

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

COATING THE TRUTH REVEALS THE SILVER LINING

Parshas Vaeira opens with Am Yisrael on the verge of despair, after Pharaoh refuses to release them from slavery. It is then that Hakadosh Baruch Hu tells Moshe Rabbeinu, "*Ani Hashem*," adding that He did not make Himself known to the Avos with this Name.

Rashi explains that the Avos did not recognize Hashem through His *middah* of *amitus*—consistent truthfulness, because some of the promises Hakadosh Baruch Hu made to Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov have yet to be fulfilled. In his *sefer Imrei Noam*, the Dzikover Rebbe explains these *pesukim* using a *ma'amar Chazal* in Sotah (49b), where we learn that during the Ikvesa deMeshicha, "the truth will be lost."

While *tzaddikim* are deeply attached to *emes* and passionate about living a life of truth, the Imrei Noam writes, in the current state of the world, it is not always possible for them to openly display this, due to the *reshaim* who are often powerful and dangerous. This is why, even if we see someone previously thought to be a *tzaddik* speaking well of a *rasha*, we should not conclude that he must not be a *tzaddik* after all. It is simply that he has no choice due to circumstances which sometimes require us to "bury" the truth.

This is also something we see with the Avos, the Imrei Noam adds. Before entering Mitzrayim, Avraham Avinu was obligated to present Sarah Imeinu as his sister, "as otherwise they will kill me." Yitzchak Avinu allowed Eisav to believe that he loved him, and Yaakov Avinu became Lavan's "comrade in deceit" while living in his home.

Moshe Rabbeinu, however, was different. He feared no one, and Hashem chose him to reveal to him His *middah* of *amitus*—the ultimate *emes*.

One can perhaps suggest another reason why the *passuk* tells us that Hashem did not reveal this *middah* of *amitus* to the Avos. Maybe, this is hinting to us that when it comes to our children, it's important for us "avos" not to use the strict measure of *emes* when being *mechanech*. Sometimes, the unvarnished truth needs a few coats of paint before it can be presented to our children, because the truth alone can be too harsh to accept and grow from.

Often, parents worry that sugar-coating the truth with what they feel are undeserved compliments will lead their children to think that they're just fine as they are (even though they clearly are not) and to stop trying to improve. Quite the opposite is true! Giving your child (or anyone) a good feeling about himself will only encourage him to justify your faith in him and will give him the tools he needs to do even better.

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Parshas
Vaeira
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Dear Rabbi Gruen,

I would like to ask you a question about my seven-year-old son, who is very sensitive by nature, very emotional, and feels things very deeply. Sometimes, his emotions get the better of him and he loses control of himself, especially when he feels under attack.

All day long in *cheder* he manages to hold his emotions inside, but when he comes home, it all explodes. Sometimes, we need to actually physically hold him down to stop him from hurting his siblings. He can also be verbally abusive and say such nasty things, and the only way we've found to stop him is by putting black pepper in his mouth, which calms him down.

What I'd like to know is whether there's a better way to go about things rather than just a band-aid solution.

Thank you



This letter doesn't provide a great amount of detail, but the question is one that could apply to quite a lot of children. Many parents struggle in their relationships with highly emotional children, and while all children tend to be much more emotional than adults, there is a significant number of children who can be described as "highly sensitive," or "UV" as I refer to them in my book, *Get Along with Everyone*. These children are the ones who seem to literally "lose it" much more frequently and easily than others — when they are triggered, they really seem to lose control or at least find it very hard to maintain the slightest degree of control. They generally tend to have a very self-centered perception of life where they are always in the right and other people just don't see it and keep picking on them "for no reason."

Learning to deal with such children (and adults) is challenging, but with the right methods and important insights, we can gradually peel off the layers of abrasiveness to reveal the sweetness beneath.

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The parent writing the letter describes how this seven-year-old boy comes home and seems to turn into another person. All day long in *cheder* he's keeping his emotions in check, and when he comes home, he allows everything to explode. It's possible that this is exactly what's happening as the pent-up emotions that accumulate all day pour out the moment he steps through the front door. However, I would like to suggest an alternative explanation, one that I have found to be both more typical and more helpful in understanding this phenomenon.

In many cases, when we notice a child behave one way in one setting and another way entirely in another setting, this gives us important clues for understanding the child's personality. People don't generally behave in radically different ways depending on where they are and who they are with. Even though the *cheder* environment is quite different from the home, a person's "style" usually remains the same wherever he is — for example, a calm child will be more-or-less calm in all settings; a very lively child will generally be lively in school, at home, in camp, and so forth. A very sensitive child, however, is very likely to present himself differently depending on his surroundings, because his behavior is much more tied to his emotional state and how secure and accepted he feels at any particular moment. This "split-personality" is generally a telling sign of a sensitive child.

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There are a number of reasons why a child could feel more (or less) secure in *cheder* than at home. Perhaps in *cheder*, when he's with classmates all the same age, with an equal amount of attention given to everyone, he doesn't feel challenged or threatened. Perhaps he has a very good *rebbi* who gives him plenty of positive feedback. Perhaps he has the capabilities to shine in *cheder* due to his intelligence or *hasmadah* or good memory. But when he gets home, these positive traits don't attract attention or praise. There may also be older siblings around who are more capable, younger siblings who get

more attention, and so forth. Perhaps his parents aren't able to give him the same level of attention he gets in *cheder*, simply because they have many other responsibilities. Sometimes it's just the opposite: At home, a child behaves nicely and gets plenty of positive attention from his parents and allowances made for his sensitivity, whereas in *cheder*, he feels the competition between his peers, knows he isn't one of the more intelligent boys in class, and he acts out because of his sense of inadequacy.

In any such case, it's important to find out exactly what is going on in *cheder*, both from the *rebbi* and from the child. Does the *rebbi* think the boy is shy, or frightened of speaking up in class? What exactly does "good behavior" in *cheder* mean? The parents should also ask their son why he likes going to *cheder* (presuming he does). Maybe he's getting lots of compliments from his *rebbi* and has plenty of good friends who help him to feel good about himself.

Anywhere you see someone, child or adult, behaving differently depending on the setting, it's important to try and find out why. When it comes to *shalom bayis*, a husband or wife can usually learn a lot by trying to find out what their spouse enjoys in other relationships. Are other people giving your spouse something you could be giving too? Even if they're giving something that you are actually incapable of matching, at least you will know what to aim for or in which direction to proceed.

If you find out that your child is getting lots of positive reinforcement in *cheder* for asking a good *kashye*, for clear handwriting, or anything else, it's worth trying to implement something similar at home. There are almost always things that you can compliment a child for, and this alone could make a significant difference in making your child calm at home.

If you're at a loss for something to say, you may need to be a bit creative. You can call the *rebbi*, for instance, and when your son comes home, tell him about all the nice things his *rebbi* said about him.

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Of course it's also quite possible that after sitting for so many hours at a desk in a classroom, a seven-year-old boy simply needs to let off steam when he comes home. If that's the case, parents can be prepared and give him the opportunity to let out all his surplus physical energy. If he needs to run around, play, eat something, then let him. If supper's not ready and he's hungry, be ready with a snack. If it's possible, you can even take the child on a short walk or watch him on his bike for a quarter of an hour.

Even if you can't do this every day, it helps to do it whenever you can. Transitions are always harder on very sensitive children, so try to make the transition from cheder to home as smooth as possible. Give him time to adjust, and it could be that doing so will set the tone for the rest of the afternoon and evening.

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Very often, highly sensitive children get their (desperately needed) attention at their worst moments, not their best. That's why it's important to try and change this, and catch them when they're doing well, when they're calm and much more receptive to what you have to say. Once they're in an emotional state, most of what you try to tell them, even if it's worded in the best possible way, just isn't going to be recived.

So, if your son comes home in a good frame of mind and you greet him warmly with a few nice compliments and everything seems to be going well, seize the opportunity to say another few words that *b'ezras Hashem* will be taken the right way. First introduce the idea: "After your snack, you can play with your little brother; he's been waiting to have someone to play with all afternoon." Then, add an incentive: "If you play nicely with him for half an hour, I'll give you a treat."

You don't have to give your child a prize for every half hour that he plays nicely, but when this is done once in a while, you're giving your child a sweet taste of behaving well and having it work out well for everyone.

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Some days, however, your child is still going to misbehave, like any child, and you have to know how to deal with it in a way that is effective for highly sensitive children. Abusive behavior, whether physical or verbal, should always be addressed, and while perhaps for some, putting a tiny amount of black pepper in a child's mouth can be the right thing to do, there are also other ways to deal with things, perhaps better ones.

Before I suggest some other approaches, I'd like to repeat a story I once heard (although I can't vouch for its authenticity). It is said that the Satmar Rebbe, the Beirach Moshe *ztz"l,* once sent his *gabbai* to the *beis medrash* to confront a certain Yid and give him a thrashing. The Yid had no idea why he had merited this treatment and went to see the Rebbe, who told him: "I heard that you sometimes hit your wife, and since you clearly don't realize how much it hurts when you hit someone, I thought it was a good idea to have you find out." Naturally, the problematic behavior stopped.

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The key to knowing how to react when highly sensitive children misbehave is recognizing that once their emotions are in control, they don't fully realize what they're doing. This is why if you take a harsh approach ("You're a terrible child! Look what you did! You're totally crazy and out of control!") it will likely backfire on you when the child only feels even more intensely how "everyone's against me," or "no one understands me."

It's certainly not easy, but it is very important to remain as calm as you can and tell a sensitive child who is misbehaving, "Please stop doing that. It hurts a lot when you do it. If you don't stop, I'm afraid I'm going to have to do xyz, and I don't want to have to. I know you're a *tzaddik'l* and you don't mean to hurt anyone. I know your little sister made you really angry and it's tough when that happens; however, you still mustn't act that way. I know you can stop if you really try." You can also add, as an incentive rather than a demand, "When I see that you're trying hard, I'll give you a treat."

Giving your child advance notice of a consequence for a certain wrong behavior makes it less likely that he'll feel that you're unfairly picking on him. Keeping things calm and technical is also imperative. Don't get into an emotional battle with any child, especially if he's hypersensitive.

For the rest of the time — and it really is the majority of the time — do keep on the lookout for good behavior and make a big deal about it. You can even give a surprise treat and compliment your child on doing something well. Sensitive children have a great need for positive reinforcement from the outside world, and there's no reason to fear about giving them praise or warmth, even if you don't think they merited it one hundred percent.

Another thing that's important to keep in mind is avoiding the very opposite — using good behavior as a weapon against a child. "If your *rebbi* could only see what you behave like at home... he wouldn't believe it's the same boy who behaved so nicely in *cheder*!" Instead of building on the positive in *cheder* and trying to extend it to the home, comments like this destroy the positive in *cheder* and ruin things at home too.

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There are also times when neither good words nor hard consequences are in place — instead, you can just let the comment or behavior pass. Obviously this doesn't apply to seriously wrong behavior and certainly not to bullying a sibling, as parents are responsible for the welfare of all their children and must stop the problematic behavior immediately. However, a nasty comment said in the heat of the moment, as long as it isn't done on a regular basis, can often be ignored. If a child is fighting with his sibling and blurts out, "You're a *rasha*!" you don't need to jump on him for using such language if he doesn't usually say things like that. If you do, you may end up unwittingly reinforcing it ("How could you call your brother a *rasha*?" "Because he *is* a *rasha*! I hate him!")

A story related by an elderly Yid illustrates this point well. This Yid grew up in a more traditional family and lived in a mixed neighborhood with lots of friends from public school. One day, he heard that the local priest was setting up a choir for a special event and was looking for children to sing. He went along, together with a couple of other Jewish boys, and in return for their participation, all the boys were presented with a watch.

When the boy came home, he told his mother, "I want to be a *goy*."



"My mother was a very wise lady," the Yid related, "and she stayed really calm. She asked me why I wanted to be a *goy*, and I said that for years I'd been going to day school and I never got anything, but now just for singing a song, I got a watch!

"My mother said, 'Okay, first help me hang the laundry and then you can become a *goy*,' so I started pegging out the clothes, and there was one towel that was very wet and it dripped onto my new watch — and it stopped. So, no watch, and suddenly I didn't want to be a *goy* anymore.

"My mother could have made a whole *tzimmes* out of my one little comment," the Yid added, "and I'm sure she was really shocked to hear my words, but she was smart enough to know how to react, and I never gave being a *goy* another thought!"

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I'd like to conclude with another story about a certain *askan* who would visit Yidden in prisons across the United States. One time, he was visiting a maximum security prison where people were sent for serious crimes, and some of the men incarcerated there were quite scary people. All the same, he treated them like anyone else, giving them words of *chizuk* as well as a hug.

As he was about to leave, one of the inmates approached him, a big hefty guy who looked a bit intimidating. "Rabbi," he said, "please can you give me another hug? It felt so good when you embraced me."

The rabbi of course did as he was asked, and then the prisoner said to him, "Rabbi, I want to tell you something. If someone, anyone, had hugged me that way, even once, I wouldn't be here."

I'm not trying *chas ve'shalom* to imply that the parent asking this question isn't giving their child enough love, or that any parent is at fault for having a very sensitive, fragile child. What I would like to stress, however, is that fragile children need a lot — a whole lot — more love and warmth than most people realize, and when they get it, they will thrive beyond all expectations. And yes, there are situations that call for serious reinforcement and consequences, and those too need to be implemented with great caution, especially when dealing with sensitive children.

May Hashem help us all to relate to our fellow Yidden with love and warmth, to see the good in each other, and to bring out the good in everyone.

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