Rabbi Shimon Gruen

Torah Lessons for the Home

{ Bo 5780 }

The Darkness of Inflexibility

When Hail Won't Break Us

When you read about the Plague of Darkness this week in the Parshah, you might notice that there were two parts to the plague. One, it was so dark that they were not able to see each other, and two, the darkness was so thick that they were not able to move or change positions.

The two parts of this plague teach us a fascinating lesson: When we dig in our heels and refuse to move away from our opinion, darkness descends among us. In order for us to get along with each other, we have to be flexible enough to accept other people's views.

This insight is alluded to in last week's Parshah as well. During the Plague of Hail we see that any grains that were standing tall and ready for harvest, were wiped out by the hail pellets. But those plants that were still young and soft swayed with the winds, and survived the onslaught. When we allow ourselves to be swayed, or even just listen to another's opinion, we won't be broken.

More Than One Dimension

It is not necessarily stubbornness that causes us to staunchly stick to our guns. Quite often the reason we refuse to consider anybody else's stance is because of a fundamental mistake. We erroneously believe that there is only one right way to do things, or to look at things. If so, when someone disagrees with me, only one of us can be right! Obviously, that's got to be me. Right? Wrong! There is usually room for more than one way to look at things.

Differing opinions are essentially normal. They are a part of human nature. You will rarely find a situation in which two people have the exact identical view. It does not mean that one of them is right and the other is wrong. Innate personality differences in our genetic makeup make us all see things from a different angle. The *mishna* tells us "*K'shem she'ein partzufeihen shavos*" - just as people look different from each other - *kach ein dei'oseihen shavos* – in that very same way, their brains are different too. Hashem, the ultimate Designer, designed each one of us differently; physically, emotionally and spiritually! No two people are exactly alike, nor do they perceive different events in the same exact way.

Even the Torah, which is the absolute, ultimate truth, can be deciphered and dissected in different ways. Look at all the disputes amongst our great sages. None of them are *wrong*! They just had a different way of seeing the same thing. If the Torah allows for multiple interpretations, shouldn't your opinion be up for interpretation?

The Right to an Opinion

When someone disagrees with you, it's not a sign that he doesn't love you, or respect you, or think highly of you. Opinions

are generated based on highly personal factors such as emotions, feelings, and physical perception. When we are commanded to love someone like ourselves, it means that we have to give them the same allowance we give ourselves to form their opinions based on their own unique life experiences.

You don't have to accept the other opinion as the correct one. That would be the next level, and is not something that happens overnight. But you must accept that the other person has as much of a right as you to *have* an opinion! The fact that his opinion differs from yours does not make him less smart, or less respectful of you. It just means that he has a different perspective.

Take a look at your own track record. Remember when you once thought that a certain individual can do no wrong? Remember when you unequivocally stated that a specific destination is the only place worth considering for a family vacation? Do you still think so? Perhaps you don't! Over time our opinions change. Sometimes we mature, but more often the situation changes, or we learn something new and our views shift accordingly. Just like our opinions get to evolve over time, we can learn to appreciate another's take on the matter right now, even though it's not similar to our own. Perhaps one day we will also think the same way, but even if that never happens, it would do us well to realize that another way of thinking exists.

The Darkness of Cynicism

Some might justify their indignance, saying that they have expended a lot of thought on the matter before coming to their conclusion. It might come as a surprise to them that the person with the opposing opinion did the same! Just because it is not identical to yours, doesn't mean that it wasn't a thought-out conclusion on their part.

We sometimes refer to the other person's perspective with derision and disdain, as if their entire premise is preposterous. Take Yecheskel*, for example, who related to me that he had a disagreement with his wife about what to do with their child who was ill. When he told me what his wife thought, it was clear from his condescending tone that it didn't even dawn on him that perhaps his wife might have had a valid point. Denying another person's dignity of having an opinion at all, and making them feel worthless or guilty about it, is hurtful and disrespectful.

Refusing to acknowledge that your spouse is entitled to an opinion as much as you are, causes "Darkness" to enter our homes. If we're blind to another's perspective, we become paralyzed and unable to move from our position. What's more, if we don't take the time to listen to their point of view, there is no way we will ever find their opinion valid. Sometimes we cynically repeat parts of our spouse's opinion, as if it's not even worth our time of day. But if we take the time to actually listen to them and try to understand where they're coming from, we might be surprised by how much merit their words have.

Let Them Think So!

Another important thing to remember is that while sometimes the disagreement is about something important, like *chinuch* or a major purchase, we often get bogged down by inconsequential differences. She thinks that the salad should go on this side of the table. So what? He thinks the neighbors should have gotten a bigger car. Who cares? Some issues are not worth the quarrel, nor the toll it will subsequently take on your relationship. If the topic has no immediate or life altering implications, just allow everyone to think and believe what they want.

Agreeing to someone else, or just admitting that their opinion is valid, is not a sign of weakness. Quite the contrary, it shows that you're confident enough to be able to make room for another perspective! By clearing space for another person and his views, you allow for light and clarity to enter your home.

Chinuch: Children Have Opinions Too

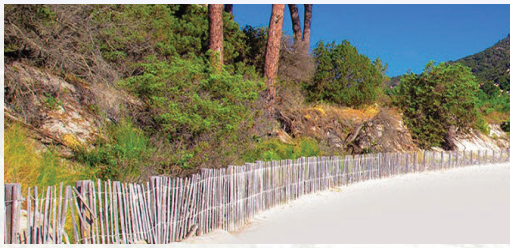
When it comes to children, we often disregard their opinions simply because we

don't believe that they are entitled to have one. Of course, our job is to raise our children to believe in the right things and to behave properly, but that doesn't mean they can't form their own opinions on random topics. Suppose your kid tells you he likes the davening in one shul over another. You disagree. Why are you fighting over it? Why are you dismissing his statement? When you were his age, you also had an opinion! How old are you now? Twenty-something? Thirty-something? At which age do you think you became qualified to have your own opinion?

What's more, perhaps your child has a point. Take a moment to hear him out. Maybe there's something bothering him about the shul you prefer, maybe it's just a difference of taste, or maybe – just maybe – he is right!

When you make him feel silly for having and expressing his opinion, it won't make him stop having one, but it *will* make him refrain from sharing it with you. You don't want to make your child uncomfortable or reluctant to have an open discussion with you. The benefit of hearing him out is that you will teach him (by example) how to be flexible and respectful when *he* has a difference of opinion with someone else.

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Q&A

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



Question:

A father approached me that his son very much wants something that he feels is inappropriate. He tried pushing him off and telling him no, but it didn't seem to work. Now he has taken a different, somewhat manipulative approach. He has told his son that this is not something that one of the best boys would want, and if he asks for something like that, it implies that he is not one of the best.

Answer:

I cannot denounce this practice enough. When your child hears that his wants qualify him as "not good", it will not make him want it less. What it *will* do is make him believe that he is simply not a good boy, and he will become complicit in his behavior since he is anyway subpar. That is both harmful and dangerous.

A better way to solve this situation would be to tell the child, "You know that you are one of the best boys in your class, don't you? I feel that this is not something that the top boys in your class have. Why don't you ask around in *cheder* between the better boys? If you still feel you want it, then I'll get it for you. But just know that I don't think it befits your status as one of the top." The moment he feels that you don't forbid it, and that you think highly of him, he might make the choice to forego his request.

It's interesting to note that the same father also told me that last year he tried making his son say Tehillim during the *Shovavim*. Not surprisingly, his son refused. This year he took a different approach. He told his son that during *Shovavim* he tries to say Tehillim every day and if his son wants, he can do it too. "You mean I don't have to?" his son asked. "No. Only if you feel like it." he answered him nonchalantly. It goes without saying that this year his son happily said some extra Tehillim during these weeks. If we give our children the feeling that they're human beings worthy of our respect and validation, they generally don't disappoint us.

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