other than to accept the pain and suffering.

When it comes to caring for our children, these guidelines are even more pertinent as our children rely on us to help and protect them. When the great Rebbe R' Zusha was stuck in the mud, he cried out to Hashem to save him: "Ribbono shel Olam, I know I am stuck in the mud because I need to do *teshuvah* — but I can't do *teshuvah* while I'm stuck in the mud, so please, take me out!" If R' Zusha needed help to extricate himself from the mud, how much more so do we?

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Parshas
Yisro
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Q QUESTION

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

My fourteen-year-old daughter (who is very popular and well-liked) had a bully in her class all of last year. Throughout the year my wife guided her to keep her distance whenever possible and gave her emotional support and encouragement whenever it was necessary. We had thought that the bully was going to camp in the second half of vacation and my daughter in the first half so we didn't make sure that they wouldn't be in the same bunk.

It turned out that both girls went during the first half, and not only that — the bully asked to be with my daughter and her request was fulfilled. My daughter called home the second night of camp crying hysterically that she feels invisible, that no one looks at her because the bully turned the rest of the bunk against her. The staff at camp admitted that all the other girls from their class asked not to be in the bully's bunk but since they heard that my daughter could deal with it, they placed them together. They said that they can switch my daughter to another bunk but my daughter doesn't want to change (probably because she is worried how others will see it). My wife tried to get the camp to switch the bully into another bunk but was so far unsuccessful.

I suggested to my wife that she should try to convince my daughter to switch bunks and to reassure her that she will be well-liked and not pitied. Was that the right advice or is there a better way to deal with this?

Thank you



A ANSWER

Bullying is unfortunately not unusual and it is the bully who needs to be dealt with. A victim should never be expected to endure the situation, figure out how to neutralize a bully, or how to stand up for himself, especially when a child is concerned.

At the same time, it's also important for parents to assess the situation from more than a single perspective. A fourteen-year-old can usually be relied upon to describe a situation fairly accurately and I don't doubt that your daughter truly is suffering. When a child is well-liked and well-adjusted, there's little reason to question whether the victim is in some way contributing to the bullying. However, in general it's good to be aware that things aren't always as black-and-white as they can seem, especially as bullying is not confined to the childhood years and unhealthy patterns can persist over decades if they are not broken.

What one person sees as bullying and manipulation, another can interpret as simply standing up for one's rights. Sensitive children (and adults) may perceive snubs and coldness where none exist; furthermore,

many people who are sensitive to their own feelings are less sensitive to the feelings of others and may fail to realize how their own behavior contributes to a painful dynamic.

Therefore, a parent dealing with a child being bullied (or one accused of bullying) should do their best to find out what's going on from impartial sources, of course without giving their child the impression that they don't trust their account of things. Even if they are exaggerating, this is rarely done deliberately and at the end of the day, their feelings are real regardless of the objective circumstances surrounding them.

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In your case, the situation is complicated by your daughter being away from home, which makes her far more vulnerable. The support you and your wife gave her throughout the year may have enabled her to deal with the situation without too much distress or lasting damage, but when she's in camp, things are very different.

When a child comes home from school upset at something that happened a few hours previously, it's relatively easy to comfort them, help them see things in a proper perspective (if appropriate), and give them the support they need to walk back into the school setting the next day. When the child is at camp, all of that is missing — it's simply not possible to provide what they need during a telephone call, and they may not even have the privacy they need to make that call and spill out their feelings.

This is why it's not enough to offer support and sympathy and why something practical has to be done, even though some may wonder why a situation that was tolerated for an entire year has suddenly become intolerable after just a few days at camp.

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It takes (at least) two to create a bullying situation, and those two people need to be dealt with effectively in order to solve the problem.

All too often, people focus only on the perceived weaker link — the victim — demanding that they change to accommodate the bully's behavior. Often, people do this without realizing how wrong and harmful it is; they prefer not to admit to themselves that they are letting the bully off the hook because they just don't know how to stop them behaving as they do. It's so much easier to tell someone to be *dan lechaf zechus* than it is to change another person's behavior, and this can result in the victim feeling pressured to forgive (and keep on forgiving) even when the bully shows no remorse and sometimes continues to inflict pain.

When staff act in this way, it is an abdication of responsibility. In a camp situation, just as in a school, the adults in charge have an obligation to care for all the children under their protection and should never whitewash problems by persuading children to keep quiet and put up with torment. Meanwhile, the parents are also obligated to do what they can to protect their children. When parents are too passive or hesitant to demand action, staff may avoid dealing with a complicated situation and prefer to let it ride until the end of the season. Conversely, when parents are too aggressive about demanding the form of action they feel is needed, staff may resent being told what to do and resist. I mention this not to justify the staff's response — they remain obligated to do their best for all the campers — but to point out the best way to approach things. As in many areas in life, finding the right balance is what brings the best results.

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Therefore, if it seems that the best way to address this particular situation is to have the bully rather than your daughter removed to another bunk, you and your wife should discuss this with the staff. Don't make demands of them, or try to dictate how they deal with the situation, as that alone can cause resistance. But you should question why the victim should have to "admit defeat," and point out that the bully should pay the penalty for her behavior, not your daughter. If you have other suggestions to offer you may do so

gently, and it's also worthwhile to thank them for being willing to help.

Meanwhile, you should certainly continue to support your daughter and help her to see the bully as someone who lacks insight into her own behavior and doesn't realize how poor her *middos* are. This doesn't mean that she should be encouraged to play a part in healing the bully and it certainly doesn't mean that she should be told how her behavior "contributed" to the situation; that would be unreasonable and often extremely unfair. However, she can certainly be helped to see the situation in a more accurate light and to realize that it is less about her weakness and more about the bully's.

Most bullies are essentially weak characters with low self-confidence who think that they will feel better if they aggrandize themselves at another's expense. In the long-term, their tactics almost always fail.

This is why, while a bully must be reprimanded, they also need to be built up in healthy ways if they are going to change. An approach that focuses solely on the negative is unlikely to have positive consequences.

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With all that said, there almost always is something in the victim that marks them as victim-material. Even though your daughter is well-liked, there may very well be some reason why she has apparently been singled out for over a year for this horrible treatment. Frequently, it is the sensitive children who are singled out as easy targets. Well-meaning parents often try to make such children less sensitive, but this is a project doomed to failure. Sensitivity is innate; it's a trait that persists throughout life. What parents can and should do instead is enhance their children's resilience. This is achieved not by telling them to care less or not take things to heart, but rather by giving them constant and realistic praise, helping them to see their strengths, and never giving them the impression that they are to blame for being bullied because they are "too sensitive."

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Even though a fourteen-year-old child may seem like a young adult in many ways, they are still far too young to face life on their own. In fact, it's not reasonable to expect anyone, child or adult, to simply tolerate a damaging situation when it could be remedied. Just as we don't tell someone living in a house with a leaky roof to buy buckets and thank Hashem for the *nisayon* of the cold and damp, we don't tell people being bullied to put up with it and love the perpetrator.

Doing so would be a betrayal of our responsibility to help a fellow Yid, and how much more so when it's a child, and even more so, your own child, for whose wellbeing you are responsible. May we all have the wisdom and insight to know how to address such situations and to provide our children with safe and nurturing environments as they grow.



TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME: YISRO 5786

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