RABBI
SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the home

PARSHAS KORACH

WHEN A CHILD COMPLAINS ABOUT A TEACHER

In this week's *parshah* we learn the well-known story of Korach – a Torah figure beyond our understanding – who attempts to stand in the way of Moshe and Aharon's rise to power. What happens next is that Moshe Rabbeinu, who is described in the Torah as the humblest of all men, defends his position. Where did this humble man find the courage to stand up for himself?

The Shem MiShmuel teaches that if a person is meek or lacks self-confidence, it's understandable that he is humble. But Moshe wasn't humble by nature, as the Shem MiShmuel illustrates using the example of how Moshe stood up to the man who struck his fellow in Mitzrayim. He didn't hide behind a mask of meekness and turn aside. He used his natural confidence to stand up for what was right. And lest we think that Moshe worked on his humility until he broke his natural confidence entirely, we find the story of Korach's uprising which occurred many years later, demonstrating that Moshe Rabbeinu retained this aspect of his nature. Here again he stood up confidently to relay Hashem's word.

The Shem MiShmuel notes that this was indeed the greatness of Moshe Rabbeinu. When Hashem wanted him to be humble, he was the humblest of all men. Yet when it was time to stand strong, he was as confident as any person could be. Neither characteristic was simply an instinctive reaction. Both were behaviors he adopted in order to serve Hashem.

When working with people, I often discuss the topic of nature and personality; this is the main focus of my book *Get Along With Everyone*. Whether the question is one of *shalom bayis* or *chinuch,* I stress how important it is to work on understanding the personalities of those involved, because we cannot change them. On the other hand, we know that we were created in order to break our natural tendencies and work on our *middos.* (This is the subject of my *sefer, Mimtzukoseihem Yoshi'eim*.) The Rambam writes that each person has the capacity to become "like Moshe Rabbeinu," and some explain this as meaning that we are all capable of achieving what Moshe Rabbeinu achieved – namely, breaking our instinctive tendencies and, when necessary, acting in ways that don't come naturally to us. However, overcoming one's nature doesn't mean that the underlying nature changes. What it does mean is that we gradually accustom ourselves to doing what at first feels unnatural. What's vital to remember is that each person is supposed to work on his own nature. Other people can be frustrating, annoying, and difficult, and sometimes we expect them to change in order to accommodate us. But our *avodah* is to work on *ourselves*.

As an example, people often talk about the five languages of love and convince themselves that they're unhappy because their spouse isn't providing love in the language that speaks most to them. But when you learn about the different languages of love, what you should be focusing on is trying to discern what your *spouse's* primary language is, so that you can find a way to adapt your natural pattern of behavior accordingly. The same is true when it comes to dealing with different natures in our children. The best results are achieved when we accept our children and try to find the tools and forms of communication that work best for them, instead of trying to make them adapt to our own style.

This week's essay is dedicated in memory of
R' Shloima Yehuda Krieger A"H - יאה"צ ב' תמוז
who raised a family of B'nei Torah with Mesiras Nefesh in the early years in America
יהי זכרו ברוך

Question:

Dear Rabbi Gruen

My 10-year-old son comes home almost daily complaining that his rebbi is super-nervous. I understand that it's not comfortable to sit in class with a rebbi who is antsy and expresses his nervousness throughout the day. (My son sometimes tells me that his rebbi is attending a wedding that night and will be tired and a "piece of nerves" the next day.) I validate my son's feelings and tell him that I feel sorry he's in such an environment every day.

As parents, we make sure our son hears from us how much appreciation we have for *melamdim* and how much we admire their hard work. I sometimes ask my son: "Would *you* want to be a rebbi? Would you want your father to be your rebbi?" He always says no because he knows that it's a very difficult job and a great responsibility.

At this point, we want to know if we should do something about the rebbi's tenseness and the fact that it rolls over to the children.

Thank you.

Answer:

You're describing a situation that's fairly typical: a teacher who's stressed, a child who doesn't deal with it well, and parents who want to know how to help a child who is unhappy in *cheder*. As I mention often, it's good to know that this is a normal problem.

At the same time, the fact that it's normal doesn't mean it should be ignored. If a child raises a concern, it should be validated and addressed. Regardless of how accurate your child's description of the situation is, if he brings something up, you should deal with it. If the situation is truly as described, it needs to be taken care of, and even though this is really the task of a *menahel*, as devoted as most of them are, at the end of the day they are human and can miss things. As parents, we are the ones who are ultimately responsible for our children's safety, happiness, and wellbeing, and so it is our responsibility to bring something like this to the attention of those concerned.

Always start with the assumption that there is some truth to the story, and that the details have yet to be verified. The first person to approach is therefore the rebbi, not the *menahel*, as it's quite possible that the problem can be sorted out without making the rebbi look bad in the eyes of the *hanhalah*. But how you go about approaching him is crucial. It's so important not to come across as critical or challenging. The more you try to prove how right you are or how bad the situation is, the more people tend to become defensive, and this lessens the likelihood of them being willing and able to work together with you to solve the problem at hand.

It's a tremendous *zechus* to be a rebbi of young children and we know our *melamdim* are overworked and underpaid. They don't get much appreciation from the children they spend the day with, nor from the parents who benefit from their hard work. Therefore, when confronted with a complaint, it's understandable if a rebbi becomes defensive, especially if he's never heard a good word from that particular parent. I've often heard *rebbeim* saying how so much of their hard work goes virtually unnoticed, but one slip, and they for sure hear about it...

The well-known story of a man who was desperate for acknowledgement illustrates this idea perfectly. Despairing of ever being noticed, he decided to jump off a roof and end it all, but before taking that final step, he figured he'll give it one last attempt. He sold all his worldly goods and then climbed up to the rooftop with his pockets full of coins and began throwing money down to the street below. He started with pennies and nickels. Nobody paid any attention. He threw singles and twenties. People picked up the money but no one took the trouble of trying to figure out where it was coming from. The man on the roof became so frustrated that he started throwing down garbage and pebbles – and suddenly people looked up to see who was there.

People often act in this way, failing to acknowledge others until something goes wrong, which isn't the most productive way of doing things. It's certainly possible that your son's rebbi really *is* tense and nervous and this should be addressed, but it's equally important to recognize how much hard work he puts in and acknowledge that as well.

Dealing with a roomful of children is incredibly stressful. The very best rebbi who has amazing classroom and discipline skills is still working with 30 children simultaneously, and often at least a few of them can be quite challenging, to say the least. (There's a cute story about a Yerushalmi *melamed* whose *menahel* called him one morning to tell him there was no need to come into school that day as there was a blizzard and only five boys had turned up. "That's OK," the *melamed* replied. "I'll be coming in anyway – I have 12 children at home..." Usually, though, it's the other way around, and the hours spent in school are far more stressful.) If the teacher is tense, all that really means is that he finds his job very demanding and feels the weight of responsibility. Recognize that before you open up the conversation and you'll avoid putting him on the defensive. (Of course, it would be even better if before approaching a *melamed* about a problem, you had already expressed appreciation in various ways throughout the year.)

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The second thing to remember when approaching the rebbi is that this isn't a question of who's right or wrong. Your focus should be on making things better for everyone involved. This enables you to escape from being caught between your son and his rebbi. Just as you take care not to put the rebbi on the defensive, take care to do the same for your son. Yes, you want to figure out "what" the problem is, but focus on the solution, more than on "identifying" and "blaming" the cause.

This means first and foremost being open to hearing an alternative account of events. You must not simply accept your child's account as one-hundred-percent accurate, and that need not mean that your child lied. Even if both the rebbi and your son insist that their mutually contradictory accounts are true, accept that. It doesn't matter, as long as everyone remains committed to finding an optimum solution. This isn't a battle and no one is seeking victory. It's a team effort to bring out the best results for your child.

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What if the rebbi isn't receptive to your approach and refuses to cooperate, insisting that the problem is all your son's? In that case, you will have to approach the *menahel*, with everything we mentioned so far kept in mind – first show appreciation, and second, keep the goal in mind and don't focus on whose fault it is. Meanwhile, you must avoid giving your son the impression that it's the two of you, or you and the *menahel*, against the rebbi. Try not to say anything negative about the

rebbi or the *menahel* that your child could share with his friends.

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Sometimes, a parent raising an issue with either a rebbi or the *menahel* is told that he's the "only parent who has complained." Don't be put off hearing that. It may or may not be true, but instead of threatening to verify that others are also upset about the same issue, you can simply reply, "I may be the only parent to have this concern, but I would very much appreciate it if we could address this together and see what can be done to help everyone." This isn't about challenging anyone or figuring out who's right and who's going to win. It's about you working with the rebbi or *menahel* to help your child to thrive. Make a point of communicating how much you appreciate the rebbi and the effort he invests in helping your child succeed. Remember that you're all on the same team.

At the same time, you do have to consider the possibility that it really is only your child who is bothered about the issue at hand – or that he is blowing it out of proportion for some reason. If that's the case, it could be that he needs more attention in general, and of course this must be addressed. Taking your child seriously will help you get to the bottom of things.

Another possibility is that your son is simply more sensitive to the rebbi's tension. If the other children in class don't seem to be affected by it, this may be a question of the particular dynamics between your child and this specific rebbi, especially if in previous years, such issues never arose. But if your child *has* experienced such problems in the past, you may want to find ways to help him learn how to handle the typical goings-on of an average day in *cheder*.

Here, again, it's important to acknowledge that you don't have to make a judgment on who's right or wrong. Even if your son is a more sensitive type, that doesn't mean that the rebbi can't try to adjust a little to help him feel more comfortable.

Hashem should help you get everyone on board for the benefit of your child, and with a clear focus on the goal may you achieve the ultimate *hatzlachah* for everyone concerned!

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

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