RABBI
SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the home

PARSHAS SHLACH

SCHOOL SKILLS FOR SENSITIVE CHILDREN

Among the *mitzvos* described in Parshas Shlach is that of *hafrashas challah*: *"Raishis arisoseichem challah tarimu terumah*—the first of your dough shall be set aside as *terumah*." The Chasam Sofer in *Toras Moshe* teaches that the word "*arisoseichem*" can also refer to children (as "*arisah*" can be translated as a "crib") and points out that the word *"terumah"* is made up of the letters of *"Torah"* with the addition of a *"mem,"* to allude to the idea that we want our children to grow up to become *talmidei chachomim,"* imbued with the Torah that was given in forty (*mem*) days.

The *Midrash* teaches that out of a thousand children who start out in *cheder,* only a hundred will emerge capable of learning Mishnah. Of these hundred, only ten will progress to *Gemara*. At each succeeding stage, less and less children "succeed." Yet we should never hold back from investing in our children.

This, too, is a lesson that can be derived from this *parshah*, as the Chasam Sofer explains from the wording of the *passuk* that follows the one quoted above: "*umeraishis arisoseichem...*" *Terumah* means setting aside one part out of each hundred, not giving everything away. However, we must still invest in the entire hundred, in all our children, even if only one will emerge a *gadol*. And the Chasam Sofer goes further, and says that investing all we can in all our children actually *guarantees* that at least one will become a true *lamdan*.

We can never know which child that may be, but even if we did know, we should never withhold our investment in each of our children, even if they are clearly struggling in Torah. Every effort, every investment is worthwhile, for that child alone, and for his siblings' successes too. Although not every child will, or can, grow up to be a *gadol baTorah*, still we must do our best for each and every child, to help them reach their individual potential.

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Question:

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

First of all, we very much enjoy your speeches and find them very enlightening. We thought you may be able to help us.

Our oldest son is seven years old. I think you would say he is a fragile child. He is a bright, sensitive, caring boy who loves to have a good time and is always curious about the world. He is generally shy and has a hard time transitioning between activities, be it bath time, bedtime or playing. We are constantly working on routines and he needs a lot of positivity and patience.

He is the type of boy who doesn't talk much about his day and I always wonder if he is happy and if he has normal social skills. He is very close friends with one boy and they are always playing together. He does tell me about different times that he plays with the boys in the class. He is the youngest in the class and when he started kindergarten, the *menahel* suggested that we put him up because he is smart. Right now, he is definitely on a level with the class and in my opinion, maybe even ahead. But when I called the *menahel* to see how he's doing he told me that it's a strong class and maybe my son doesn't have enough self-confidence and therefore became friends with a boy who is academically weaker than him.

I wanted to mention another thing. One day I told my son about a program the cheder was introducing that would teach them about personal safety. He was very excited about it, and when I asked him why, he said that it would teach him what to do when a certain boy bothers him. That Shabbos, he said he wanted to move to a different class because some of the boys in his class throw other boys down and then tell them that if they won't forgive them, they'll do it again. When I asked him if anyone ever did that to him he hesitated and then said no. As parents we are concerned for our son's happiness. We are wondering how seriously to take what he says and what we can do to help him in yeshiva.

Thank you,

Answer:

Firstly, I want you to know that you are describing a situation that is fairly common and definitely normal. You're describing a normal profile of a sensitive child. As I mention often, one out every four children is hypersensitive. Sensitivity can play out in different ways. Some sensitive children will bully others because they can't handle being challenged. Others will be more introverted and have a hard time expressing themselves. Knowing that this is normal will help you deal with it and you'll be a step ahead. You'll avoid seeking diagnoses, which even when valid will not be much of a help, being that you can't change the natural fragility of such a child.

That said, it's still important to keep your eyes open and pick up on red flags, without, of course, becoming paranoid or overly anxious. If your child suddenly doesn't want to go to cheder for two or more days, that's a red flag and should be looked into. If he suddenly stops taking snack to school, question why. Don't wait until a major issue appears to investigate what's going on. There is a big difference between paranoia and awareness.

The Rebbe Rashab of Chabad once said that the same way there's a *chiyuv* of *hanachas tefillin* every day, there's a *chiyuv* to invest a daily half hour thinking about the *chinuch* of your children. Don't be too busy to notice the red flags. And if you do notice one, don't ignore it. Look into it and take the necessary action.

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The first step to take is to be in touch with the teacher or rebbi even before you notice anything wrong. Let them know you're listening and aware. That in itself is sometimes enough to prompt a teacher to look out for your child. But if you do see something going on, contact the rebbi, tell him what you noticed, and ask if he noticed something too. Ask for help to make your child feel more comfortable in school. As a parent, you're not in school to see what goes on, so it's important to be in touch with the adult who is there.

That said, there's so much that's out of our control. Even in our own homes, comments need to be said the right way and actions need to be weighed before jumping in. What happens when your child is not under your direct supervision is already something else entirely. You may be able to share your ideas and experiences with your child's teachers and rebbi, but you can't control how they will actually behave toward your child. Knowing that we can't control everything reminds us that we need to daven for the success of our children. A huge part of *chinuch* is davening for our children.

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With regard to bullying, you can teach your child to stay away from a bully. You can also help him identify bullying behavior so he knows when to stay away. Teach him that he's allowed to be strong and show confidence even when he doesn't exactly feel like it. Teach him to ignore hurtful comments or behaviors. And suggest that he group up with other boys with good *middos*. But above all, teach your child not to be afraid to tell an adult if something happens. He shouldn't be afraid to "tattle". Some bullies threaten, "If you tell on me, I'll do it again." Reassure your child that no one will do anything to him for telling because his parents are stronger than any bully, and the rebbi or teacher is on his team and will take care of him when necessary. He should never feel afraid.

There will always be those who try to take advantage of a weaker child. If you tell your child that you're going to take care of a situation, make sure you keep your word. I've heard from countless people over the years that they were told someone would take care of them if they shared what happened, but they never came through. Make sure your child knows that if he told you he was hurt and you said you'll do something about it, you actually do it. And let him know once you've taken action. Give him reason to trust you.

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When a child is reserved, don't place too much emphasis on getting him to open up. Some children are naturally quieter than others. But even more than that, don't interrogate. "What happened? Did someone do something to you today? Did anyone hurt you?" Try to be more creative. For example, you yourself could introduce the topic of bullying by saying that you heard there's such a problem in his *cheder*, as if it has nothing to do with him, and then ask him if he has any details to share. You can ask him if knows anyone who was bullied. You could also try introducing the idea from the opposite direction, asking your child if anyone did something nice to him that day. If you start by asking him questions that are easier for him to answer, he may have an easier time opening up on other topics too.

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But there's more we can do for our sensitive children. Aside from protecting them and giving

them space, we can also boost their ego and confidence. And you don't have to wait for them to get hurt before doing that. Don't wait for your child to need *protection*. Invest in him before things reach that stage. Your child may not have inner confidence. Build it up for him. That doesn't necessarily mean teaching him to fight back, but it does mean making him feel needed and special, noticed and admired. Some children have a natural sense of self-esteem, but others need help building it up. For instance, you could give your child a toy or snack to share with friends, not because he has to, but because his friends will appreciate him. There's no limit to how much you can compliment or build up a child. There's no limit to how much a rebbi or teacher can do for a child.

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Sometimes when we see a quiet child, we either blame them for their problem or try to figure out how they contributed to it. Even among adults we often blame the victim for not being braver or more resilient. While it's often true that if a child were stronger, he wouldn't be singled out by a bully, most of the time, the bully is the problem that needs to be addressed, not your child. Your child is healthy even if sensitive, and is being picked on. It may be harder to deal with the bully, and it's easier to tell the victim to ignore the teasing or learn to protect himself, but that's not good enough.

Don't make the mistake of trying to turn your child into a fighter. Some parents think they should send their child for therapy to make them tougher. Apart from the fact that this doesn't usually work because it goes against the child's nature, it's also ignoring the problem. The problem is that someone is hurting your child and that he has to know that you, as the responsible adult, will address the issue. School should be a safe space for a child, a place where he feels protected and taken care of, and he has to know that you will do everything you can to make it this way.

To summarize, of course you must teach your child what to do if he is bullied, but more importantly, look for ways to build his confidence, and help him feel stronger, cared for, and loved.

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

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