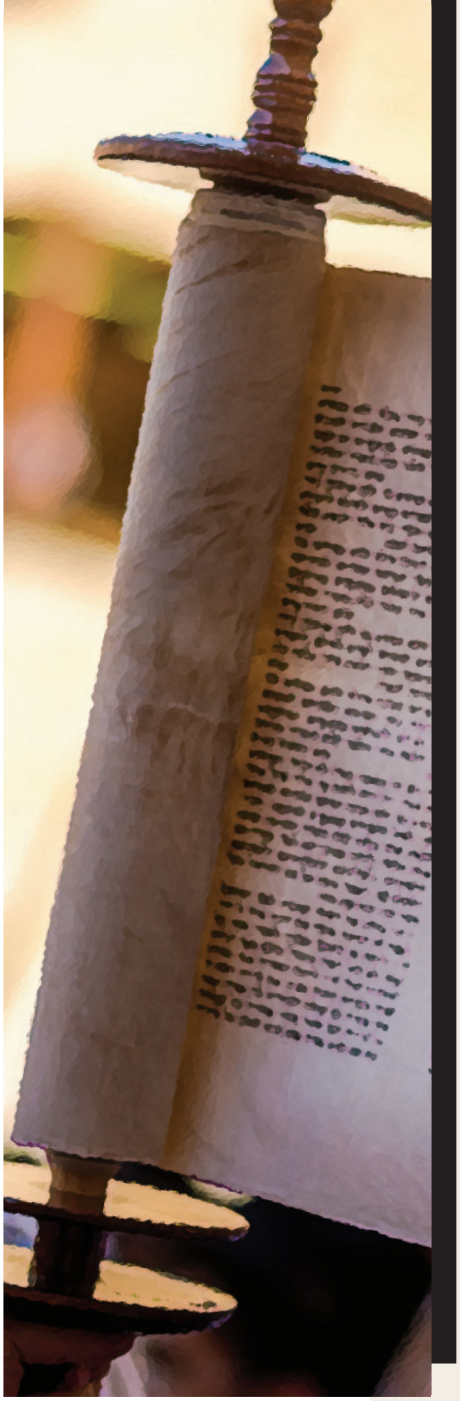


RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

YOU'RE ALLOWED TO POTCH — HOWEVER...

The *mitzvah* of giving *tochachah* — rebuking people for acting against the Torah — is one that evokes strong feelings. Some people seem to naturally gravitate toward noticing and commenting on other people's faults. Others shy away, feeling that they are unsuited to telling anyone what they might be doing better.

The words of the *passuk* stress that *tochachah* must be given when appropriate and that (as Rashi notes) it must be done in a way that doesn't embarrass the person being rebuked. The Chiddushei Harim highlights one very small word in the *passuk* to derive a different lesson.

The *passuk* states, "*Hoche'ach tochi'ach es-amisechah*" and the Chiddushei Harim notes that the "*es*" can also be understood as "with." When rebuking your fellow man, he writes, "Rebuke yourself too."

In practical terms, this means that instead of making someone feel bad, you tell them, "You know, I really struggle with that too, and I've slipped up a number of times. It really helped me when..." Using such an approach makes it less likely that the person on the receiving end will feel ashamed, and enhances the *mitzvah*. It also makes it more likely that the comment will be well-received.

We encounter these ideas frequently in our interactions with our children. We are certainly obligated to guide our children on the right path, but at the same time we must avoid shaming them. And a lot has to do with where we include ourselves in the *chinuch* we are conveying. Our aim is not to control but rather to inspire, and so we must do our best to ensure that our words and actions are well-received.

This week's essay is sponsored in honor of

Rabbi & Mrs. Gruen

by the

Friedlander family

who enjoys and benefits from the constant guidance and inspiration!

Parshas
Achrei-Kedoshim

VOL. 7 | ISSUE 28



Dear Rabbi Gruen,

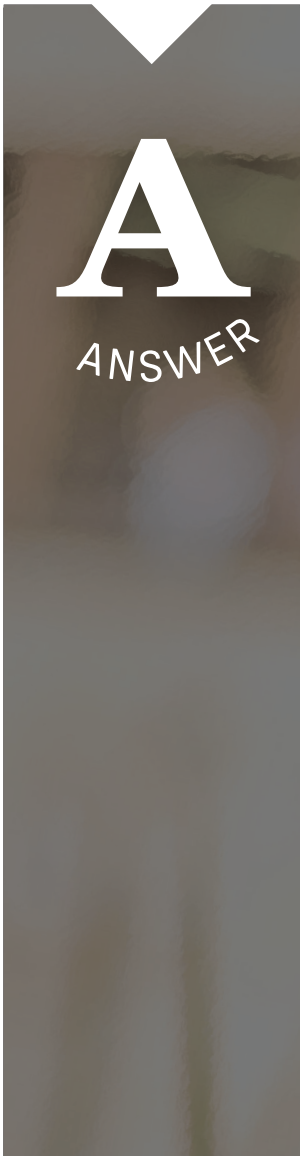
I listen to your classes weekly on TorahAnytime and I really gain a lot in general and in particular from the healthy mindset and way of thinking you present.

There was just one class where I was disturbed at what you were saying, about when to give the "old-fashioned potch." I definitely understand that you're not allowed to hit a child when you're angry, but what I don't like is when it starts to sound very Americanized, that the whole issue of hitting a child is virtually off-limits.

Why can't a child know that parents are allowed to hit a child, that they are allowed to give a potch as they're the authority figures in a child's life? That's the way we were brought up — in fact, that's how it always was. Parents didn't need to think 25 times whether they were allowed to hit a child; they didn't need parenting classes to find out whether it was okay.

I'd appreciate it if you could offer some clarity on why this became such a scary thing.

Thank you



Thank you for your kind words and for your question. Before I address the question itself (and at the risk of sounding defensive), I'd like to point out something I once heard from a prominent Rav. Often, he said, people connect to a certain speaker or rav and enjoy listening to their *shiurim*. People have different tastes and a certain style might resonate with them, so it's natural to gravitate towards someone in particular. And then, one day the speaker says something they don't agree with or appreciate and suddenly they're not so sure whether they like (or respect) the speaker after all...

The point this Rav was making is that sometimes, we enjoy listening to a speaker simply because we enjoy having our own views confirmed and echoed back to us. That's why when we hit a bump in the road and hear something we like less, we sometimes start to wonder if we still want to accept what the speaker has to offer.

That may be a common response, but it's important to be able to connect with someone from whom you accept concepts even when they contradict your preconceived ideas. It's worth considering whether the ideas that you don't like hearing are just as Torah-based as the ones you enjoy, and should be incorporated into your way of seeing things, rather than vice versa.

I'm no Rav or Daas Torah, and certainly nobody needs to accept anything I have to offer. Your words simply reminded me of this idea which is one that many people can benefit from.

• • •

On the issue of giving children petch, I'm not going to specifically advocate one way or another. The Torah certainly permits and even encourages parents to potch their children in certain circumstances. However, debating whether it's "okay" to give a potch is missing the point. I would suggest that the question parents need to ask themselves is not whether a potch is permissible, but rather,

whether that is what they really want to be doing, and whether that's the method of *chinuch* that they want to focus on.

When it comes to parenting, the focus is primarily on the goal, not on the methods. We don't have absolute control on the outcome — all we can do is our best, and daven for *siyatta diShmaya*. The goal in *chinuch* is not to have perfectly behaved children but to inspire them to become exemplary adults. If today we can give a potch and the child will comply out of fear, what will that accomplish tomorrow? What about in ten years' time? There may not always be a better method for dealing with a pressing issue, but when there is, it would be a shame not to come up with something better, without the potch's side effects.

It's true that many people's experiences of parenting included being hit somewhat often and that most of them weren't scarred for life. Nonetheless, few people look back with nostalgia to the "good old days" when a father or rebbi hit children or *talmidim* without thinking twice. It's far more common to hear today's adults speaking with bitterness or hurt about the way they were treated by parents or teachers. That's not to say that every such complaint is justified. After all, children don't usually enjoy or appreciate being reprimanded or rebuked. However, when we invest thought and caution we can overcome the instinctive urge to punish harshly when unnecessary.

I don't think that this is the result of "Americanization." It is simply the result of a greater awareness in this area.

• • •

While this wasn't your question, it does remind me of the many times when I suggest that parents might try asking instead of commanding, and people object vehemently. "I have the *right* to tell my child what to do! You're telling me I need to *ask*?"

My aim isn't to tell anyone what they need to or can't do. Parents are absolutely entitled to command their children's obedience. The question is whether that is *chinuch*. If a child only complies because he's being forced to — under threat of physical punishment — is that *chinuch*? I would say not.

When people stop to think, they usually realize this for themselves. Parents want their children to grow up happy and well-adjusted, and to have a good relationship with their parents. Does giving frequent petch "without having to think first" contribute to a strong and healthy relationship between parent and child? Ask parents who give lots of petch without compunctions how it's working out for them.

The answer to that will usually be, "Not too well" if the parents are being honest. In extreme cases it can end in disaster and *chillul Hashem*.

• • •

Does this mean that the Torah's teachings on *chinuch* are no longer relevant to our day and age? *Chas ve'shalom*. The Torah hasn't changed and never will. Parents are still allowed and in specific cases required to hit their children.

The Torah states clearly (and the *halachah* is brought down in the Shulchan Aruch) that if physical punishment is likely to have negative repercussions, it should not be used. Once a child reaches a certain age, hitting them could actually cause them to hit back and the parent is considered responsible for those consequences. Age is not the only criterion here; rather, each child, based on his nature and circumstances, reaches this stage at a different age (as the Pele Yoetz notes).

It's possible that in the last few generations, there has been a general change in children's natures that needs to be taken into account. Today, aside from having a lower level of tolerance, children reach a certain awareness of what parents "are allowed to" do (according to the prevailing customs of the society in which we live) at a very young age. Even the most sheltered children eventually become aware of the general atmosphere of resentment of parents; eventually, most children are going to find out that there's such a thing as reporting a parent or teacher to the authorities if certain red lines are crossed.

We can decry the fact that such weapons have been placed in children's hands but we can't change the situation and must adapt to it. This doesn't mean that we pander to our children's every whim. What it does mean is that we have to choose *chinuch* methods that work in today's environment and place more emphasis on drawing children closer, and less on stricter methods that were once more commonly used.

After all, a child who is pained or ashamed at being hit by a parent or teacher knows that there are plenty of other children who feel the same way, and plenty of adults and organizations which will confirm their resentment and do their utmost to drive a wedge between the child and the home, and sometimes the frum community in general. Your child may not start out wanting to distance himself, but there are unfortunately many people for whom distancing them is a mission in life and when children are in pain, they are liable to do stupid things they later come to regret.

• • •

Taking all this into consideration is not a concession to "Americanization" or "liberal-progressive ideas." This is the Torah approach — to use the necessary methods to inspire our children to want to be *ehrliche Yidden*.

You write that in the past, "Parents didn't need to think 25 times whether they were allowed to hit a child; they didn't need parenting classes to find out whether it was okay." That may or may not be true, but if a parent living in our generation does feel the need to rethink before deciding if his methods and approaches are beneficial or productive, then absolutely that is what he should do.

There are some people who claim that parents in previous generations were so saturated with Torah that they didn't need to think 25 times before striking a child. If that was true, then that was wonderful, and the same would apply to any parent today who has worked on his *middos* to such an extent that Torah *chinuch* comes naturally to him. However, many parents and teachers do need that pause for thought to prevent them from hitting in anger, which is totally *assur*.

A child should never feel that a potch is something unpredictable, something that he might get if his parent or teacher is stressed or exhausted or has "lost it." A potch, if it is to be used as part of *chinuch*, must be a recognized consequence for certain unacceptable behavior (such as telling a lie or being insolent).

As noted above, the Torah also makes it very clear that in cases where the potch will do more harm than good, it should not be given.

• • •

The Gemara mentions the story of a *melamed* who hit his students excessively and nonetheless, he continued to teach. The Gemara explains that this was not because his disciplinary methods were superior, but because no one taught as well as he did.



A parent or teacher who finds that he is resorting to physical force on a regular basis should consider what this says about his general approach to *chinuch*. In the workplace, it's generally recognized that a boss who needs to scream and yell in order to keep his employees in line is failing at his job — and certainly no one respects such a boss. Similarly, children don't respect parents or teachers who administer slaps indiscriminately and the fear children have of the physical punishment meted out by their parents is very different from the awe and respect that children should feel for their parents as part of the *mitzvah* of *kibbud av va'eim*.

• • •

All too often people look for shortcuts — *chinuch* is hard and challenges our patience to the extreme. Giving a potch can be so tempting; it provides the illusion of control, and is somewhat of a quick-fix in the heat of the moment. It's vital to remember that it really is just an illusion. Forcing children to do the right thing for the wrong reasons is not *chinuch*. Unfortunately, even if parents have the best intentions when enforcing proper behavior, it can backfire terribly when children misinterpret their parents' methods and grow up perceiving their parents as "crazy" or "bad" for hitting them.

Giving a potch is definitely not off-limits, and when administered judiciously and with the right attitude and timing, it's a vital component — among many — of parenting. A potch given in anger is a serious *aveirah*, as is shaming a child by striking him. There are also times when refraining from giving a potch is merely a sign that the parent doesn't care enough to reprimand the child.

We have no need of any guidance from American society to know where the limits are; the Torah has always made it abundantly clear, and when we follow the Torah path we will *be'ezras Hashem* have the *siyatta diShmaya* we need in *chinuch* and everything else in life.

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME: ACHREI-KEDOSHIM 5785

To contact Rabbi Gruen please call **718.841.6557** or e-mail **rabbigruen@lehair.org**
To subscribe to receive the weekly essay, please email **parshalessons@lehair.org**

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