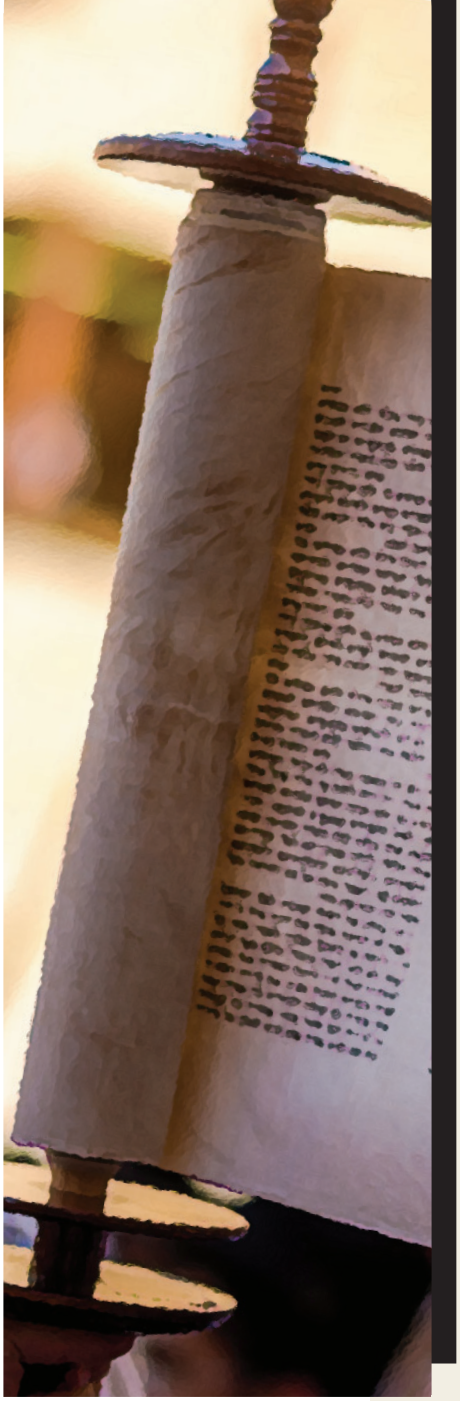


RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

FACING CHALLENGES WITH EMUNAH AND AWARENESS

This week's *parshah* recounts the events surrounding the brothers' sale of Yosef, including how Reuven saved Yosef's life by suggesting that he be thrown into a pit rather than killed. The *Likkutei Harim* brings the well-known Medrash: "If Reuven had known that Hakadosh Baruch Hu would write of him, 'And Reuven heard and he rescued him from their hands,' he would have carried [Yosef] on his shoulders and brought him back to his father."

"If he had known," writes the Chiddushei Harim, he would have done things differently. Why? Not because Reuven wanted to be praised for his deed, but because the fact that Hashem recorded his actions in the Torah shows how important the deed was. At the time, Reuven didn't realize the full importance of what he was doing, but if he had, he would have exerted himself that much more.

This idea can be applied to many areas of our lives. We often don't realize the full significance of the "little" things we do — for example, for our children — and how great the potential impact is.

Another life-lesson we can glean from this *parshah* is derived from the words "*vayeshev Yaakov*—and Yaakov settled." The Medrash tells us here that when we have *emunah*, it's possible to settle, to remain in the situation we find ourselves and deal with the challenges it presents, rather than running away. With *emunah*, we can find the solution to the problem, rather than trying to avoid it.

Very often, people try to avoid or flee from a challenge or difficulty, and although this can sometimes work, the better solution is to have *emunah*, realize that the challenge was tailor-made for us, and then do our best to address it in the right way. When we follow these guidelines, we'll surely see much more *hatzlachah* than we could ever have found by running away.

This week's essay is dedicated by

Rabbi & Mrs. Eliezer Gruen

לרגל אירוסי בתם הכלה תחי'

ויה"ר שיזכו לרוות רב נחת דקדושה מכל יוצאי חלציהם לאוי"ט אמן

Parshas **Vayeishev**

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This week I would like to address four short questions that were submitted regarding chinuch habanim. They aren't any less significant than other questions I receive, but they were presented briefly and I'll address them in that manner.

Q QUESTION

Question One:

(this question dates back to the early summer though the issue is relevant all year round):

Vacation is about to start and I find myself getting very concerned for my older boys who meet up with friends and really need good supervision to make sure they don't meet up with the wrong people. In general, they don't have enough going on to keep themselves occupied, so they're much more vulnerable. How can I watch over them and/or stop them from getting involved in not-good relationships—especially when it's hard to explain why the friends aren't so desirable, and particularly when it's the non-desirable friends who are running after them?

A ANSWER

The concept of avoiding and distancing from a bad influence is one we see in the Torah, and no one would disagree on the problems that can arise from not-good friends. This issue is a challenge for all parents, and there's no question that we all need a great deal of *siyatta diShmaya* in this area. We teach about it, talk about it, and try whatever we can to instill in our children the importance of having good friends and associating with the right people. Nonetheless, our direct influence (read: control) over our children's behavior is extremely limited.

As much as we should and need to be as responsible as possible, no parent can claim that he knows exactly who his children's friends are and everyone they come into contact with. This is nothing new: When we look back at our own childhoods, we can also see that there was a great deal that our parents didn't know about what we were getting in to. Practically speaking, the first thing we need to do in this area is daven. As the Apter Rov notes in Parshas Mattos, when a person does a *mitzvah*, it creates a *malach* that protects him. When parents do many *mitzvos*, the *malachim* they create will go a long way toward protecting their children. Since we are limited in how much we can protect our children, we often need to rely on *malachim* to do the protecting for us.

The next thing for a parent to do is realize that the only relationship that you can control is your own, the one you have with your child. It's so important to make sure that this relationship is the best it can be, so that you exert the maximum influence over your children from the connection you have with them.

This means, firstly, that you should try to create an atmosphere in which your children feel comfortable telling you about what's going on in their lives. This involves not being too critical and trying not to be controlling, as criticism is very likely to make a child simply decide not to share things that are only going to get a negative reception.

Sometimes, parents feel an obligation to tell a child, "I don't approve of this friend of yours." Otherwise, how will the child know to steer clear? In general, especially with younger children, this does hold true. However, so much of *chinuch* is not about the specific example as much as generally giving clarity about what you agree with and appreciate, and what not. Children are far more likely to be open to receiving a message when it's not directed at someone or something specific. This is just one more area where a "quick-fix" solution is likely to be less effective than a gentle, long-term osmosis effect.

When it comes to older children, however, it's important to avoid being too open with your feelings if they already know very well that you don't approve of a certain person or people, and hearing your comments might make them consider sharing less. It's often far better to keep an open relationship where your child feels comfortable telling you, even if they're aware that you don't approve. This places a natural curb on their connection with that particular friend.

Of course if you see anything dangerous going on you are obligated to seek out guidance and take action, while making sure to do so in the right way. But in general, keeping the lines of communication open and voicing your opinion in a friendly and gentle way will achieve so much more than criticism or attempts at control. When your child sees that you're interested in his life, he's much more likely to build a life that you'll approve of.

Q QUESTION

Question Two:

How should a parent react to extreme cases of chutzpah, such as nasty comments, or even getting physical? I'm asking about teenagers as well as younger children. For instance, what should a parent say to a child who responds to a request to do something with, "I'm not your slave"?

A ANSWER

The first thing that should be done in such cases is point out to the child that their behavior is wrong. Teaching the difference between right and wrong is fundamental to *chinuch*. That said, from the question, it sounds like this behavior is something that's happening on a regular basis. Whenever we run up against a recurring problem, it's the approach to solving it that needs to be examined.

As parents, we have to be confident in our approach, and part of that means not being afraid to tell a child they're wrong. A parent should never tolerate unacceptable behavior. However, part of displaying this confidence in our approach is remaining calm. When a child sees that we maintain a calm disposition regardless of chutzpah, or worse, this will influence them to have more respect for us.

On the other hand, when a child sees that we respond to chutzpah (or worse) defensively, by getting angry or losing it, this brings a parent down to the level of the child and leads to a loss of respect.

It's very natural to want to retaliate against a child who said or did something very hurtful, and try to hurt them back, but this is a very damaging response, because the issue is no longer about *kibbud av va'eim*—it's now become a battle between two "children," one of whom happens to be bigger and stronger than the other.

Remaining calm means being assertive, steadfast in your position, and clear about how unacceptable the behavior is, while expressing yourself in a relaxed tone. When you speak in a calm tone of voice, you are automatically less personal or confrontational and it's easier for others to hear your message. It also makes it clear that you aren't reacting emotionally; rather, you mean what you say and intend to be consistent in applying it. You can also clarify the natural consequences of the unacceptable behavior without giving the impression that you're out to control the outcome. As a parent, it shouldn't be hard to come up with something reasonable and practical to implement (with fair warning) if the behavior persists.

You can also describe how such behavior makes you feel, without blaming a child for deliberately behaving badly.

It's the fine line between being afraid to say something and saying too much that needs to be found.

Q QUESTION

Question Three:

I hate to admit it, but I don't enjoy spending time with my children. I'm often angry or hurt by things they do, and look for ways to keep away from them. How can I enjoy spending time with my children when they are often defiant and I don't enjoy being around them at all?

A ANSWER

First of all, I commend this parent for their honesty on this issue. It's of course impossible to fix something before admitting to the problem.

Secondly, I'd like to reassure the parent writing the question that they shouldn't feel bad for feeling this way toward their children. There are children who are more challenging than others, and there are parents who have a lower threshold of tolerance than others—and that's just their nature. It's nothing to be ashamed of.

With that said, there are some pointers in such situations that may make things easier to deal with.

If honesty about your feelings is the first step, the second step is honesty about where the problems are coming from. Some children are definitely more challenging than others, and if we keep coming up against the same issues, over and over again, it can be a sign that we need to change our approach. If, for example, you know that a certain child reacts badly to last-minute changes of plan, then make allowances in cases where these are unavoidable. If a child finds it difficult to stop in the middle of a game and tidy up, even though he knows that six p.m. is tidy-up time, give him plenty of advance notice to avoid a situation that keeps recurring.

Other children may need a lot of attention and time to give them the support they need to behave properly and feel relaxed. Although it may be hard to fulfill their needs in this area, it's likely to be the most productive and rewarding approach, not just in the short-term but also in the long-term. When a child is calmer because his needs are being met, it's much easier for a parent to enjoy his company. Furthermore, as time passes, the child will often become less "needy" due to the time invested in him, and won't even be considered a challenging child at all.

The other side of the story that might need addressing, as I noted, is the parent who might be experiencing challenges of his or her own. If you are exhausted,

stressed, or dealing with anything that limits the amount of patience you have for your children, it's important to recognize this and not see the issue as your children's fault. It's of course also important to do what you can to address these problems.

Sometimes, parents are stressed due to unrealistic expectations, when there's actually nothing "wrong" at all. Consider it this way: When your children are at school, or in camp, do you seek out other children their age to spend time with, because you really enjoy the company of school-age children? It takes time for children to grow up and be pleasant company, and while some parents really do naturally enjoy spending time with younger children, many don't, and that's normal too.

If parents are prepared for all the possible challenges that arise, they'll find it much easier to deal with them creatively. If you know it's going to rain, you'll plan your day around that and be happy with what you can accomplish. But the person who doesn't look at the weather forecast and expects sunshine is going to be very frustrated when all his plans for outdoor activities have to be scrapped when the rain starts falling.

Even the most "child-friendly" parents are going to have their days when they're not so much in the mood of spending time with their younger, or older children, and there's nothing abnormal about that. Being realistic about your expectations, your challenges, and your children's natures, is going to make a big difference here.

Question Four:

My child keeps using the excuse that he "didn't hear" whenever I ask him to do something. Is there a way to stop him from doing this, or to prove him wrong?

I think I'm safe in assuming that you already tried to prove your child wrong, and that it didn't work. I'm not even sure how you could prove such a thing—and even if you can, that's probably not the solution. If someone doesn't want to see sense, whether because they're in denial or are ashamed to admit the truth, then they won't, regardless of the amount of evidence you provide.

Furthermore, if your approach is to "prove" that your child is a liar, it could end up being very counterproductive. Once a child thinks you see him as a liar, he may well start identifying as one and acting like one.

However, this doesn't mean that you have to go along with his version of events. What you can say is something like, "I'm so sorry you didn't hear. Please make sure to hear next time." Of course this should be said calmly in a loving tone of voice, but it's not the simple, "Okay, no problem" he may have been hoping for. You can even add, "I really like to hear you, so please make sure you hear me." After all, your child probably knows very well that you know that he did hear. Responding this way is a gentle reminder that if he keeps up this behavior, it might have consequences that he won't enjoy.

There's also a way to avoid the issue, which is getting your child's attention before making the request. You could even tell a joke and then follow up with whatever else you wanted to say. If you start with, "Yossele, can you hear me? Yes? Please tidy up your room now. Did you hear me?" and then wait for his reply, you're not letting the situation arise in the first place. It shouldn't take more than a few times of doing so for your child to realize that this "not hearing" thing isn't working anymore.

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Hashem should help that we should all have the wisdom to build good relationships with all our children, hear each other, and have *nachas*.



TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME: VAYEISHEV 5784

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