

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

FRAGILE: HANDLE [BUT] WITH CARE!

How far should one go to avoid causing shame to another person? In this week's *parshah*, we learn from the story of Tamar that it is better to throw oneself into a fiery furnace than to cause another person embarrassment.

The Gemara brings another story illustrating the same concept. Mar Ukva and his wife would give *tzedakah* to the poor in secret, concealing their identities. Once, a certain poor man was curious to find out who his mysterious benefactors were, and when Mar Ukva and his wife realized that they were being pursued, they literally ran into a furnace to hide.

Were they really required to do so, asks the Brisker Rav? The words Chazal use to teach this concept are that "it is more comfortable [*no'ach*] for a person to throw himself into a fiery furnace than to mortify his fellow man in public." The Torah doesn't obligate us to make this choice, but it does tell us that it's to our benefit to do so. If we look at the bigger picture, with a focus on eternity, then we realize that it is better for us to accept suffering upon ourselves than it is to inflict terrible damage on another.

This is something we may better understand when it comes to those closest to us — our spouses and children. And when the person in question is highly sensitive, taking great care not to shame him becomes critical. Sensitive people are far more easily wounded and often find it harder to heal.

In my book, *Get Along With Everyone*, I identify four basic traits among people; while all of us have a combination of these traits, one generally dominates. One of these traits is sensitivity, which I refer to as the UV component, and when this is the dominant part of a person's natural personality, it causes them to be ultra-sensitive and fragile.

Around a quarter of all people are naturally more sensitive, having this UV personality, and the basic difference between the UV type and the other three is that the sensitive person, when in a challenging situation, is more liable to be ruled by his emotions. Their threshold for tipping out of logic and into emotion is far lower than for the rest of us. When a sensitive person feels secure, accepted, and loved, they are a delight to be around; when they feel threatened and undermined, they can appear to lose control and may lash out.

We may never know why some people seem to be born this way and why others sail through life far more contentedly. But even if we could plumb to the depths of a person's character, that doesn't mean we can change them. Accepting that they are who they are and dealing with this reality rather than trying to change it, is the most productive path to take.

Sponsored by

Barry Kleinman & family

for Hatzlacha and Nachas!

Parshas **Vayeishev**

VOL. 8 | ISSUE 9

This week I present three different questions all related to sensitive children and the challenges they and their parents face, along with brief responses that are relevant to so many. In this forum I can only scratch the surface of a complex topic, and I would recommend anyone interested in a deeper dive to refer to my book, available in English, Yiddish, and Hebrew. The book offers a unique understanding of how different personalities interact, with a special focus on the UV personality. It reveals how greater appreciation for how people differ, makes it so much easier to know how to interact with all types. With clear rules of what to do and what not to do helps us get along with the people in your life.

Interestingly, while some believe such questions are only relevant to children, when we gain a deeper understanding of how personalities operate and notice how these challenges are so intertwined with the nature of the child, we realize how these insights clearly apply to people of all ages.

Almost uniformly, parents struggling to cope with sensitive children have either capitulated to the child's sensitivity and low tolerance and are spoiling the child out of fear of challenging them more than they can handle; or they refuse to accept that the child has a certain fragility that needs to be taken into account.

Lack of discipline is disastrous for any child, including sensitive types. All children need structure and guidelines. When a child is allowed to set the home's pace, they inevitably become self-absorbed and self-centered, traits that will cause them numerous problems later in life. However, feeling unaccepted or misunderstood is just as harmful. While the damage manifests very differently, this too can have many repercussions that no caring parent wants for their child.

Q QUESTION

Question One:

Shalom Rav Gruen,

Thank you for all the insight you offer in your classes; we are very appreciative. I'd like to ask you about our five-year-old child, a fragile child who, *bli ayin hara*, has tremendous strengths and is *baruch Hashem* an amazing child.

Bedtime for him is very hard. We give him structure — dinner, bath, story-time — but even then more often than not he just has a hard time falling asleep. He'll even say to me, "Ima, why is it so hard for me to sleep?" I tell him to say Tehillim and I try to be patient but at times it's so hard because I am tired myself and work in the evenings, so sometimes, I just let him be and he eventually falls asleep.

Does the Rav have any suggestions for this?

Thank you so much. May you continue to help so many people bring the light of Torah into their homes.

A ANSWER

It's great that you describe your fragile child as "amazing" and that you see his strengths, even though his challenges are causing you difficulties. That's a great starting point, though it's not enough. Even very loving parents don't always succeed in conveying their feelings to their children.

Many children, especially the sensitive ones, are so attuned to nuance (sometimes even when it isn't there...) that a comment such as, "You have such tremendous strengths" is heard as, "You could do so much more with your strengths — why aren't you?" This is why it's worthwhile for every parent to stop and think once in a while, what would my child say if an outsider asked them: "What do your parents think of you?"

From your letter, it sounds like you are already very attuned to your child. The question is one of

balance — where does being attuned stop, and helping a child adapt to the challenges of life start?

Of course, without knowing more about your situation I can't be sure whether or how your child might be controlling you when it comes to bedtime. Perhaps he just wants you sitting at his side; perhaps he doesn't even know what it is that is motivating him. But what is important is that you do what ***you*** decide to do and not what ***he*** decides you should do.

You should set clear rules about the bedtime routine. Don't wait to discuss them at bedtime when he's already tense about his difficulty falling asleep; find time earlier in the day. Tell him that you understand that he sometimes finds it hard to fall asleep, but that you know he'll be able to overcome it. You can, if you wish, offer him incentives for staying in bed rather than coming out to tell you that he's still awake. Make it clear that bedtime is bedtime and that you'll be nearby but not in the same room while he gets to sleep. And stick to what you say, no matter how hard he tries to get you to change your mind.

Regarding practical solutions, you might find that a change in routine or diet is helpful in promoting restful sleep.

Hatzlachah!

Question Two:

Q QUESTION

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

I have a question to ask you about my five-year-old son, who is a very sensitive child. The problem is with his school bus, which he often misses. There is another bus half an hour later, but it's mainly for the kindergarten children and he refuses to get on and starts crying and wants to be taken by car. Since I don't drive, that means ordering a car service.

Actually, I'd prefer to just put him on that kindergarten bus (there are some older children on it too), but my wife doesn't want to. I've pointed out to her that he'll only cry for a few minutes and then calm down, as he does want to go to *cheder*, but she says it isn't fair to force him, as he's so sensitive.

What do you think we should do?

Thank you

A ANSWER

You are right and your wife is right, and please don't let a dispute over which approach to take become a ***shalom bayis*** issue. In general, respecting each other's viewpoints will make it easier to find a solution.

It's normal for a child, especially a sensitive one, to feel embarrassed about going on the "baby bus." And it's healthy for a child to have to adapt to reality and figure out that missing a bus has consequences. The question is how to present this to your son.

Believe it or not, even a five-year-old is capable of understanding the concept of cause-and-effect. You can and should tell him that if he misses the first bus, he will have to get the second one, and that car service is for emergencies only. Make it very clear to him that you know it's a bit embarrassing to travel with the little kids. Clarify that unfortunately, that is what happens when he misses the bus.

Given that he's only five, it is mostly the parents' responsibility to wake him up early enough to be ready in time, to help him prepare his backpack and so forth, to help him dress if needed. But he still needs to know that if he dawdles or misbehaves, and that leads to him missing the bus, then there will be consequences. Once he accepts this, you may find that he misses the bus far less frequently.

If, however, he refuses to go on the second bus, you can tell him that his other option is to stay home. That means that he sits and occupies himself all day, not that you have to find ways to occupy him. Since he enjoys ***cheder***, he'll probably make more of an effort to make his own bus in time. And, you can certainly offer him incentives to get ready early. I know that many parents hesitate before allowing a child to stay home, out of fear that they'll get used to it, but in my experience this almost never lasts over a day or two — and then it ceases.

Question Three:

Q QUESTION

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

I have a question about my teenage daughter. She's very sensitive, and whenever I ask her why she did or didn't do something, she seems to feel attacked. I guess I'm not always careful enough and I realize afterward and want to apologize and tell her that I understand her, but in the end, I don't do that because she responds with such chutzpah that I think it's inappropriate for me to apologize when she should be doing so.

What would you advise?

Thank you in advance and *tizku l'mitzvos*!

A ANSWER

There are several issues here and when we look at each one separately, it becomes easier to solve them.

Your daughter, being so sensitive that she feels attacked at the slightest hint of criticism, needs to feel good about herself. That doesn't mean that you can't ever point out something she did wrong, but it does mean that you have to go about it very carefully.

Overly coddling such a child, especially a teenager, is not helpful to her. You should build her up via her strong points, rather than pretending that her weak points don't exist. And, when you do address her weaker points, try to remember that she's fragile and that words that would sound innocuous to a tougher personality can wound her and be taken in a way that you absolutely did not intend.

You might still slip up — everyone does sometimes. That's okay, and it's also okay to apologize if that happens. When a parent apologizes to a child, that sends a very powerful message, and what a shame to pass up the opportunity.

This doesn't mean that you ignore her chutzpah. It's unacceptable and you should make that clear, calmly and firmly. Regardless of what you said or did, it is never okay for a child to show disrespect for a parent. Let her know that she's better than that, that she can overcome her hurt feelings and behave in a proper way even though she's feeling wounded.

And remember: Seek out opportunities to highlight her capabilities and show her how to turn her sensitivity to her advantage — and to the advantage of others as well.



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