

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

DON'T STRAY TO THE LEFT OR THE RIGHT

At the end of this week's *parshah*, we find Moshe Rabbeinu instructing Aharon Hakohen and his sons in many of the details of the *korbanos*, and the *parshah* concludes with the words, "And Aharon and his sons did all the things that Hashem commanded, *beyad Moshe*—through Moshe."

Rashi explains that the *passuk* is praising Aharon and his sons for "not deviating either to the right or to the left" of what they were told to do.

The *Agra D'Kallah* points out that using the language of hands suggests using the right hand, which is associated with *ahavah*—love, and the left hand, which is associated with *yirah*—fear. Aharon, and also Moshe Rabbeinu, served Hashem perfectly, using both *middos* in the correct proportions, as Rashi says, "not deviating to the right or left."

Another idea suggested by the metaphor of hands is that we can use both our hands at once. This is especially applicable in *chinuch habanim*. A child must be disciplined, but at the same time he needs to know that he is loved; it's not one *or* the other, alternating between the two important messages, rather both together, at all times. Children need to know that loving them always doesn't mean that we will tolerate any behavior — in fact, applying limits is actually an expression of our love and caring. Finding the right balance between love and limits is sometimes a challenge, especially as each child needs a different balance, but with *siyatta diShmaya* parents can find the right way.

This week's essay is dedicated in loving memory of a proud Abba and Zeidy

ר' שלמה יהודה ב"ר אליעזר טסלר ע"ה

נלב"ע כ"ז אדר תשמ"ו לפ"ק

Who survived the Holocaust and rebuilt a family of בנים ובני בנים עוסקים בתורה ומצוות

תהא נפשו צרורה בצרור החיים עדי נזכה לקיום הפסוק יקיצו וירננו שוכני עפר בביאת משיח צדקינו



Q QUESTION

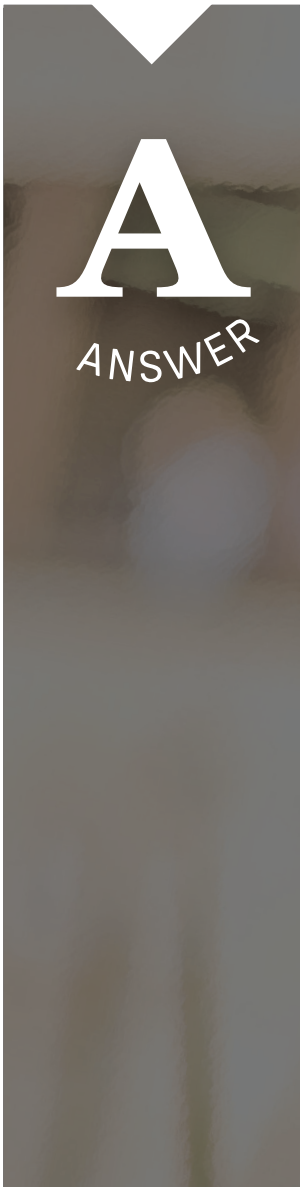
Dear Rabbi Gruen,

I would like to ask your advice regarding my son, who is a very sensitive and fragile child. He has a hard time in *cheider*. Following your advice, we give him a lot of love and encouragement to make sure that he knows that we love him and care about him and understand him. He's making nice progress and trying hard, but he's still struggling.

Now PTA is coming up and my son has been trying to persuade me not to go. He says it's a waste of time because he knows the *rebbi* will only have bad things to say about him and in any case, what the *rebbi* says depends on his mood at the time.

My question is whether I should give in to my son and not go, in order to show him how much I care about his feelings? (The *rebbi* is also new and doesn't have much experience so I don't know what he could add to what I know already.) I could then call the *rebbi* on the phone instead. Or perhaps it's important for my son to know that he can't control what I do?

Thank you for your advice.



A ANSWER

Very often, it's the fragile, sensitive children who need special attention given to their needs, and because they tend to have a more emotional response to issues, they have to be addressed responsibly. While children who are less sensitive might often appear easier and simpler to parent, wise parents will accept all their children exactly as they are, and not resent one child's greater needs. It can help to be aware that sensitive children often have the most potential, and catering to their sensitivities responsibly, is extremely rewarding.

However, even when parents do everything right, sensitive children can still feel insecure and worry that they aren't loved or appreciated enough. This is why parents of sensitive children must be careful not to fall into the trap of only giving love and withholding necessary guidance. A parent who keeps giving love, compliments and praise, might be asked by the child one day for something far too difficult, expensive, or time-consuming, and the parent knows he should say "no" but feels pressured to say "yes" instead. After all, he's invested so much time and energy in showing this child how much he's loved — and now he's going to ruin it all by turning down his request?

A sensitive child — like any child, in fact — is also likely to use manipulative statements such as, "If you really loved me, you would give me X." While their intention in using such words is to get their way, they are also being sincere, to a degree, due to their insecurities and doubts. Nonetheless, it is a terrible mistake to give in to such emotional manipulation. Allowing a child to take charge of decision-making is terrible for his own development and certainly also for the parent's

position in the family. This is aside from the fact that it can only be a temporary solution. Eventually, you will reach a point where it is simply impossible to say "yes" to a request.

At the same time, getting angry at a child who makes excessive demands is also wrong. It's understandable, but still mistaken, for a parent in such a situation to respond, "After I already gave you so much, how can you claim that I don't love you simply because I can't give you this one thing?" A parent who feels so cornered might give up and decide to withdraw the extra love and attention he was giving, and this would also be a terrible shame. It's so important to remain loving and still know how to turn down a demand gently, yet confidently.

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The parent, in the above situation regarding attending the PTA, should certainly take the time to listen to his son's concerns and tell him that he understands why he's worried. He should validate the concerns and show that he really understands his son and isn't trivializing his worries. He can then add, "I still feel that the right thing for me to do is attend the PTA and hear what your *rebbi* has to say."

The next step is the most important: After reassuring his son that he loves him and thinks he's great, he adds, "If your *rebbi* does say anything negative about you, don't worry. I'll be there to tell him what a great boy you are, how hard you're trying, and how much progress you've already made."

To summarize: While a parent should not give in to his child's demands, he should certainly address the underlying concerns and show his child that he takes his feelings seriously. There's no reason to make this more challenging or personal than that.

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That takes care of the lead-up to the PTA. What about the meeting itself?

I recall an incident with one of my own children, when the *rebbi* called me after the very first day of *cheider* to tell me that my son had misbehaved and that I should make sure to let him know that such a lack of *derech eretz* would not be tolerated in this new class.

I thanked the *rebbi* for letting me know and then thought about what I should say to my son. Of course, if he had misbehaved he had to learn to improve — and yet, knowing my son, telling him this directly seemed unlikely to achieve that outcome. On the other hand, ignoring the *rebbi's* request was also not the correct response. So I called my son over and told him, "Your *rebbi* just called, and you know what? He enjoyed having you in his class so much today! He told me how smart you are and that he heard nice things about you from your last year's *rebbi*. He said he can see how much you're going to contribute as the year goes on."

Two days later, the *rebbi* called me back. "Thanks so much for speaking to your son. What you said had the right effect — he's like a different child."

After coming home from PTA, most parents will be able to find something positive that a teacher said and highlight it. If there's really nothing, it can often be worthwhile to be creative, because the results will prove that it was the right method to use. Children are much more likely to behave well in class when they feel that their teachers like them and appreciate their abilities.

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It's also important to invest in the *rebbi's* feelings, because everyone, adult and child, feels good about being praised and appreciated. In this case, the father should take the opportunity at the PTA to tell the *rebbi* how much his son enjoys being in his class, and how much he, the father, appreciates the special attention he is giving his son.

He can then add, "You've probably already realized that my son is a more sensitive type, and that he needs encouragement a bit more often than other children. I heard such good things about you — how you really go the extra mile to give

each child what he needs. I really admire the effort you put into my son, and I can assure you that it's paying off."

The father can even add, "My son doesn't stop talking about you when he gets home. He thinks you're an amazing *rebbi* and he looks forward to *cheider* every day."

It's important not to give the *rebbi* the impression that he's being told how to do his job, even if he is young and inexperienced.

Of course, if the *rebbi* isn't receptive to the praise and subtle suggestions, the father still has the option of speaking with the *menahel*. In general, however, many problems can be solved by using the strategy of Aharon Hakohen and improving the relationship between teacher and child with praise and encouragement. (This doesn't have to wait until PTA — it can be done throughout the year, as well as through the phone.)

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It's important to know that even after doing all the right things, parents of fragile children need a tremendous amount of patience. *Chinuch habanim* in general demands huge amounts of patience and sometimes it can take many, many years to see the fruits of our efforts.

Furthermore, parents don't only need to respond to their children. They should also go out of their way to notice things and draw attention to it. This applies especially to sensitive children, who need the reassurance that all the good things they do are seen and appreciated. This clearly doesn't apply to the father asking the question above. However, in other cases, if a parent tells his son, "If the *rebbi* says anything bad about you I'll right away tell him how amazing you are." The son might simply not believe him, because he doesn't believe that his father thinks he's amazing, which is why he was so worried about the PTA in the first place.

Sadly, many parents praise their children to outsiders, but for whatever reason, never say a good word directly to their children. I recall one person telling me that his father never complimented him when he was young (although there were plenty of complaints whenever he did something wrong). When he grew older, someone happened to tell him, "Your father was always boasting about you when you were a boy, telling everyone how smart you are and how he was sure you would grow up to be a *gadol hador*." The man simply couldn't believe it. "If only he would have said even just one word to me while I was growing up..." he told me.

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What a shame to let such opportunities pass by, while our children are growing up and can so easily be motivated by encouragement, love, and praise. While our children need the "left hand" of *yirah* and discipline, they need the "right hand" to be stronger and constantly giving *ahavah*. In this way they will b'ezras Hashem flourish and grow, and be a source of much Yiddishe nachas.



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