

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

KEEPING YOUR EYES ON THE GOAL

The Torah introduces the Aseres Hadibros—the Ten Commandments—with the *passuk*, "*Vaydaber Elokim es kol-hadvarim ha'eileh,*" and then adds, "*leimor*—to say..." before continuing with the first of the Dibros, *Anochi Hashem*...

What is the purpose of adding "to say"?

The *Ahavas Shalom* suggests one reason, which illuminates a fundamental principle in the Torah. Now that the Torah has been given to Am Yisrael, the obvious question is: What for? What is the end-goal of all these *mitzvos*? He explains that the word "*leimor*" hints that the purpose of all the Torah, *kol hadvarim ha'eileh*, is "to say *Anochi.*" All the *mitzvos* — in fact, everything a Jew does — should be fulfilled with the intention of achieving awareness of and closeness to Hashem.

Other *sefarim* expand on this idea, stressing that even *limmud haTorah* itself is ultimately intended to bring *nachas ruach* to Hashem. The Torah describes a "*naval be'reshus haTorah*," someone who acts in a disgusting manner which is ostensibly within the Torah's guidelines — this is the exact opposite of aiming, via learning the Torah and fulfilling its commandments, to connect and bring pleasure to Hashem.

When we keep in mind this end-goal, many of our everyday decisions become much easier to make. The question is no longer a vague "what's the right thing to do?" but "what will bring greater *nachas* to Hashem?" This applies in every area of life, and especially in *shalom bayis* and *chinuch habanim* questions, where having the right goal in mind is so crucial.

That's not to say that putting the decision into practice necessarily becomes easier, because sometimes it may mean a lot of hard work. However, at least making the decision should become easier as the focus is clearer: Will this bring me closer to my goal, or further away? What is the goal, for instance, in *chinuch habanim*? We aren't aiming for short-term successes such as getting our children to do what we say, but rather for the long-term goal of bringing up our children to be *ehrliche* Yidden.

Even with all the hard work we invest in doing the right thing, reaching the goal isn't in our hands, of course. Only Hashem decides the outcome of our actions, but we still need to put in the effort and aim in the right direction.

Dedicated in loving memory of everyone's favorite Bobby

Mrs. Devorah Schwartzman ע"ה

In honor of her Yuhrtzeit
כ"ב שבט

Parshas
Yisro
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Q QUESTION

Dear Rabbi Gruen, I can't thank you enough for your *shiurim*. They're so full of practical advice and have helped me, and others, so much.

I have a problem that I would like your advice on. It involves my two older children, girls of four and two-and-a-half. I'm at home in the mornings when they're at school — I stopped working outside the house so that I can get everything done while they're out and be calm for them when they get home.

The problem is that when they come home from school, they are so cranky and in such a bad mood, and they start whining and complaining the moment they get off the bus. They continue like this all the way home, up the stairs to our apartment, and it's so hard.

The younger one wants me to hold her, but I can't because I'm carrying the baby. So she throws a tantrum and things carry on like that even once we're home. Getting them to put their things away is a whole story, and then they're still difficult after that too. No matter how calm I am, they still don't do what they're told. It always takes a half hour before they calm down and start listening to me.

It's hard because I get so tense even before they get off the bus, and I admit that part of the problem is the social pressure I have, because my neighbors can see how I can't cope with my children, how I can't even get them up the stairs without complaints and fights.

What can I do?

Thank you



A ANSWER

I'd like to start by noting that many of the basic principles of *chinuch habanim* (and *shalom bayis* too) apply to "smaller" as well as "larger" problems. Everyone can learn something applicable from the answer to a question about younger children, even if it seems simple in comparison to their own issue which revolves around something more serious, or older children, for instance. One should never belittle a "small" problem just because it doesn't seem as serious as another. With the right principles in place, smaller problems don't have to develop into bigger ones; without them, you never know where things can sadly and unfortunately lead.

Another general point I'd like to make before getting into the specifics of this question is that whenever a person is faced with a difficult issue involving someone else, the first step, before trying to deal with it, is to divide it into its separate parts. Most problems people face involve various aspects, and only some of them are actually within our power to change. Trying to fix someone else's problem because you mistakenly identify it as your own issue is bound to end in disappointment. Recognizing the areas that you can fix will be far more productive, and also reassuring, when you see that even though you can't fix everything, some things can be quite easily improved.

In this particular example, you mention that you stopped going out to work in order to get things done at home and be calm for your children when they come home from school. It seems that you accomplished these goals,

regardless of the fact that your children come home cranky, and that can be a great source of satisfaction.

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Now to your question. Are there ways to calm down cranky children? Of course there are — you can offer a snack right away, or think of other things that might help. But I imagine you have already tried such things and they haven't worked. That difficult half hour when they come home still seems to be a problem.

It's normal to find cranky children difficult to deal with, and it's also very normal for children to be jumpy and irritable when they come home after a long day in school. They often need time to adjust to the transition and to relax after long hours in a classroom setting, and having realistic expectations for children is a big part of knowing how to respond to difficulties.

This is something everyone can relate to. I recall as a young married man with our first baby, I was idealistically trying to utilize every spare moment and thought that I could apply that to babysitting as well. I thought I'd be able to learn or listen to a *shiur* as I rocked the baby carriage with my foot, but it didn't work out like that. I was constantly frustrated and disappointed at "wasting" that time, until I accepted the fact that babysitting is (usually) a full-time occupation, and that this time was now designated for watching the baby and nothing else. It was silly to think that watching the baby would be no more significant or time-consuming than watching a pot to make sure it didn't boil over.

If you accept the fact that when your children come home from school, it is going to take that half hour to calm them down and get them over the school-home transition, it will become a less frustrating time for all of you. Try to come to terms with the idea that this is the way it goes with your (and many people's) children and that you won't get anything much done during this time. All you can do is keep yourself calm and smiling — and that's going to be easier once you accept the situation for what it is.

Interestingly, this might make your children easier to deal with too, but even if it doesn't, at least you won't be dealing with your own disappointment every single day.

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Another point which is relevant to this discussion relates to problems that crop up on a regular basis. The advantage of such problems is that you know they're coming, and can make preparations accordingly. This is good advice for many areas in life, and it's a shame people don't realize how often it's applicable. Don't wait for a problem that you know is on its way to actually arrive before dealing with it — preempt it. You won't always be able to completely prevent it from occurring, but at least you'll be ready for it.

With this particular problem, it might help to talk to your children in a calm moment, such as before they leave for school in the morning, or at bedtime. Then you can ask them, "What would you like when you come home from school?" Since your children are still very young, you might need to suggest some options: "Are you really hungry and want to eat right away? Would you like me to bring your snack to the bus stop?" Asking them why they're so cranky once they already are only makes them more irritable, as you've probably already noticed, which is why it's important to catch them at a calm moment and see if you can figure out whether there's an actual issue, or whether it's just normal coming-home-from-school crankiness.

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Of course, with all the planning and preempting you try, it might not help, and again you'll have to fall back on the realization that you're not in control of this situation. Don't let it become a power struggle — it will often only make things worse. In general, wanting to feel in control of a situation (or relationship in general) is very natural in any relationship and is also a significant source of friction. The aim is not just to accept that you can't control your children, but to not even *want* to control them.

If you "accept" the situation but still wish the problem would just go away, your underlying tension is probably still going to communicate itself to your children and contribute to their irritability. It also makes you continually frustrated and upset.

Surrendering control means that you don't know how things "should" look. Only Hashem knows how your children are supposed to behave when they get home from school. While you can and should model good behavior and show them that they're loved and wanted, you can't *make* them behave any particular

way at a time when their emotions are overwhelming them, for whatever reason.

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You mention in your letter the social pressure of being perceived by your neighbors as unable to cope with your children, and I imagine that this is a large component of your stress. Feeling judged (negatively) by your neighbors is unpleasant and hard to deal with, and hopefully once you internalize that your situation is quite normal (despite being genuinely challenging), you'll feel less concerned about your neighbors' judgments.

Often, after I give a class on *chinuch habanim*, a parent or two will come up to me and say, sometimes in a very low voice, almost a whisper, "You know, I have a child like that, too — the difficult child you were describing." I feel very bad for such parents who think they're dealing with something so exceptional and shameful, because they're not. Every family has at least one challenging child; most families have more than one. That's normal, and entirely to be expected, and certainly nothing to be ashamed of. Do you think I'd be speaking about such children publicly if they were exceptional cases?

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Even when we know that, however, it's still difficult when it's your child throwing a tantrum in the grocery store, or running around in shul. It's normal to feel embarrassed when it happens, and what can help is to realize that when it's someone else's child, you either barely notice it or just accept it as "one of those things."



"*Tzaras rabbim chatzi nechamah*" is a well-known phrase, and it's important to properly understand what it means. It doesn't mean that "everyone's suffering, not just me, so it's not that bad." What it means is that when it comes to a very common scenario, if you're one of those affected, it's nothing personal; it's not about you.

It's not personal when your kids are cranky at the end of a school day, or when they won't sit nicely and daven in shul. It's commonplace, and that means that it's not because of your failings as a parent, as long as you're doing your best.

There's no reason to feel guilty, or like a failure, and therefore no reason to feel embarrassed or ashamed. This is why if a *melamed* calls up the father of one of his students to tell him about his problematic behavior, and that father is himself a *melamed*, he won't get as stressed about it as another father who isn't a *melamed*. He knows that as much as the behavior is problematic, and must be dealt with, it's not abnormal and doesn't reflect on the parents.

It's not easy to stop being concerned about what other people think, but keeping your focus on your goal — which is to do what's best for your children and yourself — will help. Your aim isn't to impress others. What you are aiming for is to bring up *ehrliche*, happy children who are secure in your love for them. When you keep that in mind, it becomes easier to remain calm, with a smile on your face, and get through that tough half hour each day.

May Hashem help us all to keep our focus on the *tachlis* and to bring Him *nachas ruach* — from us, and from our children.

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME: YISRO 5784

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