

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

GETTING THE ANSWER RIGHT

This week's *parshah* begins with what Yisro, the father-in-law of Moshe Rabbeinu, heard that inspired him to join Am Yisrael: "And Yisro ... heard everything that Hashem did for Moshe and for Yisrael, His people — that Hashem had taken Yisrael out of Mitzrayim." What exactly did Yisro hear?

The Imrei Chaim *ztz"l* quotes Rashi who tells us that Yisro heard about Kriyas Yam Suf and the battle with Amalek, and he explains some of the deeper meanings in the lessons Yisro derived. Chazal describe making a living as one of the things that is "as difficult as the splitting of the Yam Suf"; when Yisro saw how, despite the struggles of Klal Yisrael to sustain themselves they still devoted themselves to learning Torah, he was inspired to join them. Similarly, when he saw how, despite their difficulty in enduring in the face of Amalek, (constant attacks from the *goyim*) the Yidden remained faithful servants of Hashem, he decided to convert.

Yisro was not the only person to see these things but he was the only person to draw the right conclusions. Others saw as well, yet they derived very different lessons.

There is a well-known story of a Jew who survived the Holocaust but became disenchanted with Yiddishkeit. Rabbi Eliezer Silver *ztz"l* encountered him and asked why.

"There was just one Jew in the barracks who had a *siddur*, but there were lots of people who wanted a chance to hold it in their hands and be able to recite some of the prayers. But the Jew demanded payment! In exchange for a few moments with the *siddur*, he demanded a piece of bread, a significant amount of the daily ration.

"When I saw that, I thought to myself: If that's how a Jew exploits the situation to get bread out of starving people, then I want nothing to do with Yiddishkeit."

"You foolish person!" Rav Silver responded. "I understand that you were disillusioned by what you saw. But what about all the people waiting on line for a chance to hold the precious *siddur*, so desperate to feel a connection to something holy that they were willing to forgo a piece of their meager ration? How about being inspired by them instead?"

Yisro, like all converts, gave up a great deal in order to join Am Yisrael. Sometimes, it's hard for such people to understand that those born into Yiddishkeit could ever see it as anything other than a privilege. However, many Yidden see the Torah and *mitzvos* as burdens, and while adults can adjust their perspective and learn to appreciate their precious heritage, children are not always able to do so.

It can be challenging to know how to respond whenever we are confronted with people who don't value Yiddishkeit, but it is necessary to know how to relate to them so that we can gradually open their eyes.

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Parshas
Yisro
VOL. 7 | ISSUE 17



Dear Rabbi Gruen,

I am the *rebbi* of a class of high school boys. The boys come from frum but less heimish homes. I recently gave my class the opportunity to write any question they had on any topic and told them that we would be discussing the answers in class.

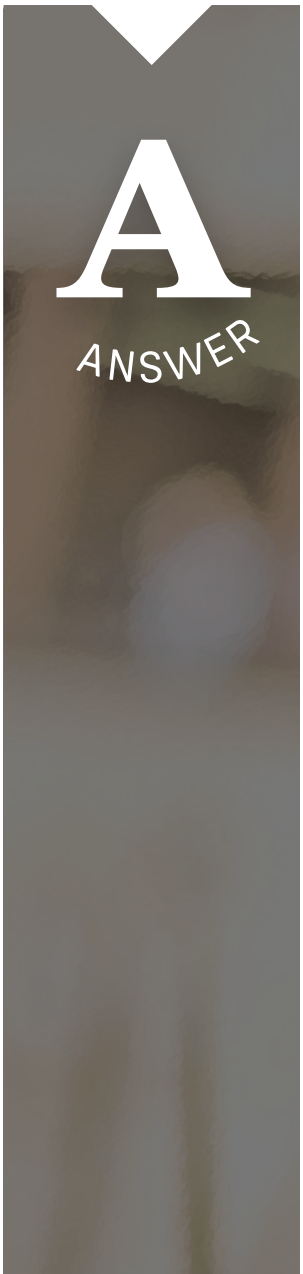
One boy wrote the following question which I quote:

"Why? Why should I care that there is a G-D? I want to have fun so what's the point of listening to a bunch of constricting rules? I do believe there is a G-D but... so what? What would you say to a guy who asked you that?"

I think this boy feels restrained and stifled by all the *halachos* and concepts in Yiddishkeit. What would be the best way to explain that Hashem loves us and gives us these *halachos* for our benefit?

I also want to make sure I give him the best and clearest answer possible. He's an intelligent kid.

Thanks very much



While it can be alarming to hear such questions, they're not actually as unusual as many people believe. They're also not as terrible as people believe, for a number of reasons.

Yiddishkeit has never frowned upon asking questions on virtually any topic. Many *sefarim* that discuss topics of *emunah* are based on asking and answering questions. The same is true of the Haggadah. The wicked son is not punished for asking a "bad" question but rather, because he excludes himself from Klal Yisrael. Asking a challenging question does not exclude the person from our nation. In fact, in last week's *parshah* we learned that Moshe Rabbeinu did not teach Am Yisrael the laws of Shabbos until they asked about them.

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When it comes to replying to such questions, it's important to realize that there are many ways of interpreting them. There is the literal interpretation: What does the question actually mean? There is a deeper attempt at interpretation: Why is this person challenging me like this? And then there is a personalized interpretation: What does this question reveal about the person asking it?

While taking a literal approach may be best with other kinds of questions, with questions such as the ones posed by this high school boy it is very likely that he did not mean them literally and therefore, taking his words at face-value will not achieve very much. Similarly, treating the questions as obnoxious challenges to your authority as *rebbi* will likely also backfire.

This is why responding defensively ("How can you ask something like that?") often gives the impression that you simply don't know how to reply, and that's a sure way to lose your student's respect. Furthermore, it will give the question a heightened importance that it doesn't deserve. In all likelihood, your student doesn't want a literal response, but if he senses that he's "caught" you, he may start to wonder whether he's somehow stumbled on a deep dark secret that must never, ever be exposed.

What a parent or teacher really needs to do when trying to respond correctly to such questions is to take the third approach, which is to answer the person rather than the words spoken. Here, you have yourself noted that he probably feels

stifled and restricted by all the *halachos*. It's reasonable to assume that what he is seeking is a way to get past that stifled feeling. Perhaps subconsciously, he's even looking to find the joy in Yiddishkeit. If you treat him as nothing more than a rebellious teen who just wants to have fun, all he will have learned from the exchange is that seeking answers will only make things worse and that you now look down on him and see him as a "bad kid" — which is the last thing either of you want.

Therefore, your initial response should actually encourage the asking of questions, no matter what they are. If you can also convey that having such questions is a sign that he is someone who seeks wisdom and understanding, that's even better. And if you can add that you, yourself, had similar questions when you were younger, that's amazing.

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After setting the scene, the next step is to address the question itself. It should be obvious to your student that you welcome the opportunity to delve deeper into this question with him and that you're happy he asked. This doesn't mean that you have to know the answer, although you should show confidence in the fact that there is an answer — which is precisely why you're willing to engage and investigate instead of ignoring or invalidating. You can even admit that you don't know the best way to respond, and ask for a day or two to think it over, or suggest that the two of you go to consult with a Torah authority if that's an option.

In the past, I've sometimes suggested that fathers take a similar course of action, whenever their child didn't seem open to an explanation from them. Having them both go together to a rav (who was given advance warning) proved to be a better option and helped them strengthen their relationship.

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I once spoke with a *chassidishe bachur* after discovering that he had attached himself to a somewhat unconventional mentor. I asked him why he had chosen this person as his "rebbe," and he replied:

"I had all these questions, and no one wanted to answer them. Everyone put me off with one excuse or another. Some of them seemed to look down at me just for asking. Eventually, I found my rebbe, who was not only capable of answering — he was actually happy to answer! So I decided that he was someone who I could follow and admire."

This mentor probably saved this *bachur's* life. Meanwhile, all the people who either refused to answer or didn't know how to respond gave the *bachur* the message that his questions weren't welcome and that he, himself, was a problematic kind of person.

If you're a person who finds himself challenged by such questions, do what you can to keep the channels of communication open. This way the next time the person needs something addressed, he'll come looking for you again. The *bachur* I encountered was fortunate that he found an *ehrliche* mentor. Unfortunately, some boys who fail to get their questions answered by the right people end up getting them answered by people who put terrible thoughts into their head. They then encourage them to follow up with even more doubts and confused thoughts, and unfortunately lead them very far away from Yiddishkeit.

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While these people may sometimes have positive intentions, the one thing that they can never give to confused or struggling people is the sense that they are in Hashem's loving hands and that there's no better place to be. So, as you write, what is the best way to convey how much Hashem loves us and how He has given the Torah to us for our benefit? Though it may not be easy to "explain," just being clear in your mind will make it a bit easier.

You know what you're *not* looking to convey; anything that could make him feel threatened or bad. You also know what you are looking to convey, which is the conviction that living a Torah way of life is absolutely beneficial. Nonetheless, I would suggest presenting your thoughts as interesting ideas to think about rather than the rock-solid facts they are.

The reason for this is that pushing ideas onto people doesn't usually work. Sharing them as suggestions rather than facts to be either accepted or rejected makes it easier for others to listen. People often make the mistake of presenting ideas in a way that forces listeners to either surrender or wage war, which makes it hard for them to admit to what they know is really true.

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One possible way to open a discussion after a student asks you why he should care if there's a G-d, is by turning the question on him: "Who said you should care? *Do* you care?"

By throwing the ball back into his court, you may provoke your student into revealing some of what's going on beneath his question. If the conversation then takes an entirely unexpected direction don't be surprised and just proceed at his pace, without trying to force him into your way of thinking.

It's also possible that you won't get a response at all, and in that case, if you feel he's ready, you could follow up yourself by asking: "Should I care that I have a heart? Maybe I don't have to care. My heart beats regardless of

whether I care that it's doing its job. Even if I pretend it's not there it just keeps on functioning and keeping me alive."

You could then add that such questions bother a lot of people for a very simple reason: They intuitively know that Hashem is there, creating everything, looking after them, keeping them alive and guiding their lives. No one can ever truly make peace with denial of Hashem's existence. The truth that we sense deep within ourselves will always gnaw away at us if we try to deny it.

Only if and when he's willing to hear, you can use the analogy of the heart and continue: "Let's say you want to deny your heart's existence, or at least, live as if you don't have to take any notice of it. You just want to have fun, so you eat all kinds of junk, never exercise, and engage in dangerous pursuits such as bungee jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge... Do you think ignoring your heart's needs will turn out well?"

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There are many more ideas you can share, but again, only if it looks like he's both interested and ready to hear. For example, many *sefarim* describe the Torah as our instruction manual for life. Only Hashem, who created the entire universe, knows how it functions. If we are wise, we will follow the rules; if we are foolish, we will ignore the rules and suffer the consequences.

Breaking the rules can seem like fun when you're young; as we get older, we tend to appreciate the rules much more. Little kids think it would be amazing to have a diet solely consisting of cookies and candy. However, as adults, if we're immature enough to actually try it out, we will surely come to understand why seeking fun and enjoyment is actually not the best way to live.

That doesn't mean that cookies lose their appeal. They will probably always be tempting. The only way we can overcome the temptation is by internalizing the greater benefit of self-restraint for a higher goal of health and strength. The nutritional needs of the soul are not as obvious as those of the body, but the Torah makes it absolutely clear that the only way to nourish the soul is via the *mitzvos* — and that *aveiros* are like poison to us, no matter how enticing they may appear.



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This doesn't mean that living according to the Torah cannot be enjoyable — in fact, the opposite is true. Just as a top athlete feels bursting with energy and ready to tackle anything, and doesn't even miss all the candy bars, a *tzaddik (lehavdil)* feels spiritual energy and dynamism and is delighted to forgo all the dubious pleasures of the world in order to function at his optimal best.

And just as a top athlete needs to keep in training in order not to lose his edge, a *tzaddik* must constantly strengthen himself in *emunah* and *limmud haTorah* in order to maintain his spiritual strength. An athlete will place his trust in his trainer plus all the latest sports research in order to attain his goals. As Yidden, our spiritual goals are so much more significant and their value is eternal — and we place our trust in Hashem and the Torah He has given us, secure in the knowledge that this is the only way to succeed in life.

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While these options are equally relevant for parents answering their children's questions, as the *rebbi* of your student, you have an advantage that parents don't have in such circumstances. Parents are so emotionally bound up with their children that it is very hard to reply calmly and attentively without getting overwhelmed by concern. If a parent finds himself in such a situation, it may be better for him to suggest that the child consult with someone else, rather than trying to deal with it on his own.

But even if you do end up referring the seeking child to someone better qualified, never send the child away with the sense that he is simply causing trouble. Tell him how impressed you are with his honesty and integrity, and how much you admire his desire to seek the truth. Reassure him that there are answers, and that simply by asking he is already going in the right direction.

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