Torah Lessons for the Home

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

| Parshas Balak |

Stop Forcing Your Donkey

The Donkey Teaches a Lesson

In our parsha, Bilam was travelling with his donkey when the donkey suddenly veered off the road. Bilam raised his staff and struck the donkey - as any conscientious donkey driver would do. They went a bit further and the donkey abruptly stopped in a narrow place, injuring Bilam's leg. Once again Bilam struck his donkey. However the donkey didn't respond and crouched further, and so, Bilam struck again. Then the miracle happened:

"Hashem opened the mouth of the donkey and she said to Bilam: 'What have I done to you that you've hit me these three times?'" The donkey did not rebuke Bilam after he hit her the first two times, but after three times, the donkey was correct in complaining. Don't you see it's not working? Don't you see something is up? Why don't you try something new?

Don't Ignore the Real Issue

I've told this story before; there was a girl who wasn't obeying the school dress code, she wasn't closing her top button or something. Her principal called her in and let her know that what she was doing was against school rules. The girl immediately closed her button. The next day, the principal noticed that her button was open again, and reprimanded her again. This went on daily for a few weeks.

Finally after feeling frustrated with this case, the principal went to the school director, Rabbi Ronnie Greenwald ע"ה, for some advice. "How long has this been going on for?" Rabbi Greenwald asked. "Three weeks", was the answer. "Three weeks? When will you realize this is not working?!"

Whenever we hit resistance we need to be *meivin davar mitoch davar* **and** know that something is under the resistance. Your spouse or child is not just a "stubborn donkey", something else is at play here!

Who Are You Forcing?

There is an old yiddish maxim: "*Az s'geit nisht mit koach, probirt men mit moach - If force (koach) doesn't work, we try to understand the issue better (moach)"*. Unfortunately some people say that if *koach* doesn't work, more *koach* should be applied!

It is unfortunate because there is really no place for force in a relationship. Most often, force simply doesn't work. But even if it would work, who are you forcing? He's your *husband!* She's your *wife!* Everyone has their blockages - just like Bilam's donkey encountered a גדר מזה וגדר מזה, instead of applying

force like Bilam, let us try and understand what the blockages are.

Force is a Deterrent

You might be surprised to hear this but very often the blockages may be your own fault. Sometimes your spouse may have a valid reason for resisting, but your self-absorption leads you to misread the signs, and suddenly you find yourself resorting to force.

Sometimes the way you phrase your request may trigger resistance in your spouse (or child). Sometimes it's not even your words but your tone of voice: "Please take care of this today" can be perceived as an attack by a sensitive spouse and it may trigger resistance; "You're attacking me and you want me to take care of this for you too?" Some people are more sensitive than others, but nobody especially relishes being ordered around, so don't be forceful.

Speak Gently

The gemara (Shabbos 34a) says "Although the *chachamim* required a husband to supervise some aspects of his wife's mitzvah observance, he should ask about it in a gentle manner *so that she accepts his words*". Even matters pertaining to mitzvah observance, things we are obligated in, should not be forced. Certainly not when it's a matter of my preference over your preference. What right do I have to enforce that my preference should prevail?

The sefer Yesod Ha'emunah writes that there is no mitzvah of הוכח תוכיח for something that is not a Torah obligation. He explains that we can only give mussar to a fellow Jew, because we are all held responsible for each other's sins. But this only applies to actual sins, you will not be held responsible if another Jew ignores a chumra. So why bring it up? How often do we try forcing upon someone something they aren't required to do in the first place!

Some people just cannot handle being told what to do. I've seen so many people drop a certain counselor or therapist because they felt that person was telling them what to do.

Force may Backfire

Even when force and manipulation "works", it tears down the relationship. Pinchas* was very manipulative, he would come into my office and explain to me that he could get his wife to do whatever he wants - by force. Five months later he was divorced. Yes it worked for him in the short term, he made the decisions, she put up with whatever he made her do, but at a certain point it backfired.

I see this so often with children. I see adults who have an aversion to certain mitzvos just because it was forced on them when they were young. Aryeh* told me that he never listens to the haftorah being read. As a child his father was very strict about this particular part of davening, and now he just cannot bring himself to sit in shul for this portion. It's unfortunate, and obviously there's no excuse for an adult to behave in such a way, it's Aryeh's *nisayon*, and he has to work on it, and he is. But it was caused by his father's excessive force.

Compelled to Rebel

Just recently I was guiding a father on how to better get along with his son, a young boy. There was significant friction in their relationship and we were working towards reducing that friction. After a few weeks the father told me that he overheard his son telling a friend. "Lately I'm much better about doing my homework because my father doesn't yell at me anymore, he reminds me to do it - in a smart way, so I don't feel pressured"! Sometimes a child says it best!

Another case: Chaim*, an eighteen year old, had a very rocky relationship with his father. At one point he said to me "When is my father going to realize that I'll do whatever I want anyway?" Chaim admitted that his father's demands weren't so terribly unreasonable, but it was just the way they were made, that made them so unacceptable to him. As a result he felt compelled to rebel.

Lesson from the Stone

In last week's parsha during the episode of *Mei Merivah,* Rashi says that Hashem was *k'vayachol* upset at Moshe for not speaking to the stone. Had he spoken to the stone, Am Yisroel would have learned to heed the words of Hashem. "If a stone listens", they would have said, "surely we too should heed the words of Hashem".

Interestingly, the fact that the stone obeyed once it was forced is no longer a desirable lesson. Hashem didn't want us to learn that force works sometimes. The lesson He wanted Moshe to teach was that soft words have the ability to accomplish so much. That's a lesson!

Chinuch: Educate Patiently

Parents may sometimes get hung up on teaching a particular lesson to their children, and they resort to force. Meanwhile the poor child cannot understand, למה הכיתני זה שלש רגלים, why do you keep forcing me?

Now, a parent might say: "What do you mean why I'm forcing you? You're not doing it any other way!" But a parent has an obligation to try and see why that is. What is it that's blocking the message from getting through? What is causing this child to resist? Is it because of the way I'm making the demand? Is he ashamed of something? Is something else at play here?

It is so important to be tuned in to a child's feelings, to see what is bothering him and to try to fix the root of his concerns. If we're not selfishly trying to get our way, we can be more attuned to the people in our relationships and guide them with love, not with force.

-Q&A-

Please feel free to send any questions, on this topic or any topic to RabbiGruen@Lehair.org

Question: How do I get my wife to be more interested in my life? I feel like she doesn't care about me, She doesn't ask me how my day was when I get home from work. How can I get her to be more involved?

Answer: Yankel was standing in the city office and was asked his age by the clerk. Moshe who was standing next to him on line noticed that it took him very long to answer the question. As they both exited the building, Moshe asked Yankel why he didn't answer right away, it's not such a complicated question after all. Yankel explained that he wasn't sure if he should say that he's older than he really is, or younger. "Well why didn't you just say your real age?" asked Moshe. "That's brilliant!" said Yankel "Why didn't I think of it myself?"

Sometimes we overlook the simplest solution, just be straightforward and tell her how you feel! If you're married to her for three years and she has never asked you about your day before, chances are she won't start just by you wishing for it; ask her. Don't complain, don't say: "How come you never ask me about my day? You don't really care about me!" Just tell her: "It would really mean a lot to me if you asked about my life more. I would love to include you in what's going on".

If for whatever reason that doesn't work, or your ego doesn't allow you to be vulnerable like that; how about involving her, without her initiating it. Tell her about your day! Ask for her input. If you involve her, she will automatically feel more interested. If she's personally invested, she will be more interested.

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