RABBI
SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the home

PARSHAS BAMIDBAR

THE PARENTING PATH

Chumash Bamidbar opens with the counting of *Bnei Yisroel*. The Sar Shalom of Belz points out that the total number of Jews in each *shevet* is always an even number, and explains that this comes to teach us an important principle: In *Klal Yisroel*, there's never an odd man out. There's no such thing as someone who doesn't belong. Each and every individual is critical to the whole. We are all members of one large family.

Within our personal family units, it's important to recreate that same feeling. Whether it's your spouse or your child, no one should feel that he doesn't belong. That's not always easy. Some children behave in such a way that it's a challenge to convey the feeling that they're an integral part of the family. They may flout your principles or engage in behaviors that seem designed to show how different they are. But that's precisely the time when we need to double down and do our best to give over that feeling of belonging.

The feeling of being connected and belonging is one that every Yid deserves, and that certainly holds true for our own family members. The Baal Shem Tov says that wherever a Yid goes, *iz er keinmol nisht elend – a* Yid is never alone. That's because he's always connected to Hashem and always connected to *Klal Yisroel*. When we learn the *parshah* of *yerushah*, we see that it's always possible to find a relative, even if we need to look a little further than we expected, because a Yid is always connected to his people. How wonderful to be able to give every Yid this feeling–that they are needed and appreciated, and that they belong. But it starts at home. Only a close family member can ensure that each person feels that he truly belongs, that his contribution is valued–that no one is an "outsider."

When we all feel connected, everything is so much simpler. Difficulties are easier to surmount when they can be shared. Often, when people face challenges in *shalom bayis* or *chinuch*, part of the challenge is that they don't feel supported. Aside from the challenge of the situation itself, there's the added stress of having to deal with it alone. When we're connected, ensuring that we convey this to those we love, everyone gains..

This week's essay is dedicated by

Mr. & Mrs. Kessler

May the spreading of Torah guidance be a Zchus for their family!

Question:

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

Thank you very much for your weekly emails. I find them informative and inspiring.

I have some general *chinuch* questions. Everyone focuses on teenagers and how to help them in troubled times. But I want to know about toddlers! I want to be *mechanech* my kids properly from the start so that *b'ezras Hashem* we won't have to deal with troubled teens in the future.

What I would like to ask is, how can parents help their children build healthy self-esteem and confidence when they themselves are still works in progress? Neither my husband nor myself grew up in harmonious homes. We try to keep the peace between ourselves to set our children an example of showing love and respect – but what else can we do?

Also, how can I stop my son from hitting me? When he gets frustrated (mostly at bedtime) he hits or pinches. Time-out doesn't seem to achieve much; he just yells and throws tantrums, and even after calming down he carries on pinching and even threatens to "report me" to his Tatty! What can I do or say that will make a difference?

Thank you so much.

Answer:

The question touches on several issues, and I will start by addressing the first part which can be summed up as follows: How can I convey the healthiest messages to my children from early on, and thereby prevent difficulties from emerging later in life?

That's an excellent question and a very important point when it comes to *chinuch*. Avoiding and preventing difficulties is a lot easier than dealing with tough situations later on. It's a lot easier to work on simple issues than it is to deal with a crisis, and it's a shame that people often need to be pushed into crisis-mode before they seek the help they really needed earlier. Unfortunately, in a crisis, people may be obligated to do things they would never have considered otherwise. Had they taken care of things earlier, they might never have reached the point of needing to take such steps. Extreme situations call for extreme measures. In a crisis, people are willing to invest huge amounts of money and effort to solve problems. Yet they could have invested much less earlier on to avoid these problems ever arising.

When a person reaches out to a therapist in the midst of a crisis, they're often told that there's no appointment immediately available.Therapists are busy people, but there's another reason for a therapist not working in emergency-mode. Pushing off a client for a few days or more can take him out of crisis mode and bring him to the therapist in a calmer frame of mind, one in which he's ready to address the underlying issues.

That's why it's so important to lay the foundations of *chinuch* with your toddlers, as you point out in your question. And generally, that is the best way to avoid crises with teenagers.

All the same, it's important to note that there's no magic in parenting. There is no single set of rules that is always applicable, no single book that can answer all your questions. There's no guarantee that giving over the "right" messages in your children's youth will prevent challenges in the road ahead.. You always need a combination of ideas, implemented consistently over time, and of course heavy doses of *siyatta diShmaya* and *tefillah* to put children on the right track.

And even when you feel you are on that "right track," you still can't just sit back and let the roller-coaster run its course. It doesn't work like that in real life. Yes, you have to make your children feel

valued, loved, and accepted at age four–but you can't just stop there and expect smooth sailing when they're teens. You have to keep working, day-in, day-out. It's not like a childhood vaccine that provides immunity for life.

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What's interesting though, is that when it comes to parenting, most people instinctively know what needs to be done. When you attend a lecture on *chinuch,* you're usually not surprised by the ideas you hear. The challenge is in the implementation. Even relationships between adults are not always easy to navigate; all the more so with children who don't always repay your giving, don't always appear deserving, and are often outright challenging. And even more so as families become larger and the dynamics gradually become more complex.

Healthy parenting isn't easy, and it often requires that parents stretch themselves in order to really "get it right." If your child refuses to go to bed just when you're particularly tired, it's not easy to stay in control of yourself and the situation. But as the parent, you instinctively want to stretch yourself. You wouldn't do it if you didn't have to, but because you want to parent your child and see him grow up to become a healthy individual, you will do whatever it takes.

As a parent, you don't have the liberty of checking out because you're not feeling up to it or not in the mood. When you drive a car, you don't have the liberty of stopping and starting as you please. You have to go with the flow of the traffic. If you're tired, you can't just stop in the middle of the highway and take a nap. It's not an option.

It's the same with parenting. There are times, many times, when there's just no choice but to be an adult and do the right thing. Of course you can sometimes take a responsible break, whether that's going on a vacation or taking turns with your spouse. But when you're with your children, you can't cop out. You have to try your best. And if you lose yourself, try again next time. Remembering and accepting that parenting is challenging and that it's oftentimes about stretching yourself makes it easier to do what you have to do.

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You mentioned that you and your husband had difficult upbringings. A healthy upbringing makes a tremendous difference in being able to parent your children properly. Those of us who were lucky enough to be raised in a nurturing environment should be very grateful to our parents. But what if you weren't one of the lucky ones and you weren't raised in such an environment?

The answer is that you work harder at your own parenting and do the right thing anyway! Back to the car analogy. You may be driving an old clunker of a car with outdated systems, but if you're on the highway, you keep driving. To an outsider, it will look like your driving is as effortless as someone driving a new car. It isn't. It's harder steering and you deserve a medal for keeping at it, but that's what you do. And feel good about it! Compliment yourself, and your spouse should compliment you too.

And while we wouldn't wish a troubled childhood on anyone, if your upbringing wasn't the best, you have a slight advantage. You know what *not* to do and why you shouldn't do it. You felt it in your very bones. The well-known Rashi at the beginning of *Parshas Emor* explains how giving someone a warning by showing them what happens if they don't follow the rules is that much more effective. It's like a doctor who cautions his patient to cut down on sugar or "you'll end up like Mr. Brown who died at age 50." That's a much more effective warning than just saying, "be careful."

It's the same in your situation. If you didn't have an ideal childhood, you know what you *don't* want to repeat with your children. If you weren't taken seriously, weren't given options, didn't get the attention you needed, you know what that felt like. It may be harder for you to provide it to your children, but you know firsthand why it's so important that you do.

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With that introduction, let me try to offer some practical advice, although it's impossible to fit all the ideas that might be helpful to you on one page. And yes, some of these suggestions are certainly easier said than done, but they are still worth mentioning so that you can simply do your very best.

One key piece of advice I would give is: Don't get into power struggles with your child. Don't get defensive or critical or raise your voice when your child says something that pushes your buttons. Often that's a trigger for your child to do more of the same. Remember who's the adult and who's the child. You might be tired, even exhausted, but you're the parent. Show your child that you're confident and responsible and that you expect to be taken seriously. Stay calm and collected. (Tip: Make believe someone's watching you…) Often, that will prompt your child to calm down and collect *himself*.

This applies even if you think your child doesn't deserve it. Regardless of the way he's behaving, he needs your patience. If your goal is to raise a healthy child, you have to overcome your natural impatience or exhaustion or tension and set the right example.

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A tremendous part of *chinuch* is focusing on the positive and making your children feel good. Another compliment, another good word, again noticing how they did the right thing. "I'm so excited that you managed to be on time again. I'm so proud that you were able to accomplish…" Show your confidence and pride in your child. Tell them how much it means to you. Do this at a ratio of nine compliments for each word of criticism. It's not easy, but it's so important. Each new compliment changes the way you look at your child, which changes the way your child feels about himself… and so it snowballs. (Unfortunately, so many of us do the exact opposite…)

This is important for all children, but especially for a difficult child. Hunt out every little thing he does right; stress the *mitzvah* he did even if he didn't manage to do it all the way. Build him up. Make him feel like he's *already* doing so much. Use your *chochmah* to bring out the best in him.

And don't allow yourself to stay in the same rut. If you know bedtime is difficult, preempt the difficulty. Provide incentives and give compliments. It'll achieve a whole lot more.

What about when you *do* need to criticize? Never generalize. Never say, "You never," "You always," "Why do you," "You're such a..." Don't talk about the child. Talk about the deed. And maybe even justify it for them. "Yesterday you went to bed late because you got too focused on xyz, but today, I know you'll be in bed on time." That's so much better than, "You never listen and you're never in bed on time!" It's not about "you," it's not "always," and it's not "never."

Unless it's a compliment. Then it's most definitely "you" and "always." "You always give me such *nachas*. I'm so grateful to have you as a child." Generalize in a healthy way.

Of course healthy boundaries and discipline are important, and of course your children need to know there are rules and structure. Just bear in mind that once the foundations of good feelings and compliments are laid, the discipline and boundaries follow so much more smoothly than they would if you tried to impose them by force.

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People sometimes equate success in parenting with controlling their children. But controlling our children is not the goal. The goal is having a healthy child who feels good about himself and who does the right thing with a happy heart.

A woman once came to the Satmar Rav *zt"l* for advice and a *brachah* for a child who wasn't behaving in *cheder*. A few months later, the Rebbe remembered to ask her how the boy was doing. The mother related that her son had switched classes and now had a stricter *melamed* and was therefore doing much better. The Rebbe advised her to switch her son back to the softer *rebbi* so that the child should learn that it's good and sweet to listen to authority figures, and that we don't just behave because we are forced to.

Controlling a child does not really teach a child all that much, and if that's your goal, you may seem to accomplish what you set out to do without really being successful in the long-run. While it is important to ensure that your child listens to you, remember that this is not your ultimate goal. You want to make your child feel good about doing the right thing. You want your child to feel good about himself. When you stretch yourself and focus on what's best for your child even when it's hard for you, then with *siyatta diShmaya*, you will be able to avoid many difficulties later in life.

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

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Thank you and Tizku Lmitzvos!!

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BAMIDBAR 5782

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