

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

MISTAKES

Parshas Acharei Mos relates the events surrounding the deaths of two of Aharon Hakohen's sons, following which Hashem tells Moshe Rabbeinu that no one is to enter the Kodesh Hakadoshim, other than the Kohen Gadol on Yom Kippur.

The Divrei Yisrael derives a lesson from this based on the *mishnah* that tells us that a person should not say that when he has free time he will learn, because it's quite possible that "free time" will never materialize and he will never get around to learning. He stresses that the concern is not only that he'll never find the time — it's more than that, because serving Hashem when we have free time and it's easy isn't anywhere nearly as meaningful as when it's hard, amidst other responsibilities and a busy schedule.

It's wonderful to have free time to learn and do *mitzvos*, but that's not generally how Hashem set up this world. Part of being alive and serving Hashem is making time for what's important, not waiting for the time to magically appear out of nowhere (and making excuses when it doesn't happen). Making the time and creating the space is what makes our *avodas Hashem* meaningful, even if we think that if only we had more time, the learning or the *mitzvah* would be done "better." After all, if Hashem had wanted *limmud haTorah* and *mitzvos* to be done by people with plenty of relaxed free time, He could have given the Torah to the *malachim*, who have plenty of time to fulfill His will.

There's no question that it can be very hard to serve Hashem and make time for learning and davening and doing *mitzvos*. There's also no question that this is the precise challenge that Hashem has given us — to make time for Him, demonstrating how important *avodas Hashem* is to us.

With this, the Divrei Yisrael explains the *passuk* that tells us that, "One should not come to the Mikdash at any time," as hinting that one should not wait to serve Hashem when he has the time — rather, he should make the time to do so, even when it's hard.

When it comes to *chinuch habanim*, this is especially important to remember. The years when we're raising young children are usually also the years when we're busy with finding jobs, buying a house, figuring out *shalom bayis* issues, and so forth, and we certainly don't have "free and relaxed time" to devote to nothing other than *chinuch*. Again, if Hashem had wanted us to have this free and relaxed time to devote solely to our children, the Torah would have instructed us not to have children until we are financially established, with a firm *shalom bayis* and no external worries.

That's not what it says, and so we understand that if Hashem had wanted *chinuch habanim* to be easy, He would have made it easy, and given us children at a time in life when we have no other worries and responsibilities. Instead, we have the task of raising our children to be *ehrliche Yidden* during years when we have so many other, important

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Gedalia and Shaindel Arnstein

In memory of his father

שמואל בן פנחס ושינדל

and her parents

יעקב בן דוד ויהודית
עלקא מרים בת אהרן ושינדל

ת. נ. צ. ב. ה.



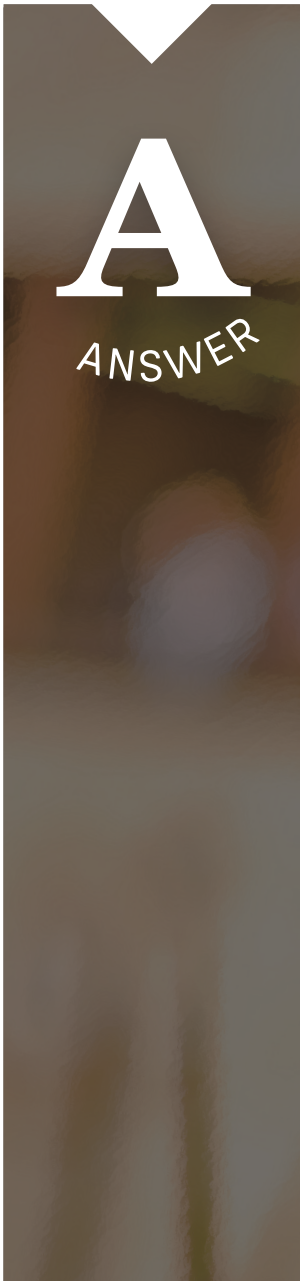
Dear Rabbi Gruen,

I read your essays and listen to your classes, which are great and helpful, especially as I'm the type of person who gets very stressed about doing things right. In fact, I really got the impression from your *shiurim* that it's so important to put tons of effort into raising children the right way, and that no sacrifice is too great.

But a friend of mine keeps telling me that we shouldn't obsess over anything and that someone who's calm and relaxed lives a happier life, even if it means that we will inevitably mess up here and there and make mistakes every so often. She claims it's fine and normal. She says that when a mistake in her parenting is pointed out to her, she doesn't get flustered, and just reminds herself that she's only human and it's fine to make a mistake.

My question is if the idea of investing in *chinuch* and taking this seriously is a contradiction to living calm and relaxed and allowing oneself to make mistakes along the journey of *chinuch habanim*.

Thank you



Obsessing over anything, and getting nervous or anxious, is almost never good, no question. That said, everyone takes at least some things seriously in life. Even your friend who advocates a relaxed and calm life certainly has at least a few areas in her life where she makes sure not to slip up, because those are the areas that really matter to her.

I think it's important for everyone to realize that *chinuch* is among the most important things in life, and putting thought, effort, and energy into properly nurturing the *neshamos* Hashem entrusted us with is something we should all do. Taking the job seriously is very important indeed.

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The Gemara, based on a *passuk* in Tehillim, describes two kinds of darkness and the effects they have. This world is compared to darkness, because we are often misled by the influences around us that cloud our vision. One type of darkness is so dense that it renders us blind — we can't see where we're going at all. The other type of darkness, a dim and inadequate light, is more dangerous: We think we can see, but we don't realize that the darkness is confusing us into believing that, for example, a pillar is a person or a person is a pillar.

In this physical world, we are often blinded and trip over obstacles, not realizing what's going on. That *should* teach us to be careful of where we step, and to look for guidance along the way. However, a person who doesn't realize that his eyes are deceiving him in the dim light doesn't bother to ask for guidance because he has misplaced confidence in his own abilities, and so he stumbles forward, slipping up all over the place, without realizing that he should be very, very afraid of all the pitfalls before him. He mistakes good for evil and evil for good, and each time he takes the wrong path, he becomes more and more convinced that it was, really, the right path, only the signpost was wrong, or the last person he asked for directions made a mistake... At the very gates to Gehinnom such a person will still be convinced that he's about to enter Gan Eden and that anyone who tells him otherwise is not to be trusted.

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We're right after Pesach, a time when there's been enhanced focus on our children and the importance of instilling the correct values in them. The plain fact is that everyone alive makes mistakes. There's no one who doesn't slip up at least once, and we should expect people (including ourselves) to make mistakes. Therefore, there's no reason to become despondent when things seem to go wrong, nor is there reason to get angry with someone who points out, "Excuse me, but you were wrong about that..."

Instead of getting upset about being called out, we should be focusing on what happened, how it happened, and what happens next — that is, what the outcome is. This is where we see the difference between the wise person and the foolish person. The wise person is, first of all, careful not to make mistakes. If he does slip up, however, even in something minor, and someone points it out, he is grateful for being corrected and immediately takes steps to figure out how he went wrong and what he can do to ensure that it doesn't happen again.

At the very least, we should be ensuring that we don't repeat the same mistakes we've been making in the *mitzvah* of *chinuch*. There are times when we seek to cut corners or costs in the short-term, and it's then that we should remind ourselves that in the long-run, it's likely to end up more difficult, more complicated, and more expensive.

The foolish person, however, frequently makes big mistakes, serious mistakes that should never be made in the first place. Worse still, he keeps on making the same mistakes, over and over, without learning from what went wrong. Even worse, if anyone points out his mistakes, he makes excuses and justifies himself — and that's the crux of the problem.

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Toward the beginning of Parshas Eikev, the *passuk* states: "If you will surely forget Hashem your G-d ... I testify against you this day that you will surely be lost." A *tzaddik* from an earlier generation once asked: What does this come to tell us? All the person did was forget — is that so bad? After all, it's only natural for people to forget things, so why should he be punished, and why so severely? He then answered: The problem isn't that he forgot "something." It's *what* he forgot that is the problem. Of course people forget all sorts of things, but forgetting Hashem is something that must never occur!

This is something we can also see in the *halachos* of "*leket shich'chah vepe'ah*." If someone accidentally leaves a large amount of the crop behind, this is not included in "*shich'chah*," because people just don't forget large items, leading one of the great *tzaddikim* to comment: "Forget Hashem? How can anyone forget Hashem? Of course people forget things, and sometimes it's not their fault, but there's no such thing as forgetting Hashem!"

The same can be said when it comes to *chinuch habanim*. A person can take a *sefer* out of the bookshelf and forget to return it, or forget to put his dirty laundry in the hamper, but when it comes to one's children, there's no such thing as making a mistake and forgetting how important this *mitzvah* is.

Let's say a person is driving and he collides with someone's car. Of course he pays for the damage he caused. But when it comes to damaging a person, and especially one's own children, parents have a responsibility to make sure it simply doesn't happen in the first place. Nu, if you break something, if you lose a few dollars, okay. But children... We have to take this *mitzvah* much more seriously.

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Let's take this a step further. If we do slip up and make a mistake, at the very least we have to take it seriously and learn the right lesson. At the very least, we have to make sure we don't make the same mistake twice, not with this child, and not with the next child either.

Not long ago, someone told me a useful piece of advice that he'd heard from a *choshuve* Yid. A certain person sent his son to learn in a very reputable *cheder*, but the child didn't do well there. When it was time to pick a *cheder* for his next son, he was in two minds as to whether to send this boy to the same *cheder*, and he went to this *choshuve* Yid to ask his advice, who answered him with a *mashal*: When a person wants to travel by train, he first checks to see that it's going in the right direction. He's not going to get on a train that will take him in the opposite direction to where he wants to go.

"You've already seen that the school where you sent your oldest son didn't take him where you wanted him to go. While it's possible that things could work out differently for your second son, you should at the very least make sure that the *cheder* does things differently this time around, so that the results are better. After all, getting on the same train as last time and hoping that somehow, it will take you somewhere different this time around, isn't the smartest thing to do..."

When a person makes a mistake and wants to excuse it, he often finds himself saying: No, it wasn't me! It was just that things happened this way... or that person said the wrong thing... the other person got involved and... it was all those other people who made such a mess of everything... It wasn't my fault!

Now, some of these excuses could be partially true, but usually, the truth is buried in a huge mound of excuses and

justifications, and what happens is that instead of correcting the mistake, a person just keeps on repeating it. We have to start realizing that we simply don't make serious mistakes with our own, beloved children — and that if something does happen, at the very least we have to figure out why and make sure that it doesn't happen again.

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Sometimes, people are stingy when it comes to investing in their children and decide that a certain thing is just too expensive. I certainly don't mean to imply that parents should spoil their children and purchase anything they ask for, but there are times when a parent decides that a particular expense is too much, and later, when refusing to pay has negative results, they end up having (even willingly) to pay much more to fix things.

For instance, if a child needs specialized help or therapy, it's going to cost a lot. Sometimes, a few dollars of wise investment can mean avoiding the necessity for therapy later on. I often tell parents that there are many things that are cheaper than therapy, and being stingy now could mean that later, one ends up paying a lot more.

Someone recently told me about a certain couple who went to a *shalom bayis* counselor every week, which cost two hundred dollars each time. The counselor mentioned one particular session when the entire discussion revolved around a fight the couple had over fifty dollars. The wife wanted fifty dollars to buy something and the husband refused to give it to her, and they were arguing over whether she deserved the money or not.

The counselor turned to the husband and said, "You know what? I have an excellent idea for you! Let's skip next week's session, and you'll save two hundred dollars just like that. Then, give your wife the fifty dollars she wants, and you'll still be $150 better off. What do you say to that?"

The husband shook his head.

The counselor said, "I don't understand. You're prepared to spend $200 here every week, but you won't give your wife $50?"

"For *shalom bayis*, I'd pay anything!" the husband responded.

Unfortunately, many of us, when we're being honest, can relate to this situation. Many people claim to be willing to do "anything" for their children, and yet when it comes down to it, they aren't really willing to invest what needs to be invested, to ensure the best outcome for them.

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In conclusion, I think it's important to emphasize that a calm and relaxed parent is likely to be more capable of raising healthy children than a parent who is constantly nervous and anxious or obsessing over how they are doing.

However, if being "relaxed and calm" translates in practice into not caring enough and forgiving oneself too readily for "being human and making mistakes" — which means that the parent just lets things slide and doesn't take them seriously enough or learn from them — then I think it's very important to reevaluate one's priorities.

It's wonderful to stay calm and relaxed regardless of what happens if the priority is enjoying a relaxed life, but if we understand that our priority is raising healthy children to serve Hashem, then we'll realize that it is absolutely vital to take this job very seriously and be on our toes with the willingness to invest whatever it will take — whether it's time, energy, money, thought, patience, or whatever else — to bring out the best in our children. *Be'ezras Hashem*, when we invest what it takes to raise healthy children we will see success and be able to be truly relaxed and calm when we enjoy the fruits of our labor and appreciate the *nachas* for many happy and healthy years to come



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