RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

TORAH LESSONS

FOR THE HOME

PARSHAS MATOS-MASEI

REWARDING PROPERLY

In Parshas Matos, Shevet Reuven requested permission from Moshe Rabbeinu to stay on the eastern side of the Yarden. They promised to join the rest of the nation in the battle for the Land, but first wanted to "build barns for their livestock and houses for their children." Rashi notes that Moshe chastised them, telling them, *"Lo chen. Asu ha'ikar ikar vehatafel tafel* — That's not right. You should prioritize what's most important and treat other things as secondary." Their families should be more important to them than their cattle.

The Rebbe Reb Henoch of Aleksander *zt"l* asks why Moshe didn't simply tell them that livestock are not more important than children, or even that children are more important. Why was such a lengthy response needed?

The answer he gives is that it's always necessary to set priorities. Much as we would like to see certain things as of equal importance, in practice, it just doesn't work, and it could lead to us according more importance to things that should be lower down on the list. Therefore, a person should make conscious decisions on what comes first, second, and so forth, to make sure that what is truly important gets the attention and emphasis it deserves.

When it comes to *chinuch habanim*, this is a very important lesson to learn. People sometimes tell me openly, "I know I should be doing more, but I don't have the patience." It is difficult, but it's important to find the patience. Otherwise, it shows that you feel other things take priority.

Sometimes, people *know* that *chinuch habanim* comes before everything else, and want to prioritize it, but even then, they could be emphasizing the wrong point (such as focusing more on what a child isn't doing, instead of what he is doing right). Maybe that is an added level of meaning in Moshe Rabbeinu's words — he was teaching that even within our priorities, we must emphasize the truly important things. Within the *ikar* alone we need to find and emphasize the *ikar*.

A SPECIAL THANK YOU TO OUR SPONSORS
ELIEZER & CHANY CZIMENT
FOR HELPING SPREAD LIGHT, GUIDANCE AND CHIZZUK TO OUR READERS!
MAY IT BE A ZCHUS FOR THEM AND THEIR FAMILY
*
PLEASE CONSIDER SPONSORING AN ISSUE OF TORAH LESSONS AND EARN EVERLASTING ZCHUSIM

QUESTION

DEAR RABBI GRUEN,

Thank you for your classes on Torah Anytime and your weekly essays.

I have a *chinuch* question. I have a very bright, good, and extremely highly fragile six-year-old son. I'm grateful to Hashem that he likes to do what's right.

Lately he decided to say the entire Krias Shema every night. We compliment him on it and he feels good about it. The last few nights, he asked me for a prize because he said it so nicely... I don't feel it's the right thing to do. I don't want him to think that every nice action needs to be rewarded with a prize. I told him that he's getting a huge *mitzvah*, gave him an extra little thing for snack, but told him that I will have to think about a prize.

I'm wondering what your take is on this and how to respond to my son's request.

Thank you.

ANSWER

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN RESPONDS

While I don't like to make assumptions, what I understand from your words is that raising an "extremely highly fragile" child comes with certain challenges (beyond the specific instance that you're asking about) which sometimes demand thinking out-of-the-box, and that you've already realized this, even though your son is only six years old. While your question may seem simple to many readers, when raising a very sensitive child, the simple is not always so simple.

You write that you're grateful to Hashem that your son likes to do what's right — and that's wonderful, because it's not something to be taken for granted, not with any child, and perhaps more so with sensitive children, which it seems your son is.

Many people who are rebellious or have a hard time with basic issues in Yiddishkeit are hypersensitive, which makes them by nature more easily irritated, less able to adapt to the demands made of them if they cause difficulty or discomfort, and more resistant to being told what to do, as I elaborated on in my book *The Fragile Factor*. Many of the parents who seek my advice on sensitive children are dealing with children who *aren't* doing what they're supposed to be doing, as they feel too boxed in. That's why you should be extra grateful that your child likes to do what's right, and I give you a great deal of the credit for it — for knowing how to handle his sensitivity and making him feel comfortable enough so that he doesn't feel tempted to resist authority.

It's not easy, but this is what *chinuch habanim* is all about — and often, such children are the ones who excel in many areas. Their sensitivity and depth can also result in a certain way of thinking that is often seen as "extreme" or black-and-white — for instance in the example you give: "If I'm going to recite Krias Shema, I'm going to recite the whole thing" (with the unstated part being, "If I don't say the whole thing, then it's worthless").

• • •

When a child enjoys doing the right thing, it's important that parents try to ensure that things stay that way. The way to achieve that is to give him praise and make sure he feels great about his choices, and even more so about the fact that he made those choices himself.

Even after the special deed seems to have become part of the new routine (such as the Krias Shema every

night), you shouldn't take it for granted. That doesn't mean that you have to continue to offer praise for years to come, but all young children, and especially sensitive ones, are dependent on regular compliments for motivation and simply to feel good about themselves.

• • •

Another thing to guard against is using something a child is doing right against him. "If you can say Krias Shema so nicely, why did you just *bentch* so fast?" "If you could say thank you so politely, why can't you be nice to your little brother?" Comments like that can make a child stop doing whatever good thing he was doing.

Of course, sometimes you will need to point out things children are doing wrong, but with sensitive children, this needs to be done very carefully. The ratio of praise to criticism needs to be especially high, otherwise sensitive children in particular will hear and identify with the criticism, while blocking out the compliments as if they don't exist.

Recently, I was dealing with a situation involving these issues, where the parents of a *yeshivah* boy (who was doing very well in *yeshivah*, and got along with his friends) were asking for advice about his behavior at home. Their son didn't get along well with his sibling and kept pointing out everything he was doing wrong. The family was getting frustrated and the parents wanted to know "why he couldn't be like his younger brother, who was more easygoing…"

The first thing I told these parents was: accept your child. He doesn't have to be like his brother. His brother didn't work on not being critical; he simply has a more easygoing nature. Drawing comparisons shows a lack of acceptance, which the child feels. Once you accept his nature, you can work on teaching him whatever social skills he's missing.

The next thing I stressed was the importance of not sounding critical. The parents could use statements such as, "I would appreciate if you could…" or "It would mean a lot to me if you said…" Believe it or not, it's fine to end with, "You don't have to," as long as you're genuinely okay with that. This makes it that much easier for your child, as he doesn't feel controlled.

But more important than anything is to boost the good. Their son was doing well in *yeshivah* — praise him for it, without turning it into a question about why he wasn't doing equally well at home. Tell him how impressed and happy you are about how well he's doing and give him the impression that you see only the good. Only then, when he feels comfortable with himself, should you gently introduce suggestions for improvement at home. Only then will he feel enough self-respect to overcome his desire to assert himself against authority figures.

• • •

With regard to your question about prizes and rewards, it's important to have general guidelines in place before making a decision. The idea of incentives and rewards, within reason, isn't at all modern. The Rambam mentions the concept of rewards in *chinuch*, discussing giving children different things as they grow older so they still appreciate it. In general, children do grow out of the expectation that every good deed should be rewarded, as they grow into healthy routines and patterns.

If a child asks for (or demands) a reward, however, the focus shifts to the child being in charge of the dynamic rather than the parent. One way to avoid this is to anticipate the request and offer a prize before the child asks for it, which keeps things on your terms. But in general, as long as the child is asking for something without demanding it, you may decide that it makes sense to give it to him. "You asked so nicely, you can have." The point isn't to deprive him or teach him that he doesn't deserve a prize. The point is simply that he can't demand it.

Sometimes, just the fact that the child asked and didn't take without permission — something that happens in many homes — can be a factor in deciding to give a reward. "I'm so proud of you for not taking without permission. This time, I'm letting you have it." This doesn't obligate you to agree at any other point in the future.

In this particular instance, I think you did very well by telling your son that "you did a huge *mitzvah*," and giving him an extra treat for snack, and then adding that you would think about the prize. You complimented the child for the *mitzvah*. You didn't downplay it because he asked for a reward. You gave a little something on your terms. Now you can decide if and when you want to give a prize.

• • •

Giving in to the demand is very rarely a good idea, as it only encourages children to keep demanding and

hands over control of the relationship to them. It's possible that this happens more often with fragile children, as they tend to have more challenges in the area of control, but that doesn't mean you should give in.

I recently spoke to parents who were dealing with a difficult situation with their son. They had confiscated something from him after giving ample warning and explanation, but the child couldn't handle it and began making various demands and threats to get the item back. The parents didn't back down — but then, their son threatened that he wouldn't go to school unless they returned the item.

That's the kind of threat that can make parents give in, naturally. Don't! I told the parents that when their son saw that they weren't intimidated, he would probably go to school — which is what happened. But even if he didn't, it would still be wrong to teach him that the threat of not going to school was the magic card.

I added, however, that the parents shouldn't feel or act as if they were in a battle with their child, even after things had escalated that far. For instance, the father could still decide to pick up a treat for his son when he passed the bakery, and give it to him saying, "I thought of you." It's important not to give in to demands, but every other part of the relationship remains the same (and can even be enhanced).

• • •

To conclude: Fragile children need attention, affection, and acknowledgement.

Once all that is in place and they feel secure in themselves, you can address any issues that arise. Help your child figure out a way to get his needs met without being challenging to the rest of the family, or without demanding that you do things his way.

Remember, you don't have to change your child. There's so much potential in the fragile, challenging child. You want to uncover what he has within him.

A beautiful teaching from the Maharal expresses a similar idea. The Rambam says that when *Moshiach* arrives, the world will continue to function as usual, except that we will no longer be under foreign rule. This seems to be a contradiction to the miracles mentioned in the Gemara, about clothing growing on trees and so forth. The Maharal explains that there is no contradiction. The world is comprised of *chomer* and *tzurah* — the physical and the potential, the soul and the body. The soul of the world has so much to offer. Indeed, there were times in the past when the world did produce more. However, since there's so much evil and decay in the world, so much of the potential is blocked and the physical world can't produce it. When Moshiach arrives, the evil will be eliminated and the potential will no longer be blocked — and the world will produce according to its full capacity.

That's an amazing parallel to bringing out the best in a child. You don't need to wait for a miracle and you don't need to change your child. All you need to do is remove the blockages so that his true potential can emerge and shine.

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME

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**

If you enjoy and benefit from Rabbi Gruen's work please consider sponsoring a weekly Parsha essay which is read and enjoyed by thousands of readers, and have a Zchus in the many hours of classes which help so many homes.

To dedicate a week or a month of this newsletter, in honor of a Simcha, in memory of a loved one, or to show appreciation for Rabbi Gruen, please email to parshalessons@lehair.org, and your donation will be most appreciated.

Thank You & Tizku Lmitzvos!