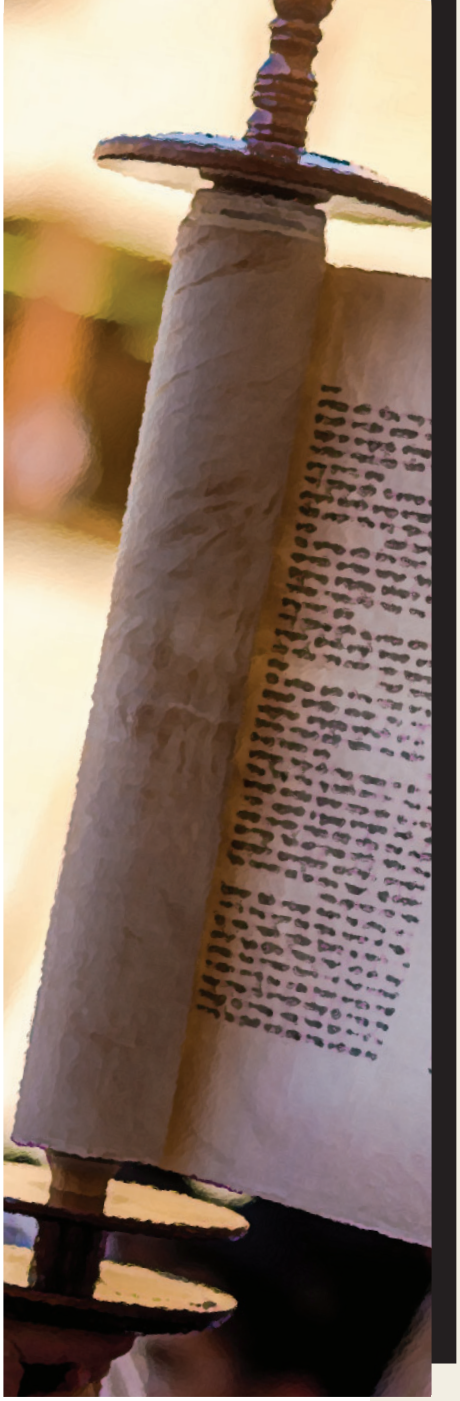


RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

THE IN-BETWEEN STAGE

In this week's *parshah* we learn the laws of giving *tzedakah* to those in need and are warned not to close our hearts to their requests. We are commanded to give them what they lack, even when we personally think that it's superfluous.

The Sokolover Rebbe explains that when a person approaches us for help, the fact that he feels forced to beg is enough reason to have *rachmanus* on him for his vulnerability and provide him with what he is asking for, regardless of how much he truly needs it. We should bear in mind that it's not easy for a person to admit that he isn't managing to take care of his own needs and to turn to others for assistance.

Within families, children sometimes need to ask a parent for help, or one spouse makes a request of the other — and it isn't always easy to make oneself vulnerable and admit to a need or a lack. Whenever you're the one being asked for help, remember that it can be hard for the person to open up and admit that he's needy. You don't always have to provide exactly what they're asking for, but remembering how hard it is to show vulnerability will color how you relate to them and can only improve your relationship with them. Even if you feel that you shouldn't be giving what is being asked for, it's still important to respond to a request with validation and sensitivity. Turning down a request too quickly can affect how (or whether) this person will open up to you again.

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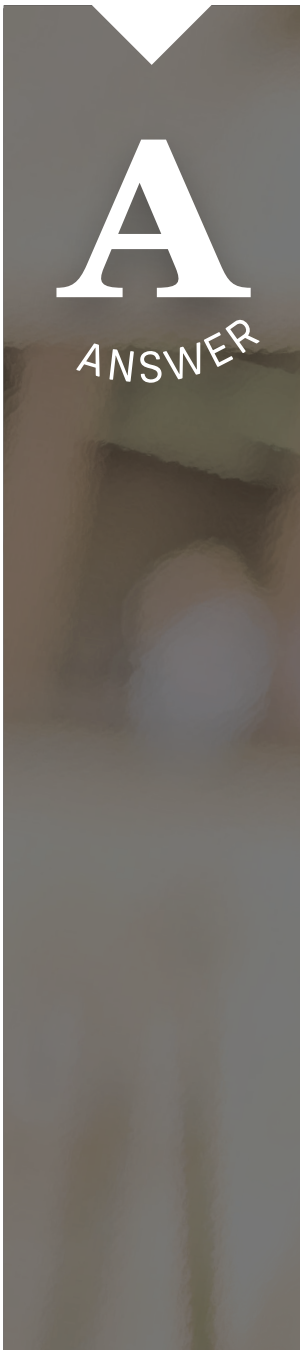


Dear Rabbi Gruen, thank you for all your *shiurim* which always provide helpful information.

I would like to ask your advice on finding the right balance when it comes to teenagers, both *bachurim* and girls. On the one hand, at this stage of life, they really need to learn how to behave as adults and accept responsibility; on the other hand, they're not mature adults yet and still need to accept that they have to do as their parents tell them.

Please can you give me the clarity and also give examples of how to tread this fine line.

Thank you



The teenage years are fascinating years, full of interesting challenges. On the one hand, children are growing into adults and starting to feel the weight of responsibility that comes with that; on the other hand, they still want to act like children at times.

Aside from how this confuses the parents who are trying to find the balance you mention, these two aspects can leave teenagers themselves confused as to what they want to do and how they want to behave.

When parents and teens interact, this confusion just gets worse. Sometimes, when parents treat a teen as "almost an adult," they get an angry response from the teen who tells them that they're demanding too much. At other times, if they treat the teen like a child, they'll also get an angry response, accusing the parent of "treating them like a baby."

Despite the challenges, however, there's no need to expect major difficulties or a communication breakdown. With a bit of clarity and thought it's certainly possible to find ways to get along well with one's children as they grow into adults.

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Like many areas of relationships, things get easier with practice. A parent dealing with a teenager who's his oldest child might have a harder time than a parent who has already dealt with a few teenagers. When a parent has children aged thirteen, ten, eight, and younger, the teenager looks so big and mature that it can seem only natural to treat them as older and more mature than they really are, expecting more from them than they can handle, and not even realizing it. By the time a parent has children aged twenty, sixteen, and thirteen, it's far easier for him to remember that the thirteen-year-old is still a kid and that demanding or expecting too much of him isn't realistic.

I know of a *menahel* who would only hire a *rebbi* for a class if the *rebbi's* children were at least that age group. He told me that he'd learned this lesson from his own experience, from when he had been a young *rebbi* with a class of

boys older than his own oldest child, and discovered over time that the boys weren't nearly as big and grown-up as he was seeing them.

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Another issue of confusion is the status of a *gadol* that a teen acquires. A

thirteen-year-old *bachur* and a twelve-year-old girl aren't really big at all, even though they are "big" in Torah terms — obligated in *Torah u'mitzvos*. Many parents feel the weight of this status and responsibility not on their children but on themselves.

It's very common for people to mistake *chinuch* for "getting results," but it's very important not to confuse the two. *Chinuch* is guidance and teaching with the aim being for the child to go, of his own accord, in the right direction. Forcing him to go in the right direction might not actually be *chinuch* at all, especially if it doesn't result in him having his own motivation and sense of responsibility.

Many parents will respond: "But he is obligated!" That's true, of course. However, how many things are we also obligated to do and yet still don't, either at all, or in the best way possible? It may not be your "obligation" to make sure someone else is actually carrying out theirs. While getting personal and specific *daas Torah* guidance is always important, as a general rule, parents need to remember that they are not responsible for getting results and therefore shouldn't feel terrible pressure to ensure that their child "does what he should." More than *doing* the right thing, being a *gadol* in Torah terms means *feeling the responsibility* to do the right thing. Children aren't going to feel that responsibility if we insist on carrying it for them. Most often teaching, encouraging, and helping a child feel right and in the best mindset possible to do what's right, is exactly where your obligation ends.

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That said, without controlling our children we should also not expect them to "figure things out" for themselves as they grow up. We are obligated as parents to make it absolutely clear where the red lines are, and what we expect of our children. And we should never feel afraid or hesitant to convey this in clear terms.

How we communicate this clarity is flexible. In some situations it could mean telling a child firmly: "This is what needs to be done." In other cases, it means, "I would like you to do this." But if you're talking about something that definitely has to be done, don't say anything that conveys uncertainty or lack of courage, such as, "I think it's right to do this," or "If you wouldn't mind..." "If it isn't too hard..." Those are nice ways of wording requests or favors, not conveying clarity about something non-negotiable.

There's also a fine but distinct line between telling a child, "This is what needs to be done" and then stepping back and allowing him to make the choice; and telling a child, "It would be nice if you could do this..." and then hoping for the best. The first option conveys the message that you know your child is mature enough to accept that this has to be done and therefore you don't need to appeal to their emotions. You also have enough confidence in their maturity to refrain from pressuring them ("Nu, have you done it yet?") because you trust that they'll get it done.

By contrast, the second option conveys a fear that the child might not obey — which in turn conveys a lack of trust in the child's judgment. It also turns a red line into a fuzzy grey line which isn't good for anyone. Is this a must or not?

Teenagers like to have clarity, without feeling forced into anything. Part of the obligation of *chinuch* is making it clear what is right and what is wrong.

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Stepping back after clarifying the obligation also opens up the possibility that the child might get it wrong, which is usually okay. Teenagers, like adults and children, are allowed to make mistakes. Only if there's danger involved should the parents supervise (read: control) the process. Otherwise, giving them space to get things wrong as well as right is an important part of their learning experience.

Let's take a recent example of a *bachur* who doesn't want to join his friends on a visit to *mekomos hakedoshim*. If the parents give him the option of staying home, there's a risk that he may assume that by not joining his friends, they think less of him (rightly or wrongly); he may actually miss out on something that could have been a boost for his *ruchniyus*, and so forth. If, on the other hand, his parents obligate him to join the trip, he probably won't learn anything... other than that his parents don't trust him to make the right decision.

A child who grows up feeling that his parents don't trust him to choose wisely may come to resent his parents' attitude. It's not just the things he may miss out on doing and experiencing — it's also the feeling of responsibility and capability that he's missed out on developing.

I once heard a newly married young man say, "I got married feeling scared about taking on adult responsibilities, while all my friends sailed right ahead

with nothing to worry about. My parents insisted on coddling me and treating me like a baby, and the predictable result was that I was always scared to try new things. Instead of making me feel like I was too young and stupid to get things right, they should have shown their confidence in me and allowed me to get things wrong — until I figured out, on my own, how to get them right." He may have been blaming his parents unnecessarily, but the message is important to learn from.

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Another thing to be careful about, is not using a child's "maturity" against him. Saying things like, "You want to be treated like a *bachur*, so act like one," or "Oh, you're a big girl of sixteen? Sure doesn't look like it," can be very damaging.

Instead, do things the other way around. "Wow, you did that? That's something I thought only someone older could do." "You did an amazing job! For a

fourteen-year-old, that's incredible!" Boosting teens and making them feel good and big is always more helpful than confronting them with their age as if it's a deficiency on their part.

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As you point out in your letter, teenagers are both child-like and adult-like, and this is why it is so challenging to relate to them. Underestimating their abilities can be taken as an insult, and underestimating their grasp of the world, their understanding of how things work, and their knowledge of concepts, can feel demeaning to them.

An adult who is confident in his abilities doesn't need to feel put down if others treat him as less than competent. However, a teen who is still figuring himself out can feel very put down if treated as unworldly or naïve.



Aside from that, teens today are usually far less naïve than their parents think or would like. Assuming that they are ignorant of certain ideas when it's more likely that they have been exposed to them runs the risk of opening up a big chasm in the relationship. While we should never treat our children as our equals, treating them as far beneath us, is also harmful.

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Even when we do everything "right," we might still not have the "perfect" relationship with our children or teenagers. They may choose to open up to others — to friends, a mentor, another relative — and that can be very hurtful for devoted parents. It's important not to take it personally. Part of growing up can involve temporarily growing away from one's parents, and that doesn't mean that the relationship has been harmed. From their side, the parents should continue to be warm, affectionate, and open to hearing whatever their children have to say.

It's also normal for children to become more sensitive to any perceived "quirks" in their parents as they get older. While children are obligated to respect their parents virtually "no matter what," there's no reason why we should make it harder for them than it has to be. Parents who act in ways that cause their children embarrassment, however unintended, should be aware that their children tend to be more sensitive at this age and reciprocate with sensitivity to their feelings.

We all look forward to seeing our children grow up and develop into *ehrliche Yidden*, and responsible adults who build lives full of Torah and *yiras Shamayim*. Following Torah guidance whenever things are challenging and modeling Torah behavior at all times, will give our children the tools and example they need to follow in our footsteps and *be'ezras Hashem* bring us *nachas a*long the way.

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