RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

Parshas Chukas

It's all from Hashem

In this week's Parsha, Hashem tells Moshe Rabbeinu to craft the image of a seraph, or serpent, and place it on a tall stick, so that people will be able to see it. The word "seraph" has the same root as the word "burn". The word used for a tall stick "Nes" can also mean "miracle". The holy Rebbe of Lublin interprets this in his *sefer* Zos Zikaron, to teach that we are to serve Hashem with a fire, a passion, a *bren*, but we should know that the ability to do so is a miracle.

When a person serves Hashem with enthusiasm but ascribes this fact to his own achievement, others who look at him might be tempted to say, "Oh, he? He's a *tzaddik*! I will never be on his level!" But when a person is humble and knows that even the fervor in his *avodah* is also thanks to Hashem, then others will sense that humility and be more tempted to try to reach the same level as him. After all, they might also be granted the same divine assistance to be able to do so.

This idea is so pertinent when it comes to raising children. We put so much effort into our children. We learn, we read, we listen, we ask questions. We all try to be the very best parents that we can possibly be. But we must remember that the results, whether good or not, are all from Hashem.

I was recently talking to someone who was telling me that he was discussing a problem he was having with one of his children with a certain Rav who he was close with, but he really has trouble accepting his advice because this Rav himself also has a child who is struggling. We must understand that even though people may put in tremendous effort, it's still all from Hashem and cannot be changed by our best efforts! And yet we're taught that despite the seeming contradiction, we still need to put in the effort and try our very best, while believing that it's all from above. All the time relying only on Hashem and not on our efforts.

As responsible and caring parents we definitely have to do our utmost for our children, and never shirk the responsibility and privilege of being the best parents we can. Ultimately, though, we should be comforted with the knowledge that Hashem is the Only One in charge.

Question:

Dear Rabbi Gruen

Thank you for your classes. I find them very helpful.

I have an issue with my four-and-a-half-year-old daughter. For the past two summers she has been complaining about going to day camp. She comes home miserable and claims she doesn't like it. She finds many reasons not to go, she claims it isn't fun, and says she just wants to stay home. She is also scared when we leave her there.

When we talk about going to the country, she begs us to just stay home in the city. She doesn't like to be there. What can we do about this?

Answer:

I'll start off with a general and common challenge that comes up in parenting. It is sometimes difficult to come to terms with the fact that our children form their own opinions and have their own will. This is especially true when they get older, and do things that we oppose when they should know better.

If we would be completely honest with ourselves, though, aren't there things that we do that our parents disapprove of? That does not mean that we shouldn't be teaching our children right from wrong or letting them know what we expect from them, but we do have to realize that at some point in time they become independent individuals. We will not always be able to force the issue.

Obviously though, this usually doesn't begin until around the time of adolescence. When it comes to the younger set, we can technically *make them* do what we want. We need to be mindful, though, that even a very young child, who is not necessarily her own person yet, cannot and should not always be controlled.

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One of the reasons for your child's refusal might be that she is simply not ready for day camp yet. She was only 2 ½ years old when she first experienced day camp! It is not at all abnormal for a child this age to still want to hang around her mommy as much as possible and to be intimidated by the big wide world that day camp represents

to her. Even though many, many kids her age are perfectly fine doing it, it could be that she simply needs a bit more time to grow up.

This can be said in any situation where you might be expecting of your child something that he or she has not yet grown into. Some kids take longer than others to be ready for things their peers find effortless, and we need to give them more time. We sometimes get impatient when a child is a bit slower to acclimate to something others the same age have already achieved, without realizing that the range of "normal" in this area definitely leaves time and space for this child to get there on her own pace.

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Another possibility to your daughter's resistance might be that your child has experienced something disturbing that is causing these feelings. Any time your child seems reluctant to do a normal, age-appropriate activity, it pays to investigate the matter and see if there might be something else going on that he or she is not telling you. Often, the answer is simple and easy to solve, so long as you ask the question.

I once had someone tell me about a problem he was having with his child in the middle of the winter. After some probing, it turned out that this kid was bullied during the summer and that was when the problem developed. Many months later, with the bullying not having been addressed, the problem was still ongoing. If taken seriously back then, the problem may very well have been nipped in the bud.

Maybe your daughter has been bothered by other children or she is afraid to make new friends. Maybe there was a traumatic incident or maybe she is simply not in her comfort zone. I'm not implying that there must be some horrific situation going on behind the scenes that demands you do detective work to get to the bottom of, and I generally don't believe in always assuming there are bigger underlying problems that must be taking place behind the scenes. I'm just suggesting that you might consider digging just a bit deeper to see if there's something going unnoticed, as it would be wise to find out. Pushing her to do it anyway, without taking the time to figure out why she is feeling this way, will probably not improve matters.

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It could also be that your daughter is overall a very sensitive child, which might cause her to be very fragile and "break" from things which wouldn't cause a problem at all for other children. While this may not be obvious because some ultra-sensitive kids actually cover up their fragility by becoming obnoxious and rebellious or bullies themselves, leaving much of their own sensitivities to go unnoticed. But at the same time their innate sensitivity may lead to acute insecurity and to always need their mother or father around to protect them.

If this is indeed the case, you can't fight it. It probably doesn't just manifest in the day camp issue, and you need to figure out a way to get through to her anytime there is a similar occurrence. Forcing her to do things that she is uncomfortable doing or trying to reason with her is futile. Instead, you need to be aware of the situation and deal with it in a very gentle way.

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There's another idea worth mentioning, which I refer to as the Push vs. Pull theory. When we want our children to do something, we can either push them towards it or pull them towards it. It is always better to entice our children to do what we want from them, or have something or someone from the day camp - in this example - attract them to come, instead of pushing them into it. With the right encouragement, motivation, or even incentive, you might be able to convince your child to comply.

Incentives don't always have to be used, but there are times when that is the only thing

that will work. It doesn't even have to mean buying your child a fancy prize or expensive toy. It could be any way that convinces your child to want to go. Maybe a smile, an extra cuddle, or a genuine compliment will do the trick. Perhaps you can buy her a pack of nosh to share with her classmates that will help her find favor in their eyes. Perhaps a call or some special attention from the teacher can make it more attractive and tempting to join. It doesn't have to happen every day, but every once in a while, you might want to consider giving her that extra little something to make her want to go.

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Having said that, the line needs to be drawn when her refusal to go causes your own schedule to be messed up. If it causes you to be stuck at home or unable to get your tasks done, then it might be considered an infringement on your personal boundaries.

Sometimes it's best - for you and the child - to tell your child that while you understand that she very much does not want to go to day camp, and that it's okay, she doesn't have to, yet because you'll be out today, she can't stay at home, either. You can offer for her to go to Bubby's house or a neighbor's house, but she should know that nobody will be home to watch her. Don't make her feel like you're trying to get back at her, just that you are simply unable to accommodate her request.

It is unhealthy for children to know that anytime they decide on a caprice, you will drop everything and come running to their aid – barring genuine emergencies, of course. You need to set healthy boundaries for your child, but still exude an understanding of their struggles.

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Some people might not understand why it is necessary to expend so much effort to try and convince a young child such as this to do something. Why not just shove them out the door? They'll cry once or twice, and then they'll be fine! Sometimes, that may be true and the child will indeed get over it with a little bit of tough love. But other times, the problem persists and the parents still do not let up. They might even think they're successful. After all, how can a four-year-old resist parental force? However, these parents need to be cognizant of the fact that their success might not be long lived. Coercing a child into something might backfire and a small issue might balloon into a much bigger problem. Especially with those ultra sensitive and fragile souls who tend to struggle with facing the big wide world and end up being forced most.

Parents should not twist into a pretzel every time their child wants something from them, but they still need to do their due diligence to find out if the child has a legitimate concern. After taking into consideration your child's age, developmental level, and unique temperament, you will b'ezras Hashem be able to come up with an approach to positively pull your child towards what you want from her.

Wishing you all the best,
Rabbi Shimon Gruen

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME: CHUKAS 5781

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