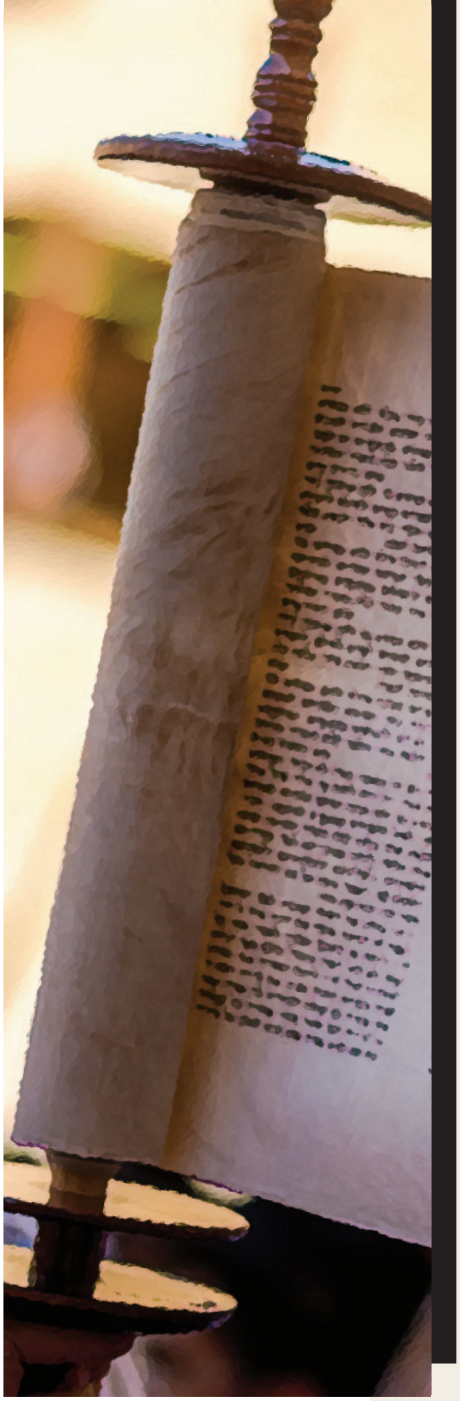


RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

ON SAYING AND NOT SAYING

"This is the *gezeirah* of the Torah" is what the Targum informs us, regarding the first few words of this week's *parshah*. This is usually understood as referring to the *parah adumah*, a *mitzvah* we don't understand but fulfill regardless, simply because "the Torah says so."

The Chasam Sofer points out that the concept of doing without understanding could equally be what is described in the continuation of the *passuk*, "*asher tzivah Hashem leimor*." Which *gezeirah* is this? The Chasam Sofer explains that it is Hashem's decree upon Torah leaders that they must educate and reprimand the Jewish People when needed.

In general, Torah leaders would much prefer to sit at home learning and *davening* without feeling responsible for correcting the wrongs of the world. The rest of the nation would also prefer such a situation in which they would be less accountable for their actions, as no one would be there to warn them of the consequences, making them culpable if they don't change their ways. Hashem, however, decreed otherwise and obligates our leaders to accept responsibility for guiding the Jewish People in order to give everyone a chance to do *teshuvah*.

The responsibility to guide and rebuke properly is truly a heavy one, involving not only knowing what to say and how to say it, but also whether to speak up at all. Words that cannot or will not be accepted are better left unsaid.

Parents have a similar responsibility when it comes to their children. Regardless of how well their children may be educated in school, their primary *chinuch* is from the home and parents are obligated to guide them in the true Torah path.

Perhaps we can add that just as leaders must know when to refrain from speaking, parents have to know when it is better to not say something, regardless of what others might suggest. And just as Torah leaders need *siyatta diShmaya* to fulfill their tasks, so too must all parents daven for Hashem's guidance to be able to successfully transmit Torah to the next generation.

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Parshas **Chukas**

VOL. 7 | ISSUE 36



Question One

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

I'm grateful that you share your wisdom on TorahAnytime and I especially appreciate the idea you keep reinforcing, that living within the Torah's guidelines leads to the happiest life.

I'd like to hear your advice on the topic of addressing or responding to teenagers on sensitive topics (such as marriage and having children). What do you think about the idea that parents should get to their heads first, before their peers feed them premature, sensitive information in a wrong way? I'm especially worried about this second point because I was made aware that in sleepaway camps many kids bring home an "education."

Sincerely, a conscientious mother

Question Two

Good afternoon Rabbi Gruen,

I'd like to start by thanking you for all your lectures and writings that I really enjoy and gain from on a daily basis. My question here is as follows:

My oldest child is a girl of seven. She loves to understand things and questions a lot. I encourage her to ask and make time to answer her, but my difficulty arises when she asks questions that I do not know how to handle, primarily on the subject of how kids are born etc., especially when she asks really blunt questions such as, "Is the baby in your stomach?" (as I'm almost due). How should I answer?

Thank you



Underlying both of these questions and others like them is the unspoken assumption that the "we don't talk about such things" method may have been appropriate for "the olden days," but in our times, a new method is needed.

It's true that children have access to certain information today that perhaps was more out of reach in the past. However, in general, children are neither more wise nor more curious today than in previous generations. A young child hundreds of years ago was just as capable as one today of noticing things that spark questions or coming up with questions of his own. Human nature has not changed; nor has the Torah. If we don't see our *chachmei hador* coming up with new ways to educate our children, we can rest assured that the way we've been taught to do so is fine. We need not come up with our own ways of doing things, or look for outside sources to teach us otherwise. For the most part, there is a subtle, and in some schools and *chadorim*, a clearer general message which clarifies ideas about issues that come up naturally when encountered in Chumash, for instance. Similarly, many schools and *chadorim* discuss appropriateness regarding touch and speech, each in their own way, as they deem fit. Mostly these are messages that have been passed down while being

shaped according to need, and provide enough of a hint to clarify things for children who have more creative minds.

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Does reserving information for a more appropriate age and stage mean that we don't answer a younger child's questions at all? No, but much depends on the child, their age and level of maturity, and the nature of the question.

Some cases are simple such as the question posed by the child who notices something different about the mother. Denying that there's anything to notice will only cause confusion and even more curiosity, but that doesn't mean that the answer has to encompass a mass of information. All it need be is the most basic response to satisfy curiosity; therefore, a direct question such as, "Is there a baby in your belly?" can usually be dealt with using just a plain, "Shh, let's not talk about it," with a smile at a shared secret which conveys understanding, resolves unnecessary doubt, and gives the child a sense of security of being able to ask without being reprimanded or lied to. It also preserves *tzniyus* and reinforces a healthy and Torah-sourced attitude of being conscious and specific about what is discussed.

For those who are worried about a child being hurt by not knowing enough, it's important to realize that exposing a child to too much can be just as damaging, and there's no way to ensure that all information is received well. That's why sticking to Torah guidelines keeps us safest.

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The kind of exposure most parents are more worried about is, however, that from the outside world. Can we control it? No. We can only *daven* for Hashem to protect our children and do our best to keep them in a sheltered environment and supervise their friendships in a healthy way. In many cases, children will still pick up more than we would like. Does that mean that we should preempt "the world" and get in there first?

This idea has gained a certain amount of currency in recent years, and while it can be appropriate in certain cases, as a blanket method for all children, it is far from being so simple and straightforward. Those who insist that, "If only someone had told me such-and-such, it would have been so different…" should be aware that many who have had other kinds of education struggled just as much or even more.

We can never truly anticipate what children will be exposed to (or what they will expose themselves to). Even if information comes from parents rather than peers, it is still information that children would be better off without, and which parent really wants to accept the responsibility of handing over this information to a pure child who might have otherwise grown up without it?

Furthermore, it's always hard to know what a child will do with information provided. Of course you can tell them to not share it, but you just handed him something that is up to his judgement as of now. That's aside from the unspoken message he might hear (as it is essentially what the parent *is* saying): "You shouldn't really know this, and you'd be better off not knowing it, but just in case someone else tells you, I'm telling you first."

Even if the parent makes it clear that such topics should ordinarily not be discussed and that they feel pushed into a corner, holding the discussion still puts a certain kind of stamp of approval on talking about these issues. The path is then open for the child to discuss it with friends whose parents might not be "considerate" enough to share this knowledge with them. This can and does happen even when parents tell their children not to take the information any further.

If a parent finds out that it's his or her own child spreading information, then naturally this has to be dealt with, firmly and clearly. And if a parent finds out that some other child is the source of this alternative education, steps must be taken. It's important to be aware that often, it's the child we would least expect who starts disseminating inappropriate ideas. If and when this happens, we tell our children that talking about such things is wrong and should not have happened.

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Does this mean we should start denying what the child was exposed to? And what about when the child comes and asks?

These are such common questions, and while there is no one standard answer that can always be used, regarding the style of the response, there are several important points to keep in mind.

The first point is to accept the question as a normal occurrence and not get angry or upset at being asked it. Nor should parents jump to the conclusion that their child has been associating with the "wrong" people. Some children are naturally more observant and curious; others just notice and wonder less. Punishing a child for first of all thinking and second of all asking you as the parent rather than someone else is completely counterproductive, and can push a child to seek

information in far less desirable places — and you won't be able to stop them from doing so.

The second thing to bear in mind is that parents must feel confident that their approach is the right one. We do not "hide" knowledge and the knowledge is not shameful in any way. It is simply that it is inappropriate for children and therefore we don't tell them what isn't good for them, just as we don't tell young children who ask about dying that, "Yes, when you die we will put you in a coffin and lower you into the ground and cover you with earth," even if that is true and eventually they will find out anyway.

Finally, if a child has already figured something out, something that you would rather they didn't know, there is no sense in denying it and certainly they should not be made to feel guilty for having thought about it. A parent should just calmly acknowledge it with a bare minimum of words and then add that this is something that is not spoken about until they are older and they actually need the knowledge.

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Many children will accept a brief answer as long as it is given in a straightforward manner. The questions of very young children can often be easily brushed off. Older children may need a little more information, but there is almost never any need or justification for going into any sensitive issue in detail. Even when we teach our children about not letting others touch them inappropriately, it is usually enough to talk about "touch that is not *eidel*."



In the rare cases that more information may need to be given, parents really do need guidance and shouldn't assume they can figure it out on their own. They may be better off referring their child to someone else, especially if the relationship isn't so close and the child won't be satisfied with what they're told by the parent.

In such cases, parents may understandably feel that the child is once again proving him or herself difficult. Try not to look at such a situation as a challenge, but rather, as an opportunity. Be grateful that your child is turning to you and not someone else, and tell them how glad you are that they came to you with questions. Take the opportunity to build the relationship and enhance the level of trust, and even when you indicate clearly that some knowledge remains off-limits for now, stress that this is an expression of your love and concern for them, not of your doubts regarding their level of maturity.

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At the end of the day, we can't control our children — not in this area, and not in any other area, either. We can only *daven* that Hashem should protect them and guide them to the right people for their answers. This has always been the case and will remain so. Yes, it is easier today to access information, but even in the Gemara, even in Chumash, certain children will see and understand things that we would maybe rather they not notice. Others will sail over the words while barely registering that there is something "missing" from the explanations.

Acknowledging our lack of control doesn't mean that we abdicate our responsibility. Alongside our *tefillos*, we still need to do our best for each child according to his nature, and when we do, we will surely have the *siyatta diShmaya* we need to overcome this and all other challenges.

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME: CHUKAS 5785

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