בס"ד

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

TORAH LESSONS

FOR THE HOME

PARSHAS PINCHAS

DON'T LET EXCEPTIONS BECOME THE RULE

At the beginning of Parshas Pinchas, Hashem tells Moshe about the reward Pinchas is to receive, *"Bekano es kinasi besocham* — Because he was very zealous for my sake amongst them." Reb Itzikel Vorker *zt"l* explains that the word *"besocham* – amongst them" teach an important lesson. Usually, a *kana'ai*, a zealot, knows how to be outspoken and give rebuke when necessary. We need people like that. However, such a person is virtually always somewhat removed from others because of the criticism he offers.

Contrast this with Pinchas who was zealous for Hashem's sake and didn't allow a wrongdoing to go unpunished — and yet he remained "*amongst them*," a part of *Klal Yisroel*.

We can aspire to such a level in our own interactions with others; there's no need to make an enemy of the person we're trying to teach and reach. The first place this might be relevant is *chinuch,* where a lot of discipline and *tochachah* is often necessary. If a child only hears compliments and you never teach right from wrong, where's that going to get you? More to the point, where's that going to get the child? Regardless of what people claim today, we have clear instructions from the "*chacham mikol adam*" who teaches, "*Yaser bincha veyanichecha veyiten madanim lenafshecha"* — disciplining your son will lead to him giving you peace of mind and genuine *nachas*.

Being able to discipline while preserving a positive relationship is a very important skill that doesn't come naturally to most people. It involves, among other things, paying attention to the ratio of rebuke to compliments, as well as taking care to criticize the deed and not the person.

There are many ways of maintaining a connection even while offering criticism, and this is the ultimate example of being *mekayem smol docheh* and *yemin mekareves* simultaneously.

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QUESTION

DEAR RABBI GRUEN,

I have a question. My son, a *bachur*, has been having a lot of difficulty in *yeshivah* and has a hard time staying there for a full day. He suffers from anxiety and gets so stressed out that more often than not, he comes home after only an hour or two. I have a policy that he can't use the computer during *yeshivah* hours, firstly so that there should be a *geder* with the computer usage (screen time, games videos), and also, because he often misses *yeshivah*, screen time shouldn't be an extra *yetzer hara* for him to want to come home.

However, I became uncomfortable with this and think it might be the wrong approach with him.

First of all, he feels — even after I explained it to him — that it's a punishment for him for not being in *yeshivah*. I think that he interprets it as meaning that I feel he's doing something bad and that he's a failure. This is definitely not good for him.

Secondly, when he's home, he does almost nothing and he's probably going nuts. There isn't much that he's interested in, and I have nothing with which to replace the screen.

My feeling is that he *nebach* can't handle being in *yeshivah* and it's not his fault. Why should he have to be home for hours on end and feel punished and tortured with nothing to keep him entertained?

Would you agree that my original rule doesn't fit my son? Should I be more permissive in this regard?

I look forward to hearing your answer. Thank you.

ANSWER

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN RESPONDS

I'll start by saying that a child's anxiety may be a serious issue, and difficulties a child experiences in school may be as well. They need to be taken seriously, assessed properly, dealt with responsibly, and monitored closely. Some situations are overplayed and others are underplayed. I don't claim to be able to read between the lines of your letter and gain an accurate understanding of what's really going on here, and I suggest you discuss the situation in general with someone who can responsibly guide you regarding any specifics. With that said I'll try to share a perspective regarding what you describe.

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I want to point out that this situation is out of the ordinary. I'm sharing this in a public forum because many people may be dealing with out-of-the-ordinary situations. It happens to be very ordinary to have out-of-the-ordinary situations, and there's no reason to panic when faced with a challenge that is uncommon. All the same, situations that are not typical should be dealt with differently from ordinary situations and advice for atypical situations does not apply to regular cases.

A lot of the general guidance given is meant for ordinary situations. When you're dealing with unusual circumstances, it's important not to get stuck in doing things the way you've always been taught, and to acknowledge that there are exceptions to the rules. However, just as there are guidelines for the ordinary, there are also guidelines for the exceptions — for deciding what an exception is, and what is to be done in that case. Just because a case is non-standard doesn't mean that not a single one of the usual rules applies. And no one should be making the decision that the "regular" way "doesn't work" for them without Torah guidance.

Furthermore, even when you have received guidance for your exceptional case, it's important to know when the exceptional phase has ended and standard rules become fully applicable once more. Unfortunately, I have seen many cases where people became accustomed to non-typical ways of doing things and never recovered their previous standards. This is also something many of us saw during the COVID lockdown period, when it seemed necessary to some people to bend their standards — and then, even after it was over, what was once seen as bent now appeared straight, as Chazal say: "*Avar veshanah naseis lo k'heter* — If one sins once and repeats the sin, it becomes [seemingly] permissible to him."

This is important not just for individuals but also for entire families, as a unit. If you ever need to break a rule because of a specific situation or environment, let yourself and your children know that you're doing something specific, for a specific reason, and for a specific period of time. Don't allow the exceptions to become the norm.

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The Mishnah teaches that if a person sees that his *yetzer hara* is so strong that he cannot withstand the temptation, he should don black clothes and go to a place where nobody knows him, do what he has to do, and return home. Why? So that it doesn't become normal behavior to him. (Again, this is a tricky topic and not something a person should ever decide for himself.) Nobody should do something that will label him as "different" to others, but even more important is that the person should not label himself as different in his own eyes.

When it comes to our children, we should also be very, very careful not to label them as "different." Let's say a child did something wrong. People are sometimes tempted to let their children know that they're aware of *everything* their children are doing. "I caught you. I figured it out." Dr. David Lieberman points out that when you let your child (or your spouse) know that you caught them doing something wrong, you may think that the shame you're causing them will deter them from repeating the behavior in the future, but the opposite is actually the case, by and large.

Of course this doesn't mean that you should let your child get away with everything or make believe you don't know anything at all. Some accountability is important and it's good for children to know you're on the ball. All the same, it's important to know when it's more appropriate to look away so that the child or spouse can bounce back on their own. Allow them to think they still have a clean slate, that you still have a high opinion of them, so that they continue to feel motivated to justify your faith in them.

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Sometimes children truly do have special needs — they genuinely require specific and exceptional alterations to the general rules. But more often the "special need" of that child is simply to "feel special," in a good way. And this doesn't have to involve having a special version of the rules. What it does usually involve is time and patience. Sometimes, parents get resentful or simply overwhelmed. "I'm giving him so much! He still needs more?" Yes, some children *do* need more in order to feel special. And all children need to feel special.

Recently, I spoke to a father whose child needed a lot of time from him, taking him away from his business with all the attendant consequences. The father told me, "I've already spent so much on his tutors, his therapies, everything else. I also have to lose so much money for the time he needs?"

The truth is, this is what this specific child needs from his father. This child costs so much money because his needs are special, and his genuine needs are not the place to cut corners.

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When it comes to computer usage, it's okay for you to set limits for it without justifying them. There's nothing wrong with telling your son that you want to limit usage as a *geder* and to ensure that staying home doesn't become enticing. You don't have to worry that he'll think it's a punishment. Don't feel weak when you present such a policy. If you decide that your son truly needs more time than you might allow your other children, you can make allowances, but your policy doesn't have to be approved by anyone. As a parent, you should be comfortable with what you want.

When a child can't attend school for whatever reason (whether due to bullying, anxiety, or other severe difficulties), it's okay to validate the child's feelings and let him know that you understand that it's hard for him to go, without justifying it for him. And you should make it very clear that you're willing to try whatever you can to resolve the situation and make things easier for him. But your child doesn't have to feel that it's okay not to go to *yeshivah*. It's a fine line between not making him feel like a failure for not going and not making him feel like a victor for staying home. What you can say is, "I understand you. It's challenging. I think the right way to deal with it is by trying again, and seeing what we can

come up with to avoid the problems you experienced. I'll be happy and proud when you can go back."

At the same time, don't make it too comfortable to stay home. Don't serve him three gourmet meals. Make him feel understood without making him want more of it. Let him feel bored. Rarely will the child stay home for too many boring days. When parents successfully combine true validation, real boredom, and encouragement to try again with zero force, it's usually a matter of a day or two, in my experience, before most kids return to school.

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There are so many ways of making a child feel good without making them feel that it's okay to chuck the *yeshivah* system. You don't have to condone not wanting to go to *yeshivah*. If your son wants to spend time with you during the day, for instance, you can tell him, "I don't think it's right to go out during *yeshivah* hours." And if you decide to allow him to use the computer, let him know what you're okay with during *yeshivah* hours — what he can watch or play, whether it has to be something educational or inspirational, less time-wasting, less addictive, and so forth. Your guidelines shouldn't and don't have to project anything on him, but if you want to reassure him that you don't see him as a failure, then tell him, "I know it's hard for you. You're not a failure. I believe in you. You have so much talent. You're such a *berachah*. I appreciate you." Say it clearly, and go on to tell him what you're okay with or not okay with, without using the word "but."

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Of course being reasonable is as important as being consistent and firm. When you lay down your guidelines, make sure they are ones that your child can handle and leave yourself room to amend things if it becomes necessary. You should not put him in a position of unbearable temptation, along the lines of the *halachah* in Shulchan Aruch which states that one may not hit an older child if he is likely to lose control and hit back.

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When a person is in a tough situation, they often think that there's only one — or maybe no — solution, when there may be many other ways to address the problem. You may be surprised how much you can come up with if you keep brainstorming and seeking advice. Maybe you can think of a way to get your son back to *yeshivah*. Maybe you can talk to his *maggid shiur*, his *chavrusa*, his friend. Maybe he'll feel better in class if you teach him the material in advance. When you are open to new ideas, you may realize that the situation is more solvable than you thought.

The same applies for staying home. Maybe there are other things your son can do aside from playing on the computer. Perhaps, instead of telling him to do something, you can get someone to ask him for help doing that same thing, and he'll feel good about doing it... And maybe he rejects the ideas you suggest, but will accept them from someone else. In most situations, with Hashem's help, you can set your mind to it and come up with a variety of solutions. Think out of the box so that you're not left between a rock and a hard place. And with *siyatta diShmaya* and a lot of *tefillah*, when you give your child what he needs, you can make him feel like he's good now — not just potentially good in the future — and he'll bring you true *nachas* when he grows up to be successful. And every child can be successful!

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

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