RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

Parshas Ki Sisa

Keeping it Positive… to Others

In his sefer Zera Kodesh, the Ropshitzer Rav differentiates between the way Moshe spoke to Klal Yisrael and the way he spoke about Klal Yisrael. In this week's Parsha we read how Moshe Rabbeinu pulled out all the stops to try and benefit the Yidden. Moshe told Hashem that he'd rather his name be obliterated from the Torah, if that would make Hashem forgive Klal Yisrael! However, when Moshe Rabbeinu spoke directly to Am Yisrael, he took a completely different tone. He sharply rebuked them for their wrongdoing and did not mince words when he told them how disappointed he was with their behavior.

The Ropshitzer Rav quotes a mashal on this from the Zlotchever Maggid. A melamed or a teacher may tell off a student, sometimes with sharp criticism. When speaking to the child's father, however, they should compliment the child and bring out his positive sides.

The Rachmastrivka Rebbe Shlita in his Sefer Amaros Tehoros, said that this comes to show us that when an educator speaks to a child's parent, there is no need to tell them all the gory details. It is okay to gloss over some things and keep the picture rosier than it actually is. That is not because they are to try and make the parents feel good about themselves; that isn't what an educator's job is. It is a way to motivate the child to live up to the report his father received.

Obviously, if something is a cause for concern or a persistent problem, then it should definitely be brought up with the parents. But for little infractions, there is no need to involve the parents, and when the child will hear back how highly his teacher thinks of him, it might inspire him to do better next time.

Ironically, some people do just the opposite. They try to often heap praise on the heads of their children and students, yet when they talk to others, they don't stop complaining how bothersome or difficult their children/students are. That is not how it should be. Often what your children need to hear is that you speak highly of them to others, and they'll feel even better, believing your intentions and compliments you've given them personally too.

Let me just add, that the need to praise our children and give them compliments, is in no way a contradiction to telling them – in the right way, of course – when we feel they can do better. It's often simpler to speak to them directly than to talk to others about them, and they can appreciate that to others you only showed their "good side".

Question:

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

Thank you so much for the weekly shiurim.

I got married several years ago and BH have two little kids, the oldest of which is two years old. I wanted to know if you can give one shiur with basic tips on what is necessary for parents of really young children to know, especially when they are not yet experienced parents. What is necessary for their chinuch, and what isn't? When should one deal with a "no", and when not?

Thank you for everything.

Answer:

I was once invited to speak to a group of people, and in response to my question whether it should be about chinuch or shalom bayis, the organizer told me that chinuch isn't really practical for them yet, because they were all under thirty years old. I was dumbstruck. Why is chinuch not an issue for parents of little children? When do they think parenting starts? When the child is a teen? That is actually when (according to many) the obligation to raise them ENDS!

But before I go on and explain where the Chinuch actually is so relevant, I will clarify that actually the Shalom Bayis between a young couple is not independent of the Chinuch, and should not be seen as an alternative topic at all. What children need from the youngest age, is to see a unified set of parents raising them. So the idea of discussing Shalom Bayis for couples is not contradictory to helping them with the important role of Chinuch, as it's intertwined and one.

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Chanoch L'naar al "Pi Darko". Pi can also be translated as an opening, at the opening and start of his way. When a child is young, you still have an "opening" to reach his heart and for your lessons to penetrate. Just like an impression on wet, soft wax stays on forever and a crack in a seed will be visible on a grown tree, so too young children are impressionable and that is prime time to teach them right from wrong.

Chinuch begins immediately after the child is born. Some might even say that it starts even earlier than that, when parents daven for their children before they are even born. Someone once went to his Reb-

be to ask when his obligation of chinuch will begin. "How old is your child?", the Rebbe asked. When the chassid answered that he was three years old, the Rebbe responded, "You are already three years late!"

This goes along with what we have all heard about the great sage Reb Yehoshua ben Chananya whose mother would leave his cradle the Bais Hamedrash. She wanted that, even as a tiny infant, he should imbibe the sound of Torah learning. Indeed, he grew up to be the Rosh Beis Din and Rebbe of Rabbi Akiva.

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Another interpretation of "al Pi Darko" is "based on the way of the Mechanech", meaning that a child will learn based on what he sees. The way you conduct yourself is what your child will internalize and go on to imitate later. More than any speeches and lectures, your child will absorb what he sees you do. In fact, there will come a time when he will not even listen to your speeches or lectures, but he will follow your actions.

Besides speaking with your child and explaining to him what the right thing to do is, it also helps to solidify those lessons with actions. There are many things you can do together with or for your child, even when he's still very young. You can wash his hentelech neggel vasser, sing and dance with him on Shabbos, and create various rituals around mitzvos and minhagim. Those things will leave a deep impression on your young saplings.

It's interesting to note that those who didn't grow up in a traditional Yiddishe Shtieb can often grow into fabulous orators, tremendous yerei shamayim, and brilliant talmidei chachachim, and yet they sometimes feel this lack of growing up with observance as part of the fabric of their youth, missing certain things others take for granted and have in them naturally. There is so much children pick up by osmosis. Don't let the opportunity slide by!

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It's sometimes shocking to see how much children pick up just by observation. Someone once told me that his young daughter of 4 years old stayed over at a friend's house for a couple of days. He was very meticulous about getting up early and so his daughter rarely saw him sleep during the week. The friend's father was apparently not such an early riser. When his daughter saw her friend's father still in bed, she couldn't contain her bewilderment. "A father sleeps during the week??" She asked in surprise.

You need to be mindful not to contradict yourself while transmitting your values, both verbally and in action. When parents tell their children that speaking Lashon Hora is forbidden, and then the children hear them run their mouths off on someone they dislike, it sends them a confusing message. Don't think they're too young to notice the infraction. Children notice pretty much everything – especially something they consider to be unjust or hypocritical.

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Being a parent also helps to strengthen you as a person. There are many ideas that you hear while growing up, but you don't fully internalize them or put them into practice – for various reasons. Once you become a parent, however, you have no choice but to start acting on those beliefs and getting the answers you need so that you can confidently respond to your children's inevitable questions. The Belzer Rav interpreted the words "Lemaan tesapeir.. v'yedaatem ki ani Hashem" to mean that the parent or educator needs to know What and Who Hashem is so that they can tell their children about it.

Interestingly, in addition to that, children tend to keep you in line even just personally. For example, some people find it difficult to bentch from a siddur. If you have little kids at the table, though, you will have a bunch of little prosecutors you need to answer to if you choose not to go get a siddur. "Why are you not bentching, Totty?" or, "Why didn't you go to shul yet, Totty?" It gets easier to just do the proper thing, if only to evade answering those prying young questioners...

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When raising young children, it's important to remember that as important as anything else, they need your love and affection. It's not only providing the extremely important emotional needs of a child, it actually makes you be the person that will then be "allowed" to educate them. You're earning the right to be their guiding light. Don't be afraid that hugging them and telling them you love them will spoil them. Whenever you can, give them your time and show them how much they mean to you. That doesn't mean that you have to give in to their every whim; absolutely not! But love is never too much.

Another thing to keep in mind is that young children are still immature and raw. While you shouldn't be afraid to tell them "no" sometimes, keep in mind that their reaction to it might not be very civil – and that's okay. Don't yell at your child for being a child!

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There's another very important point that I can't finish this discussion about young children without mentioning at least briefly. Every one of our children comes with their unique nature and temperament, and some of them will be easier to raise than others. Don't expect them to be like other kids or try to force them to fit a certain mold. Embrace their differences, find their strengths, and let them be.

The Rachmastrivka Rebbe Shlita told a story he heard from a melamed in Bnei Brak. A big Talmid Chacham sent his young son to this melamed and warned him in advance that he should only speak softly and use a gentle approach with him. Indeed, the melamed heeded this advice and was successful in reaching this child.

Some years later, the same Talmid Chacham brought him another child. He told the melamed to make sure to keep this kid in line and be extremely firm with him. "Oh! I see you changed your chinuch method!" the melamed remarked. "Not at all!" The father said to him. "There is not such a thing as a 'shitta' in chinuch. There is no one size fits all. Every child is different and has different needs, and must be dealt with in a way that works with his personality type."

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I dedicated much of my book Get Along With Everyone on dealing with children, and getting it right from a young age is definitely something that can and has helped many avoid problems.

Don't go to battle with your child or try to "fix" them. Enhance their positive attributes, work with them, and with Hashem's help you will raise them to be their very best selves. Of course you need to be "Mechanech" them, and help them become what they are and were meant to be, but if that equates with "changing or molding" them to your picture of them, or your expectation of them (let alone your failed expectation of yourself), you might not only not be successful, but actually cause damage on the way, and be left with even less than you started with...

On the other hand, never give up or decide that too much damage was done to be rectified. As much as the advantages of starting young with children are, it's never too late...

Wishing you many years
of nachas from your children,

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

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