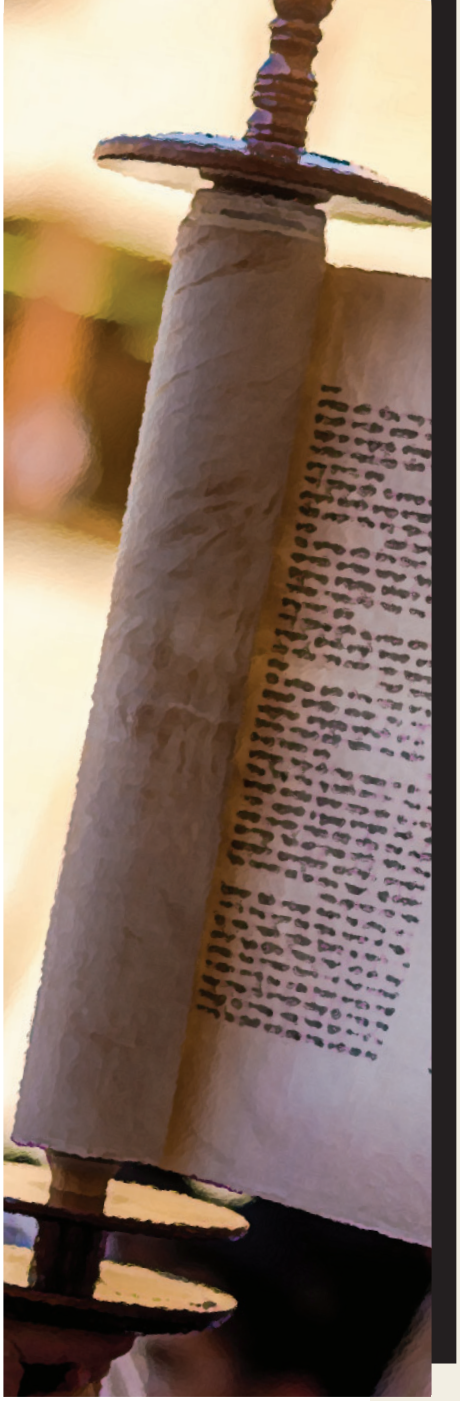


RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

LITTLE PEOPLE IN THE BIG PICTURE

Parshas Vayikra begins with Hashem calling to Moshe Rabbeinu, but with Hashem's Name missing: "*Vayikra el-Moshe*..." The Meor Einayim comments that the small "*aleph*" at the end of "*vayikra*" hints at Hashem's presence as He hides Himself and only provides hints of His constant involvement in our lives.

Once we start to seek out the "*aleph*," the *Alupho shel Olam* (Hashem), He responds by showing us His presence more clearly, as the *passuk* continues: "And Hashem spoke *to him* from the Ohel Moed, saying..."

Finding Hashem in our lives can mean many things. The Meor Einayim gives an example of the times when we were about to do something wrong and "something" (Hashem) prevented us from being able to go ahead. Once we realize that Hashem is communicating with us constantly, it becomes so much easier to accept the things that happen, the things people say and do, and all the challenges that we face.

Aside from the importance of finding Hashem's "underlying" presence in every aspect of our lives, it's important to get used to understanding things on a deeper level than they appear at first glance. Within our homes, trying to figure out the underlying message can help improve interpersonal relationships. This is especially important when it comes to our children, who often don't have the ability to tell us clearly what is really bothering them on a day when they're unusually grumpy or disobedient. Once we start looking beneath the surface, we can solve the problems at their source, with Hashem's (now noticeable) help, without getting distracted and frustrated at the superficial symptoms.

This week's essay
is kindly sponsored by

Elli Wagner

לזיכוי הרבים



Dear Rabbi Gruen,

I've listened to many of your *shiurim*, and you often teach that parents who keep trying the same methods with their children and don't see success, should look for different ways of doing things.

I have a question about children under the age of five. I think most people realize that when it comes to a two-year-old, for instance, if the child runs into the street, or tries to play with fire, a normal parent will give that child a potch rather than an explanation of why the behavior is wrong.

Also, most people know that giving a potch does work, whereas an explanation might not. So why do so many people say that slapping a child is wrong or old-fashioned? I'm not suggesting that parents should be hitting their kids all the time to make them behave, but in cases where the child won't obey and something has to be done about it NOW, one potch can do the trick and is that so bad?

Also, don't you agree that there is a certain type of child who just won't understand any other language (such as charts, rewards, punishments, time-out, or explanations)? Some children just won't "get it" until they get that potch. So why is giving that potch only okay in extreme or dangerous situations if it generally works?

Your response would be much appreciated,

Thank you very much.



It's true that it's important to look for methods that work rather than getting stuck in the same failed methods for months or years, and I try to stress this point often. It's also important, however, to understand what "working" means, before looking for methods that achieve one's goals.

If a person has a specific, limited (short-term) goal in mind, then looking for a method that brings you closer to that goal is sensible. *Chinuch*, however, is something entirely different. The goal of *chinuch* is not obedience or getting our children to do any number of little tasks such as making their beds in the morning. The purpose of *chinuch* is that our children grow up to be *ehrliche* Yidden who serve Hashem out of love, and develop into the best version of themselves while doing just that. Obedience (mainly to Hashem, and as a byproduct of that, to parents too) is only part of that, but there's much more to it in the scheme of things.

That's why if a child, for example, keeps forgetting to make *brachos* before eating, the correct response really is to keep reminding them over and over again... until it finally becomes ingrained. Giving a potch (even if it worked in this instance) would be wrong, because the child would

only be learning to make *brachos* out of fear (of us), and that's certainly not what we want.

It's normal for children to keep forgetting to do the right thing and to need many months and even years of reminders and encouragement and prizes. Parents need to be incredibly patient, but once we realize that this is totally normal, it becomes easier to accept that instant results are not part of the scheme.

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Using positive reinforcement is hard work, of course, and there are also areas where it seems that even if a potch isn't warranted, some form of "tough love" might work better than incentives and compliments. This is something we encounter in many types of relationships.

Let me use an example from within marriage. A husband might tell a friend, "I'm such a good husband — I give my wife everything she wants, I listen to her and make time for her... and she still doesn't do xyz. I figured that this Mr. Nice Guy isn't working, so from now on, I'm not doing that anymore, and maybe she'll finally realize that she can't get away with (not cooking supper/being late for everything...)."

It's understandable if someone becomes extremely frustrated at repeated unacceptable behavior and decides that from now on, there will be negative repercussions. However, it's often not a logical or correct conclusion.

Treating one's spouse lovingly is something we should do at all times, regardless of how they behave. That doesn't mean that we should ignore unacceptable behavior. But we can continue to treat people correctly and also learn how not to let them walk all over us.

When it comes to *chinuch*, parents who have tried all the types of positive incentives for a specific behavior they are trying to encourage or eliminate, and have seen no success, might easily become discouraged and give up. The right answer isn't necessarily to switch to "tough love," however. It might be "more patience," or a different type of incentive. It could also be a potch, but with the loving relationship remaining unchanged.

In fact, it's essential that the underlying loving relationship remains unchanged, because children (in fact, everyone) need the love in order to be able to accept the criticism, as we learn from the *brachos* that Yaakov Avinu gave to the Shevatim. Even though some of the Shevatim were reprimanded, they were all given *brachos* first, to enable them to accept the critique. This certainly applies to our children.

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Of course, there is a time and a place for a potch, and anyone who says that a potch is never justified is contradicting Chazal who explicitly say otherwise.

But Chazal also caution us to take into account the reaction of a child to a potch before giving it. This is true of any method but much more so with a potch. Chazal stress that a parent should not strike an older child, and the *meforshim* add that the temperament of the child must also be taken into account, even before they officially become over-age for the potch. Even if the child is still young, if you know that a potch will be counterproductive, don't give it.

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Another thing to consider before giving a potch is whether the behavior you are trying to stop is truly dangerous, or just wrong and frustrating. If a child has grabbed someone's cookie, for instance, and refuses to give it back, it's not urgent for you to hit him to get him to obey you. Nothing terrible will happen if he quickly stuffs the cookie into his mouth and it takes another few months (or years) to really grasp the idea that "mine is mine and yours is yours."

In genuinely dangerous situations, of course, a potch is definitely a valid response. But regardless of which consequence is called for, ideally, a child will know in advance that doing A will lead to B. This means, of course, that A *always* leads to B, even if the parent is too tired to implement the set

consequence or is feeling indulgent and inclined to give the child a pass "just this once." It also means that if the child is doing something that isn't A, then B *isn't* indicated, even if the parent is tired, distracted, or frustrated.

A potch given in anger is almost certain to be out of place, because an angry parent is out of control and incapable of judging whether the potch is warranted. If you know (or assume) that when you calm down, you're going to regret that potch, don't give it.

In general, when it comes to consequences and punishments, aside from making sure they're outnumbered by positive messages and vibes, it's important to be consistent. If a child knows when to expect a given punishment as well as why he is getting it, even if he doesn't agree, at least it isn't confusing and will often not be taken personally. However, if there's no clarity or predictability, your child will almost certainly end up hurt, which will take you further from your *chinuch* goals.

My intention is not to discourage any specific method of discipline, but rather to clarify how to ensure that the message and desired results are achieved. It's a shame when not only the child is confused but also the parent, who ends up grasping at the tool that will bring the fastest short-term results without stopping to consider whether his response was warranted or the after-affects and subtle messages were actually those he wanted to convey.



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In *chinuch*, as in so many areas of life, it's easy to get swallowed up by the little picture. A child is being *chutzpadig*, the bedroom's untidy, the trash wasn't taken out… Getting angry and frustrated when we put in so much effort and don't see results is natural, but there are things we can do to help.

One of the things we can do is look for the background features that we aren't always aware of, but which do so much to set the scene.

The trash wasn't taken out even though you specifically asked your son to empty it? There's probably a reason. Maybe he was worried about an upcoming test and rushed off to *cheder* and forgot. Maybe he could use a cup of cocoa and a smile rather than a lecture on being more responsible.

Your daughter came home from school and started fighting with her little brother? First separate them, and then ask her how her day was, and maybe you'll find out that her best friend isn't her best friend anymore.

When we look for the big picture instead of getting distracted by the details, and remind ourselves that it's none other than Hashem Who is painting that picture for us, we'll find it much easier to improve our relationships with our children and spouses, and to invite *siyatta diShmaya* into our homes.

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME: VAYIKRA 5784

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