RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

TORAH LESSONS

FOR THE HOME

PARSHAS TERUMAH

NORMAL PROBLEMS

When the Torah lists the items donated for the building of the Mishkan, gold, silver, and copper are mentioned first, giving the impression that the list was compiled in order of value. However, the precious gems (the *avnei shoham* and *avnei milu'im*) are listed at the end, even though they are more precious than gold and silver.

The Sar Shalom of Belz offers an explanation, quoting the *passuk*, *"Hein Kel Kabir lo yimas tefillas rabim* — Hashem will not reject the prayers of a multitude." He notes that in general, a joint effort is valued more than the efforts of an individual. In the case of the Mishkan, most of the donations were made by the *tzibbur*, and they are listed in order of value: gold, silver, and copper. The precious gems, however, were offered by individual *nesi'im* and are listed separately. In a similar vein, the *avnei shoham*, which list six *shevatim* on each of them, are mentioned before the *avnei milu'im,* which only have one *shevet* written on each one. That is the *chashivus* of *achdus*.

Another important lesson along the same lines can be derived from the manner in which the donations were given. Just as gold given by a large number of people is valued above diamonds given by an individual, so too gold given with enthusiasm is prized above diamonds given reluctantly. The *nesi'im* postponed their donation, whereas the rest of the nation donated with excitement at their first opportunity.

A husband can buy his wife the most expensive jewelry, and a woman can treat her husband to the most scrumptious delicacies, and they might not accomplish nearly as much as a person who spent less money, time, and energy but invested heart and feeling into something that they gave with a smile. People sometimes get stuck on *how much* they do for their spouse, or *to what extent* they spoil their children. We know that children rarely appreciate either the time or the amount of money spent on them, but adults are more appreciative than we might imagine of presents that don't cost much in terms of money or time but are given with love and consideration, especially when genuine effort has clearly been invested. Generally speaking, it's not *what* you do, it's *how* you do it.

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"IN HONOR OF RABBI GRUEN"

QUESTION

HI RABBI GRUEN,

I listen to your *shiurim* every week on TorahAnytime, and they're amazing.

I have just one question. My oldest daughter is six years old. She is *kein ayin hara* very smart and way ahead of her class. However, her teachers complain that she often seems spaced out and doesn't participate. Yet, if they ask her anything they see that she knows everything she's being taught.

Is this concerning or should I just ignore it and accept that that's her nature and the way she is?

Thanks in advance.

ANSWER

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN RESPONDS

The short and quick answer is that, no, this isn't something to be concerned about. If a child is keeping up with the class and knows what she's being taught, while you may understandably want her to be more focused, it seems like she's doing well in general. Being spaced out sometimes and not participating a lot aren't things to worry about.

With that out of the way, let's elaborate a bit on the topic…

When it comes to children, we seem to have the idea that they should all fit the same cookie-cutter mold. They should behave the same way, understand the same things, retain the same amount of knowledge, and develop in the same way. It doesn't work like that — and we all know it, but we still need to be reminded over and over, until it becomes relevant when we forget all over again!

While there is such a thing as average or "typical" in most areas, for some reason we tend to look at "exceptions to the rule" as "problems." If a child lags behind a little bit, we view them (or us) as having a problem that has to be dealt with. Problematic situations certainly do exist, but even if a child is a little different even from "most" others, it doesn't mean the child has — or worse, *is, chas ve'shalom* — a problem. Some children are more focused. Some are less focused. Some are more intelligent, some less. And that's okay. We have to assess what is and isn't a problem and what's an exception, but exceptions are normal when it comes to people, as long as they're not out of bounds.

Many disorders we ascribe to children of today are simply "exceptions" and not problems, and the more such exceptions we find, the more we can assume they aren't all that problematic at all. It's not that "all problem children" do this. A certain percentage of children are the exception to the norm, but that doesn't automatically translate to "problematic." We don't have to be paranoid about every little thing in a child that's different. Most often, there's no actual problem. It's almost amusing to me when I see parents shocked by the fact that something they've decided to discuss with me is so commonplace that I've encountered it numerous times already. I guess it's comforting to realize that exceptions are not always so exceptional.

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Being that your question relates to an oldest child who is just six years old, I'd also like to address this from a related perspective. When your oldest child is

six, your biggest problem may be that she's a little spaced out. As a family grows, the range of problems tends to grow as well — people need *shidduchim*, have issues with *parnassah*, with health, and the type of problem you're describing may pale in comparison.

Rabbi Twersky *a"h* would often relate that at his wedding, his grandfather blessed the young couple with lots of problems in life. His grandfather explained that when someone has a major problem, that's the only thing they notice — everything else is insignificant in comparison. When a couple is facing an infertility issue, they won't notice the peeling paint on the walls. If your electricity gets shut off or your water main bursts and floods the house, you don't care about a mosquito bite. When a person has a lot of problems, it's a good sign. It means he has lots of normal-sized issues with no big issue to overshadow them.

I don't mean to make light of your problem, but it's good to keep things in perspective. While spacing out can sometimes be a symptom of a more serious issue, if the teacher admits that it isn't affecting your child scholastically, nor causing her social problems, there doesn't seem to be much to worry about.

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Being that *baruch Hashem* the specific situation we're addressing doesn't seem to need all that much guidance, I'd like to address the topic more generally. There are two opposite approaches to dealing with problems. For some people, the slightest hint of a problem is reason enough to press the panic button. A paper cut may need Hatzalah. Then there are people who downgrade even major issues. A broken leg might heal with just an ice pack and some bedrest.

There are parents who start calling mental health professionals and seeking evaluations because their child's teacher suggested that they may have noticed a concerning issue. In the vast majority of cases, there's nothing seriously wrong with mildly overreacting like this, but when parents do this obsessively and/or consistently, it brings their motivations into question.

Most parents do put their children's needs first and foremost. A very small number of parents, however, use their children's real or imagined issues to attract attention or because they crave admiration for the immense efforts they are making to cope with a "terrible situation." (Such parents may not even be aware of their true motivations, which could be rooted in all kinds of past traumas. However, it's important that the situation be recognized for what it is.)

At the other end of the spectrum are those parents who downplay even legitimate concerns to the extent that they are genuinely neglectful of their children's needs. I've heard from *mechanchim* who called parents to tell them their child could be suffering from OCD and anxiety, only to have the parents dismiss their worries, saying that "it runs in the family" and it's fine.

Most parents fall somewhere in-between these two extremes, and as long as things are within bounds, it's okay for people to have different approaches to dealing with problems, while bearing in mind that real issues must be addressed.

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There's a story about a principal who seemingly failed at his job and was forced to resign. As he handed over to his successor, the new principal asked him for some good advice. He replied, "Don't worry. I left you three envelopes. When the first crisis hits, open the first envelope. The second envelope is for the second crisis and the third for the third."

When the first crisis hit, the new principal opened the first envelope. The advice? "Just ignore it. It'll pass." The second time around, the message in the envelope was the same as in the first. When the third crisis hit, the new principal hoped desperately for some golden nugget that would extract him from all his difficulties. He opened the envelope and read: "If you hit this point, prepare three envelopes for the next principal. It's time for you to pack your bags."

Some people ignore the first crisis. They ignore the second crisis too. But it may come to a point where the problems are too big to ignore and, by then, much harder to deal with.

There's a middle ground between making an issue out of tissue and ignoring problems that shouldn't be

ignored. Our kids are worth everything and they're deserving of our best efforts.

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You asked whether you should "ignore the problem." When you *ignore* a problem, it means you don't acknowledge it at all. It can even look like you don't care. Acknowledging a problem doesn't mean it's something major. There's a middle way, and that's accepting your child for who she is and knowing that you may never succeed in changing her. In fact, even just *trying to change* your child may already be sending a wrong message of disapproval and disappointment.

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So finally, back to the situation in the question. I think what you want to do is make your daughter feel good about herself. You also want to work within your daughter's nature to bring out the best in her. Be reasonable about your expectations. Trying to force a child to be more focused when it's not within his capabilities just so that he can appear more like his siblings or classmates can break him.

Don't ignore the issue. Instead, work with your daughter, using incentives and making a big deal about every little bit of progress. (And be careful about complimenting potential! Statements like, "I know you can do better" often convey the message that you're unhappy with the way the child is now.)

I recently spoke to the parents of a very sensitive child. They were doing their best to deal with him appropriately and they were seeing good results. When the boy went into sixth grade, however, he had a very tough *rebbi*. The parents tried talking to him and explaining what their son needed, but the *rebbi* wasn't receptive. "Give me three weeks," he responded. "You'll see, I'll toughen him up and you'll have a new child." The parents knew it wouldn't work, so they tried talking to the *menahel*. But the *menahel* felt he had to give the *rebbi* those three weeks.

It's already two years since those three weeks during which the *rebbi* tried to toughen up this sensitive boy in a way that didn't work with his nature. He was called out for every little thing, and when the boy felt insulted, the *rebbi* made light of it, saying, "You're in sixth grade already! You should be able to handle this." By the time the three weeks were up, the boy hated his *rebbi*, was embarrassed before his classmates, and became a "problem boy" when he hadn't been before. Two years later, he still hasn't fully recovered.

In the case of your daughter, if she's a little spaced out but doing well academically and socially, don't keep continually focusing on her lack of focus, even if you're using incentives and positive motivation. Zooming in on her "negative" point is unlikely to make her feel good about herself. And, maybe her way of focusing *is* by spacing out.

To sum it up: We shouldn't try to change children. Issues should not be ignored, but it's important not to overemphasize anything that isn't important. Work within the nature of each child in order to bring out the best in them.

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

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