RABBI
SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the home

PARSHAS VA'ESCHANAN

HELPING A CHALLENGING CHILD

This week's *parshah* includes the famous *passuk*, *"V'atem hadeveikim baHashem Elokeichem chayim kulchem hayom,"* on which the Noam Elimelech (in *Likutei Shoshanah*) asks: Why only "*hayom* – today"? The Rebbe Reb Elimelech answers with a *mishnah* in Pirkei Avos, *"Al ta'amin b'atzmecha ad yom moscha* – don't believe in yourself until the day of your death." A person may appear to be on the right track and be doing everything correctly, but all the same, he shouldn't become overly confident and complacent, because what happens today is not predictive of what tomorrow will look like. You can never go on "cruise control" with your *avodas Hashem*. Each day brings new challenges and requires new efforts.

In *ruchnius,* falling into routine – even a good routine – leads to a lack of alertness which brings about its own problems. When it comes to *chinuch*, parents are often confident that they're doing the right thing, and the truth is that they generally do what's right instinctively when it comes to their children. Nonetheless, *"Al ta'amin b'atzmecha…"* still applies. It's important to feel and project confidence in your approach, but don't be too sure of yourself. You don't *always* need to consult a professional before making a move. You don't *have* to call your child's teacher to inquire about every little change in behavior. But if your approach hasn't met with success in the past with a certain issue, or you're faced with a challenge you aren't all that sure about, don't get stuck in over-confidence mode, allowing your gut feeling to lead you full speed ahead. Don't conclude that nothing can be done because the approach you *knew* was right didn't work. Tomorrow is another day, and new situations can bring new challenges, a new "*hayom.*" It's very possible that what worked in the past isn't relevant for the future. If you don't have the answers, you may have to seek them elsewhere and be open to learning something new.

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Question:

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

I've consulted with you in the past and read your book. As you describe, my 5-year-old son is a UV, hypersensitive child. I want to ask two questions regarding him. The first question is about his bathroom habits. He tends to run to the bathroom at the last second, so his underwear is often wet. Sometimes, he doesn't go until it's way too late and he gets really wet. (For example, he was outside with his cousins, feeling uncomfortable. By the time he came in, he was already very wet.) Understandably, the smell can be really bad and even we, his parents, are repulsed by it. Do you think this is connected to or a result of his sensitivity? Maybe from feeling degraded? A lack of confidence? What can we do about it?

My second question is about effective punishment. What is the right way to punish my child when he does something wrong that must be stopped right away? Usually if I punish him, it backfires on me. He gets angry and behaves even worse. If he's angry at me because I didn't let him do something, he yells and pulls my skirt. I'm embarrassed to say but he can even smack me and call me names. I try to go away from him to calm down, but he just pulls at my skirt and comes along with me. If he wants something I don't have or don't allow, he yells and kvetches. If I talk nicely and calmly back to him, he says, "It's your fault that I don't have what I want." I know he probably needs a hug at that time, but I need to calm down first to be able to give it to him. How do I handle all this?

Answer:

I'm sure many people can relate to various parts of this question. Much of what you describe is within the boundaries of "normal" for a five-year-old, although the specifics are on the more challenging side of the spectrum. And yes, as I point out in my book, children who are challenging in this way are usually also very sensitive. Understanding that much of this stems from your child's emotional discomfort gives you a different perspective. You're not dealing with a "difficult child" but with a child with difficult emotions.

Let's start by addressing what you write – that you know he needs a hug and you also know you need to calm down. Part of the answer here goes back to the age-old question: "How do I get myself to do what I know I need to when it's so hard?" The question isn't really how to handle the situation (you know the answer to that already). The real challenge is how to get yourself to actually give that hug and calm down.

People often tell me how many times they've sought advice, or how many books they've read. They know exactly what they need to do, but claim that "it's not working." It's not that "it" is not working, but rather that it's hard to put the ideas into practice. If you know your child needs a hug but find it hard to give it, *that's* the challenge. So, what are you going to do about it? It genuinely is a tough challenge, but the fact that you're the parent and he's the child obligates you to do what needs to be done regardless. That's true when your son is five and it remains true when he's fifteen. You're older and more intelligent. Your child may not deserve the hug, but he needs it and you're the parent and this is what you signed up for. Giving your child what he needs is

your privilege as a parent. If you can't do the hug, do something else instead. Seize the opportunity.

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With regard to the specifics of your situation, you mentioned the difficulty with your child smelling unpleasant and feeling repulsed. I can't tell you not to feel what you feel; I can only tell you to try your best not to act in a way that your child *senses* that you feel repulsed. When you change a child's diaper, you don't have to like any part of the process but you get it done without hurting your child. Even at a very young age, a child can sense if you feel disgust when changing him; how much more so when we're talking about a five-year-old boy with issues in this area. I can assure you that he doesn't feel good about it; he may be broken even if he doesn't show it, especially given his above-average level of sensitivity. Try your best to avoid shaming him further.

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It's very possible that the difficult behavior along with the specific issue of wetting pants stem from the same emotional difficulty. As many times as I've seen this play out, it still fascinates me how so many similar issues concern very sensitive children. Children without these emotional challenges automatically choose the sensible, logical option and thereby avoid such challenges. The internal struggle and emotional difficulty can have a strong impact even on physical issues a child is dealing with. That's why in this case, for example, it's not only about getting to the bathroom faster and being aware of the urge to go. It's about making your child feel good about himself, which is why anything that makes him feel worse about this problem is unlikely to improve the situation.

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Now for the next and very important point. Think for a minute: What is this child's status? Is he the "problem child"? Is he the "smelly kid"? Is he the kid who "always misbehaves"? When he asks himself what *you* think of *him*, does he come up with a negative image (and this could apply even if you view him positively, due to his sensitivities)? This could be what's holding him back from doing better. All children need to feel good about themselves, but sensitive children (who are skeptical by nature, quicker to misinterpret, and less tolerant of unacceptance) are even more needy in this area. As hard as it may be, try to turn your son into the "'good kid," the one who's appreciated and respected for all his good qualities. He's not dumb, and he knows that superficially, his behavior doesn't quite justifiy that label, but you can still use your creativity to gradually alter his identity – and you'll simultaneously be altering the way he approaches his challenges.

I saw this recently with a child in camp who was being very difficult. He woke up kids at night, broke stuff, fought with everyone and behaved badly in general. Punishments didn't help, and neither did incentives, but making him kitchen manager did. His specific issues still had to be addressed, but they were taken care of from the perspective of "a kitchen manager doesn't do things like that." He really was given responsibility over the kitchen and felt like a million dollars. Once a child feels needed and respected, he'll do his best to live up to his new image.

While it may be tempting to view this issue as one that will resolve itself with time, I urge you to deal with it now, regardless. I'm sure you've tried plenty of things already, but different strategies suit different temperaments. While it's true that the issue could clear up on its own (and it may not), since it is likely emotionally based, you could end up simply having the underlying issue express itself in another way.

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You asked about "effective punishment." The word "punishment" has an interesting connotation and suggests that you're out to get even with the child. In terms of *chinuch*, the focus should be more about consequences, regardless of which word you use. This is a general concept in Yiddishkeit, and the Shelah describes at length how Hashem does not "punish" – rather, *sechar* and *onesh* are about natural cause and effect – "if you do this, that happens." When you do a *mitzvah*, you're building a connection to Hashem and drawing down good things to yourself through this channel. If you sin, you lose that connection and block the channel, automatically losing access to the good things Hashem wants to send you.

Another thing to keep in mind here is that if you "get back at" your child for doing something wrong, your child may choose to get back at you, and you'll both end up stuck in a cycle of fighting. Worse still, it could end up as a fight that he wins. If the punishment you decide on hinges on something that your child is supposed to do, what happens if he doesn't comply? If you fine him a dollar and he refuses to hand it over, you will have to take it by force – another form of power struggle. This is why consequences that involve you withholding something you would prefer to provide (whether it's something tangible, or your presence or help) are more effective. Be clear about the fact that

you *want* to give and that your child's behavior is the obstacle.

This way, the message is clearly not about "getting back at" your child, and you also ensure that you remain firmly in charge. Make sure you follow through, though. If you said you won't be able to do something because of a certain behavior, don't do it. Even if your son throws a tantrum and starts breaking things, don't give in, or you'll end up transmitting the message that such behavior pays and "works." So, if he breaks a chair, you still won't do what you said you wouldn't. And even if he breaks a second chair, you'll stay resolute. Hopefully those will be your last two broken chairs because your child will have learned that you mean what you say. (You can deal with the natural consequences of breaking things at another time.)

You may be able to use such an approach for the specific issue of your son's wetting his pants as well. "I want to buy you new pants, but as long as you're getting them wet it's hard for me to feel great about doing so. I really want to though." You can also balance things out with an incentive: "If you go on time, I'll get you some really special pants." The balance of consequence and incentive is often enough to motivate a child to alter his behavior.

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As with any issue, you have to believe in your child. It's not "if" he can make the changes but "when" he does so. "I know you can do this, and I believe in you. I already bought your prize because I know you can do it, and I'm just waiting to give it to you." Instill the confidence in him. There's a saying, "Whether you believe you can or you believe you can't, you're right." A parent's belief has a strong impact on a child.

There's one more issue I want to address. There are red lines that should never be crossed. If a child is hitting a parent or being destructive, don't ignore it. Don't make believe it's okay and don't let him think he can get away with it. If your child is calling you names and tugging at you, the reason is likely that there wasn't a consequence big enough to make him stop. Crying and throwing tantrums are normal, but crossing red lines is not. Let him know that you're hurt and saddened that this happened. "I'm so sad, I can't talk now. I wish I could be there for you but I need time to calm down first, so it'll take around five minutes for me to feel good and serve supper." Don't make him feel that your love for him depends on his behavior, but don't ignore it.

Above all, ask Hashem for help with everything you're dealing with. With *siyatta diShmaya* you will come up with the right words for those irrational and super-emotional situations, the ones that challenge even the most emotionally intelligent people, and you'll find a way to remain calm and in control of yourself as well.

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

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