RABBI
SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the home

PARSHAS CHAYEI SARAH

TEACHABLE TEACHERS

What made Rivkah worthy of becoming the mother of the Am Yisroel? Her extreme Gemilus Chasodim. It is interesting that what clinched the deal for Eliezer was when she offered to do *chesed* with his *'gemalim',* his camels, as well. The mystical sources explain that the person who appears to be receiving kindness is actually the one giving kindness. Here Rivkah thought she was helping the camels, but actually, through them she merited becoming "Rivkah Imeinu" forever.

The Degel Machane Efraim adds an interesting twist on this based on the Chazal *"umitalmidai yoser mekulam* – and I gained from my students most of all." A *rebbe* may think he is giving his students the water of Torah, but actually like the *gemalim,* they are repaying him with much more. One who teaches and gives over to students will become ever greater in his learning as a result.

When it comes to *chinuch habanim*, wanting to be *mechanech* and taking *chinuch* seriously, it does so much for parents.

I recently spoke to a *yungerman* who was married for a few years. In the first years of his marriage, he slackened off in certain areas. Now that he had children, he didn't feel capable of being *mechanech* properly. I explained to him that when a person takes *chinuch* seriously and does things only for the sake of his children, it keeps him in a better place. He's not fooling himself or his children, it's the *achrayus* of teaching his children that keeps him in place.

The same is true for *melamdim* and teachers in school. They know they have to live up to a certain standard because their students are watching. This is a *chessed* the students do with their teachers. That's besides for the *segulah* and *Siyata Dishmaya* that a *melamed* has, and the additional wisdom they achieve. It's quite understandable actually, that when you're involved in giving something over, you will end up having more of it. When you work with children, understanding them, teaching them, explaining and giving over ideas and ideals in the right way – without controlling – it's a benefit for the parents.

Sometimes parents can resent the fact that there are certain things they have to do because the children are around. "When I'm on vacation, I can do things I wouldn't dare do in front of my children..." But that's a wrong perspective. Our children are doing us a favor by helping us do things right.

With that, let's discuss this week's *chinuch* question:

Question:

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

Last week, we learnt about Avraham Avinu and Akeidas Yitzchak. We learnt that Avraham took Yitzchak to slaughter him because Hashem commanded him to do so. After discussing the story at our Shabbos seuda, my child asked me what I would do if I would hear from Hashem that I should slaughter *him*. I was caught off guard and didn't have an answer. What should my answer to such a question be?

Answer:

The story of Akeidas Yitzchak can be a bit traumatic for a child, and here prompted a child to ask what his father would do if the same command was now given to him. "Is that what I'm in for?"

It can be tempting to say, "Of course, I'd do whatever Hashem tells me to do," and so be *mechanech* your child that we have to accept Hashem's will no matter what. But this child is already a little traumatized from this story. Maybe such an answer can make him lose trust in his father, and not the healthy and reassuring message he needs right now.

But can you answer, "No, I would never *shecht* you." What would *that* be teaching him? That Avraham Avinu was a fanatic who didn't love his son?

It is a difficult question to address indeed.

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Before we address the question, I want to mention an important principle. When it comes to *chinuch habanim*, it should never be, "Hashem and me against you." In general, it's not healthy to be on the opposite side of the child. This is true for parents and anyone else in *chinuch*.

The Bais Aharon once said of his chassidim, "What is the difference between me and them? They are bound to the *yetzer hora* and scream to Hashem for help. I bind myself to Hashem and scream at the *yetzer hora*..."

When it comes to *chinuch*, it often seems like the parent or *mechanech* is on Hashem's team; opposing the child. Sometimes we talk down to a child and make him feel that he is the "bad one", or "on the wrong side". We don't necessarily mean to present it this way, but we often give over that message.

Sometimes a child asks, "Why do we have to do this? Why can't we do that?" and we answer, "What do you mean? Hashem said so!" This gives the child the feeling that you're disappointed by the question and can't relate to or even fathom how one can ask such a question. This places the child on the defensive and he now has to prove his position.

It's important not to talk down to children, especially when the attitude of us being all there is not even true. As much as we should be completely connected to Hashem and always serve Him completely, we know that we're not always there. We have our own questions and challenges. Of course children shouldn't get the message that you struggle with Torah and Mitzvos. But we should still be careful not to give an attitude of 'us against you.'

There's another point to consider. When a child asks a question, it's important to recognize that it's being asked on a child's level. When a child says "Why do we have to..." he's not necessarily waiting for an answer, he may just be expressing his difficulty and frustration. Maybe he didn't get there yet. Maybe he doesn't enjoy it. On a child's level, not everything he says is meant to challenge.

The story is told of the tzaddik, the Rebbe Reb Elimelech of Lizhensk who was sitting by the *seder* table and discussing the *nissim* of Yetzias Mitzrayim, when one of the grandchildren asked, "Zeide, how can it be the *yam* split just like that?" Today, we might get flustered by such a question "*oy,* my child is having *sfeikos* in *emunah!*". But the Rebbe asked to have a bowl of water brought in. He raised his holy hands over it, causing it to split in two, and said, "See, my child. This is how the water split." He later explained that even though we usually refrain from doing things *shelo k'derech hateva,* it was worth doing it so that a child shouldn't have doubts in *emunah*.

While we are obviously on that madreigah and don't have the capability to resolve our children's doubts in this manner, there is still what to learn from this story. When the *heilige* Rebbe Reb Elimelech heard a child questioning *krias yam suf*, and he didn't jump at him. He understood that in a child's mind, a body of water doesn't split. And to help him understand it, you have to explain it on the child's level.

Sometimes a child hears something but doesn't understand. And based on that, people get upset at the child. Actually, it's on a childish level. When a child asks, "would you slaughter me," first understand that it's coming from a childish perspective. He doesn't understand what prophecy means or what it means to obey Hashem, and there's no reason to be offended by the comment.

My family always reminds me of a story that happened when I was a little boy. I repeated something my *rebbi* taught about Dovid Hamelech and my father asked me who Dovid Hamelech was. I answered that Dovid Hamelech was a worm. A worm? Until I told them that my *rebbi* taught us that Dovid Hamelech told Hashem, *"Anochi solaas velo ish* – I am but a worm and not [worthy of the title] man."

Another common example. It's cold outside and the child has to go to shul. The child complains, "It's so cold, I want to stay home." A father can be tempted to say, "Stay home? Don't you *want* to thank Hashem? Don't you *want* to *daven*?" But it's important to be able to tell a child, "Yes, it's so cold. I'm also very cold. Maybe if we both take an extra scarf, we'll both be warmer. What do you think?"

That's me and you! Not me and you against Hashem *cholilah*, but me and you trying to find a solution. Later you can thank him that you were warmer because of the extra scarf. That's the way to do it. You're both on the same page.

Interestingly, by the *akeidah* we also see that Avraham was careful not to scare Yitzchak. He guided him slowly. They discussed that they were carrying firewood but no sheep. They discussed their destination. He wasn't insensitive to his son's feelings. Avraham was careful how he spoke and Yitzchak went along with it. *Vayeilchu shnayhem yachdav*.

In the case of this questioner's child, the best would be to explain (in age-appropriate language) firstly, how much you love him and that normal people who aren't tzaddikim would definitely have an extremely difficult time even considering slaughtering a child, let alone one of their own children.

Explain that Hashem would likely never test you with something like this because Hashem doesn't test people with things that are too difficult for them. We are not on that *madreigah* yet. If Hashem would command something like this to someone, it would mean that he's so close to Hashem to be able to think about something like this.

"In fact, if Hashem would command me to do something like this, it would mean that *both of us* would understand that this is good." Avraham and Yitzchak were both able to fulfill Hashem's command. Hashem won't tell a father to do something his child is not able to do. Don't try to be macho and show him that you have to be tough and listen to Hashem.

Then quickly steer the conversation to fulfilling Hashem's will with daily challenges instead of focusing on frightening things.

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This concept is helpful in marriage as well. Every person who gets married hopefully has a *rav*, *rebbetzin*, mentor, *chassan* or *kallah* teacher. You may hear ideas from them that are important to you. Sometimes, a person will come home and say, "My *rav* said this... My mentor said that..." and because they are so connected to the *rav* or mentor, the spouse will just have to accept whatever it is they said. It becomes 'me and the *rav* against you'.

That's never good. It should be 'me understanding why it's difficult for you,' or 'me having the patience to discuss or explain this to you.'

When people team up against each other, even adults have a hard time with it. Don't get so hyped up and personal about it. You can explain that this is the right way to do it. "I understand that it's hard and wish it wouldn't be, but I feel this is the right thing to do. Should we ask someone?"

The same with a child. When a child asks why they have to do something, you can get curious with the child. "I wonder why. It would be easier not to. Let's ask the *rav*." It's 'me and you' finding out what Hashem wants from us. Don't allow a *halacha* or lesson to become a personal issue. Include people so they don't have to be challenged.

And as we explained from the Degel Machane Efraim, this person's question is a favor to you, helping *you* understand things better. By fighting it, you won't get anything out of it, and you'll cause them to be resentful.

Chazal teach us that we shouldn't say, "I could *never* eat pork." We should rather say that we are in fact tempted by non-kosher foods but we don't eat it because Hashem commanded us. It's okay to tell a child or a spouse that you find something tempting or difficult. When it comes to people in general, and children in particular, you want to be on the same team. Me and you understand each other.

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