RABBI
SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the home

PARSHAS KI SISA

THE SUPPORTIVE SPOUSE/PARENT

The Imrei Shaul, a grandson of Rav Yechezkel of Kuzmir, brings a *Midrash, "Ra'ah moshe she'ain l'Yisroel Amidah, chiber nafsho imahem veshavar es haluchos* – Moshe saw that Klal Yisroel would not be able to stand up after their sin, so he bound his soul to theirs and broke the *Luchos.*"

When Moshe came down and saw Klal Yisroel dancing around the *eigel*, Moshe said that he doesn't want to be a lone tzaddik all by himself. Instead he joined the nation in sin and broke the *Luchos*. In so doing, he saved Klal Yisroel. Moshe told Hashem, "They sinned with the *eigel*, and I sinned by breaking the *Luchos*. If you'll forgive them, forgive me too. If you won't forgive them, don't forgive me and erase me from your book." The *Midrash* continues that Moshe Rabbeinu didn't move until Hashem promised to forgive them.

After quoting this Midrash, the Imrei Shaul relates that one Shavuos, his grandfather's chassidim learned through the night and then decided to drink a *lechaim* together. The Kuzmirer walked in just then and they realized that it was already morning, when drinking a *lechaim* is questionable. The chassidim assumed their Rebbe would give them *mussar*. Instead, Rav Yechezkel asked to join their *lechaim*. He said that this is what Moshe Rabbeinu did when he broke the *Luchos*.

We can't draw our own conclusions from this *midrash* and decide when we can transgress along with others, but we can learn a lesson. When you want to help people out of tough spots, first be 'part of them' and then get out of the struggle together

When it comes to *chinuch* and *shalom bayis*, we sometimes point out the severity and act shocked at a behavior or action. But often, this creates a rift. It makes the child or spouse feel like we don't understand them. If they're struggling with something and we can't fathom their difficulty, we're not on the same page. This approach may work short-term, but if the struggle persists, the person may feel like they have nothing to gain by trying, because we don't understand them anyway.

This doesn't mean we should condone wrongdoing. But it can be helpful to give the message that you understand the struggle and can relate to the challenge. You can even admit to having a hard time with the same thing. Explain the right thing to do. Offer help. But don't distance yourself or disconnect because of a challenge.

If a man tells his wife, "I see you're having a hard time with the children. I think you should

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ויה"ר שהזיווג יעלה יפה ויזכה לראות מהם רב נחת דקדושה לאוישט"א

אכי"ר!

take some chinuch classes." How does this make her feel? Like she's the bad one, the non-coper, while he's perfect. It creates a gap in the relationship. It makes it harder to accept the challenge when the other one appears to be effortlessly good at it. It's much more productive to say, "I see the children are giving us a hard time. Maybe *we* can learn something together."

I recently spoke to a man who is married for a couple of years, and as is normal, he and his wife are still working on certain parts of their relationship. He told me that his wife asked her mother, "When does *shalom bayis* start? When do you feel a connection?" The mother answered, "You should feel connected right away. Totty and I were always one. We never questioned our status."

Is this helpful? Do you think the daughter suddenly felt that her marriage was strong? Of course not. It only made her question the viability of her marriage even more because after a few years she still didn't have perfect *shalom bayis*.

It so happens that this young man told me that his mother-in-law can humiliate her husband in front of the children and is often disrespectful. His father-in-law doesn't feel comfortable at home and will often hide things from his wife. Which means that the mother's statement, besides for making the daughter feel inadequate, *wasn't even true.*

In general, if married children come to parents with a question, the best advice is, "You should probably speak to someone. Whenever we had such issues – and it's perfectly normal to have such issues – we went for the help we needed." That's helpful. By including yourself in the challenge, you give your child the feeling that they're normal and will be okay with time.

Question:

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

I met you at one of the Keiravtuni Shabbatons and enjoyed your classes very much. I found them to be on target and just made sense. Maybe you can give me your thoughts on my situation.

I have a 12-years-old son. He is a bright kid with a lot of emotion. He's creative and thoughtful. His one issue is that he is lazy and unmotivated. When he has an amazing, dynamic rebbe, he does very well: gets top marks and is very involved. This year, he has a new rebbe who is not so *geshmak* or experienced. Because my son isn't the self-motivated type, he isn't doing so well. He's probably performing at 60 percent of his ability. The rebbe says when he wants to, he can do well. When he doesn't, he just spaces out. I feel that his laziness and lack of motivation is getting in the way.

My question is, should we bribe him with money for good marks or good behavior? This is an important year before mesivta age.

His room at home is a wreck. Same lazy issue. When I'm strict with him, he gets more upset and doesn't want to hear my *mussar.* In general, what attitude do I take with him? I feel that ignoring these concerns would be allowing a waste of his potential.

Thank you.

Answer:

Your question gives the impression that you're trying to do what's right for your child, and I want to give you credit for that. Often, we emphasize what children 'can' and/or 'should be' doing, but it's usually a mistake. Your experience proves that. We also sometimes use it against the child, saying, "I know he's capable, so how can I *not* make him do it?"

But the fact that a child could or should do something doesn't prove that he actually will. Some children are motivated by ability or obligation, but most aren't. And trying to motivate them through these means focuses on the negative and is usually counterproductive. To the child, it can reinforce their belief that they are unsuccessful or simply not good enough.

◇

A better approach is to think back and see what *did* work in the past. We often make a mistake of looking at past success and ascribing it to the circumstances. "*He had a dynamic rebbi so he did well then.*" It's true that a great rebbi can motivate a child to do well. But we can't always replicate the circumstances, so we have to look at what we *can* do. *What about* the dynamic rebbi motivated your child? Usually, it's the good feeling the child got that made them do well, more than the actual dynamism or other circumstantial details.

Some children don't do well in *cheder* but do very well in camp – and not only because they like playing soccer. They do well with the learning too. We can't keep these children in camp all year, but for each one, we can think back to which part of camp motivated him to do well in other areas and replicate that. It may be the grass and the fresh air, but not always. It may be the breathing space and flexibility built into the camp schedule. It may be the compliments offered by so many staff members. Perhaps the contests and other motivation. If so, maybe some of that can be incorporated into the child's life during the school year to produce similar results.

Maybe the dynamic rebbi made your child feel special in some way. Perhaps the less dynamic rebbi can do that too, and if not, maybe the parents can create that special feeling from the sidelines. "Your rebbi said such nice things about you. He said that in your own quiet way, you add so much to the class." Sure, the dynamic rebbi was able to motivate your child, but maybe there are things you can pick up on that can also generate such success.

◇

I often mention how much feelings play a role with certain children. All children, in fact – all people, have sensitivity, emotionalism and fragility as part of their programming. But some are dominated by their sensitivity. They are more emotionally driven than other people. They are dependent on 'feeling good' to perform well. (Many of my readers and listeners already know about my classification of UV children, the hyper-sensitive ones).

Rational arguments and explanations that they 'should' and 'can' be doing better don't work for such children. In fact, if you tried using logic and it didn't work, trying it again won't increase the likelihood of success. Such children won't be the ones keeping a generally successful track record from preschool through high school. They'll do well sometimes and get stuck at other times, depending on how they feel. Even just this alone, noticing how "reactive" a child is to his situation, doing very differently in one environment than another, is often a sign of a sensitive child.

I once spoke to a group of melamdim in a summer camp and I mentioned this idea about some children's performance being dependent on how they feel, and how with them it's normal to see a big change from one place or time to another. The menahel then related that he got a call from another menahel warning him about a problematic student who applied to this camp. But the previous summer, a child by that name had been in the camp and was not problematic at all. The second menahel insisted that it must have been a different child because "this boy is a problem-kid." But it *was* the same child, and he was one of the best kids in the camp.

It's normal for children to perform differently in different settings, especially if they are emotional children. This can even be in the same day. We've had morning teachers insist that a child has a chemical imbalance and must be medicated when *that same child* performs and behaves well by the afternoon teacher. It's because of how the child feels. Most likely, your son did well by the dynamic rebbi, not so much because of the learning style, but because of how the rebbi made him feel.

In a nutshell, how can we motivate the emotional child to do well? Certainly not by fighting him. But also not by letting go and allowing the child to do whatever he wants. There's a very fine balance in accepting a child for what they are and making them feel good, and at the same time redirecting disturbing behavior.

Bring out his personal qualities *while* teaching him which behaviors to change. Motivate him by getting him to feel good about himself. Catch him doing the right thing, even if it's only 10% right and make a big deal about *that*. Don't focus on the 90% that wasn't good.

You mentioned that your child is bright, creative and thoughtful, *with one issue* of laziness. Work on seeing it as *one* issue even if it affects many areas, and address it carefully. Your child has 99% positive qualities and one issue. If your emphasis is on his qualities, your child will feel good about himself. If he cleaned part of his room, make a big deal. And if his room is messy, accept it as part of his one issue. Especially with a sensitive child, don't take what he's doing right for granted.

You asked about bribing for good marks. Good marks are good, and are often what makes a child feel good about himself, a way to monitor his progress and growth, but they are certainly not the goal. We want children to listen and participate in class. We don't want our children to think we like them because of their good marks. Don't waste his potential in these important years before *mesivta*. Focus on what he's already doing right. Help him realize his potential by making him feel good, loved, respected, needed, special. Let him feel that the people around him see the good in him.

Wishing you much hatzlocha,
Rabbi Shimon Gruen

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