RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME

PARSHAS
KI SAVO

[MORE ON] THE SENSITIVE CHILD

In this week's *parshah*, the Torah teaches us, "*Vesamachta bechol hatov ... atah vehalevi vehager asher bekirbecha* — And you shall rejoice with all the good ... you and the Levi and the stranger who is among you."

The Chasam Sofer teaches an important lesson from these words. In order for a person to be satisfied with what he has, he has to know his place. There are always people who have more than we do — this is the Levi, who serves Hashem on a higher level — and people who have less — the *ger*. When we look at those who have more, we should be thinking about how they are probably *doing* more as well, which makes them more deserving. When we look at those who have less, however, we should be filled with gratitude for what we have that they don't. Approaching life like this helps us to guard against arrogance, to be grateful for what we have been given, and to feel a sense of obligation to be doing better. It is also key to enabling us to reach the *madreigah* of "*Vesamachta bechol hatov.*"

Unfortunately, people often do the exact opposite, comparing themselves to those who have more and complaining, and then looking at those who have less and patting themselves on the back and reassuring themselves that they must be doing amazing if they are more blessed. Hashem often gives us opportunities to overcome the *middah* of arrogance, if only we remember to look out for them.

We can see this clearly with our children. People often take credit for their children's accomplishments and enjoy and even expect the *nachas*, telling others how much they invested in their *chinuch*. When things don't go so smoothly, however, they find fault with the entire world and refuse to take any responsibility for what went "wrong."

Other parents do things the right way. When they have difficulties, they don't look for someone to blame — themselves or others. They realize that they don't deserve anything and ask Hashem to help. And when they see *nachas*, they thank Hashem for it. "Thank you, Hashem, for my child who's learning, for the one who has such good *middos*, for the child who's such a pleasure to be around..." They don't take anything for granted.

Then there are parents who would have taken success and *nachas* for granted... if not for the fact that they have one child who is more challenging. In almost every family with several children, there is one child who is a bit more challenging. It's often those challenging children who teach us to invest more in our *chinuch* and who remind us not to take the accomplishments for granted. It's normal to experience challenges with one or more children, and it's important to learn how to deal with them.

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THIS WEEK'S ESSAY IS GENEROUSLY SPONSORED BY

A SET OF WONDERFUL PARENTS

AS A ZCHUS FOR NACHAS FROM THEIR CHILDREN

ויה"ר שיזכו לנחת לרוב מכל יוצ"ח אכי"ר

QUESTION #1

DEAR RABBI GRUEN,

Thank you so much for your *shiurim* on TorahAnytime. I have benefited from them so many times.

My son, who is my oldest child, has a very hard time controlling his anger. He gets angry pretty fast and his reactions to his anger are bad. He throws things, hits, and gets out of control. We've had garbage cans spilled, chairs thrown, spitting, and more.

I usually react in a calm way by removing him from the situation until he calms down. I also make him clean up whatever he messed up.

I explained to him a few times that he has so many beautiful *middos* and that he is very special... but that he has a hard time controlling his anger. He knows it's hard for him.

I want to help him overcome this challenge in a healthy way and learn to control himself. What is the right way to go about it?

Thank you so much.

QUESTION #2

DEAR RABBI GRUEN,

I listen to your *shiurim* and I find you are always on target so I wanted to turn to you again for guidance/*chizuk*. This issue of mine may be more than can be addressed in an email, but hopefully, maybe, you can give me *chizuk*.

My husband is an *avreich* B"H and we have nine healthy beautiful children B"H. My oldest son, I would say, is my life's mission.

You would probably say that he's a fragile child. I'm sure I've handled him wrong, even though I've gone to many *chinuch* classes.

We are in a *matzav* now that I find unbearable. My son is already past *bar mitzvah*. He has a GREAT loving rebbe who does everything right according to *chinuch*, who is patient, and knows what the boys are capable of. My son loves him. I don't have as much patience and want him to be perfect now. My son is popular among his friends and it is no wonder that he wants to be with them and not us.

My issue is not that he's doing bad things B"H. I wish he would be more serious and not hang out all day, although he's still young.

His behavior at home is unlivable. There is no concept of listening. He does whatever he wants, comes and goes as he pleases, and I just can't handle it. I don't blame him for not wanting to be home because it's not so pleasant for him at home. He gets himself into trouble all the time. I know that he's much better and just pretending to be so macho.

He can't get up in the morning, and his *davening* is not the way I want it to be. His *Yiddishkeit* is not on the standard that we would want it to be. His *middos* around us are very poor, although he behaves very nicely with his friends. I know that many of the things that bother me are normal among *bochurim*, but they bother me very much. The things he does... the way he dresses... I'm so disappointed and resentful that this is what my *bochur* has become. I know that most of the problem is with me, but I don't know how to get over it.

I know I shouldn't compare him to any other *bochur* and that my life is tailor-made for me. I can give myself all the speeches. But when it comes down to it, I'm so disappointed in who he is and it's hard for me to get out of this cycle. I have no positive feelings for him. It's such a painful feeling from a mother to a son.

I know that it's these children who are the ones who have extra potential and just have to channel it. For me it seems like an impossible task. I know if Hashem gave it to me, I can do it. I know to try to only focus on the good, ignore the bad etc. But it's so hard.

It's even harder because I have this burning desire for my husband and children to be *yirei shamayim* and *talmidei chachamim*. Yet, I feel that because of this desire, I'm creating the opposite. Is that fair? Just because it's hard for me to implement the *chinuch* lessons I learned, coupled with this extreme hope for my family to be *talmidei chachamim*, my son should be turned off?

He could throw a pen in my face, a shoe at his father, say the most disgusting words to us... and then kiss us an hour later. Those kisses make me feel disgusted because he thinks he can make up for his behavior with a kiss. "Don't kiss me; just act like a *mentch*!" I'm not really sure how to relate to him because I feel like he's doing whatever he wants whenever he wants, so how can I treat him like a regular person in the family? He feels my feelings (obviously).

Basically, I know I need a lot of work on my part, but I also feel helpless due to his behavior and where he is holding. B"H I talk to Hashem constantly, and I know this issue is tailor-made — but in a way I feel rejected. Why can't I be *zocheh* to have children who are *yirei Shamayim*?

I know we are in an "instant generation" and things take time and work, but it looks so far sometimes. I apologize for rambling. I will appreciate any *chizuk* you can provide.

ANSWER

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN RESPONDS

When reading or hearing about situations like these, we can either feel validated if we have the same struggles, or grateful that we don't have the same challenges.

In general, whenever I quote questions, I try to change identifying details. I haven't changed many details in these questions, however, because having a child who has a hard time controlling his anger, who could spill garbage and throw chairs, sadly does not identify anyone. It may be unfortunate and not the typical, but it's more common than most people realize. Many parents can relate to what this parent describes in some form or another. Children do sometimes lose it, and it's important to realize how "normal" it is, both because it's reassuring, and because it gives us perspective which helps us know how to react. In cases where things are clearly at a level beyond normal they will need to be addressed differently and perhaps with professional guidance too, but for the most part such behavior is not a sign that something is terribly wrong.

Aside from it being normal for a child to "lose it" on occasion, it's also normal for every family to have a child they struggle with. Most of the parents who sign up for a *chinuch* course, for example, do so because they have a child they're struggling with, a child for whom the typical methods don't seem to be working. That's normal. And it's all from Hashem. He presents us with exactly what we need, along with the right tools for the job, and He's the One Who employed us as parents for these specific children.

Before I answer these two questions, I want to stress that as much as they relate to situations that fall into the category of "normal," they certainly aren't *easy* to address. Implementing the advice I give can definitely be a challenge for any parent, and it's very normal for parents with such children to want and even need outside support and guidance. That said, there's a lot parents can achieve on their own, and when you try to the best of your ability, you may be surprised to find that things move forward at a much faster pace than you imagined could be possible — and that the situation isn't nearly as intolerable as you once thought.

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So, after that important introduction, let's get into practicalities. What do we do with children who present challenges such as uncontrolled anger or defiance (which often stem from the same source)? This topic is one that I address often in my *shiurim* and articles, as well as in my book. People ascribe such behaviors to all kinds of causes — "oldest child syndrome," sandwich child, explosive nature, learning-disabled, on the spectrum... to name just a few. What I have found to be a consistent and accurate "explanation" is an extra measure of sensitivity and emotional instability in the child concerned. What looks like challenging behavior

in a difficult child is often just the natural reaction of a very sensitive child with a fragile ego and personality.

Each person's personality is made up of different components. Everyone has a fragile component, a certain amount of sensitivity. We all get nervous sometimes, like things a certain way, and thirst for emotional wellbeing — feeling respected, needed, and understood. The question is how much of the personality is dominated by this fragile component. Some people's lives are dominated by their craving for emotional comfort. They have low tolerance for emotional discomfort and lack that "bumper" of resilience that enables other people to tolerate life when they aren't being given what they feel they need.

The degree to which a person is fragile and sensitive is not something that develops — it's innate. It's not caused by circumstance or upbringing, although circumstances can trigger or heighten a sensitive reaction or difficulty in tolerating hardship. Two people going through the same thing react differently. Many mothers will look back and say, "Yes, this baby was fussier, cried more, needed things done a certain way…" because degrees of sensitivity can be detected in the crib *before* there's any obnoxiousness or explosiveness, or any reason for stronger-than-usual reactions.

When the element of sensitivity is naturally dominant in a child (or even an adult for that matter), it will be accompanied by a need for a greater level of emotional comfort, and a lower level of tolerance to the lack of it. Such children are easily triggered or thrown off-course. They don't like to be controlled or told what to do, amongst many other characteristics.

Understanding and interpreting sensitivity correctly can help you prevent or at least minimize many of the problems that arise with such a child. If you have no idea what's going to cause the next explosion, everything remains unpredictable and the best you can do is deal with each new incident as it arises. When you understand the child, you don't need to wait for things to happen.

I often ask parents in such situations, "How many times have you knocked a glass off the table in the past month?" Usually the answer is, "Not even once." Then I ask, "How many times did you drop a tissue or a pen during the past month?" Most parents can recall dropping plenty of things even just in the past few days. How come?

The answer is that subconsciously, we're more careful with glass. When there's a glass on the table, we walk past it differently, and we take care not to place it at the edge. It's not even something we stop to think about — it's automatic. And why? Because glass is fragile. In the same way, we have to understand that the child who's causing difficulty and heartache is not "a bad kid with anger issues that need to be fixed." He's just a *sensitive child*. Very sensitive. And he'll probably always remain that way. When a fragile child is dealt with appropriately, in a way that helps him feel good about himself, he'll grow up healthier and more balanced than he would if his nature was constantly challenged. This sensitivity is part of who he is. He doesn't have to be fixed or changed. You — or the child — may want to go to someone who can give you some guidance and tips on how to deal with the sensitivity, but no one can "fix" him.

When you understand that the issue is *sensitivity,* not *obnoxiousness*, suddenly you can predict how he's going to react — based on his patterns and your understanding of what sensitivity is all about. "He's going to come home to this situation. He won't be able to handle it. I'll talk to him in advance." That's what *he* needs, even if your other children don't.

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A child with hypersensitivity may look very macho on the outside. It's very likely a cover-up for low self-esteem. I often ask parents, "If I were to ask your child how you feel about him, what would he say?" Parents usually answer that they love their child and that they assume the child will say that his parents love him — but that wasn't the question. The question was, "What does your child think you *feel* about *him*?" If he thinks you feel that he's a difficult kid, that might be part of the reason why he's behaving the way he is.

When you try to make him feel good, respected, and needed, this can help avoid a lot of the macho outbursts. "I need you. I depend on you. I love being around you." Once he feels better about himself, he'll feel less need to try to stand up for himself and control things.

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As far as possible, it's important not to challenge sensitive children. When you confront a sensitive child, blame him, argue with him, point out what he's doing wrong, or minimize something that's important to him, his feelings of hurt go far beyond what you would expect and he's often unable to handle them. Of course, *all* children are hurt when criticized or blamed, but as much as many suggest silk-glove treatment for all children, aside from not always being practical, it's often unnecessary. Most children handle a low dose of criticism just fine. It's those children that can't handle it who need special care.

My usual advice to parents of sensitive children is: Talk to them nicely. Prepare them for challenging

situations in advance, before their emotions have a chance to kick in. Tell them how much it will mean to you if they do whatever it is, adding that they *don't have to* do it. Most times, you'll see them come through. Parents are often skeptical, but the truth is that sensitive children, when handled gently, behave very differently in response. They need respect, emotional stability, and to feel good about themselves — and when you provide that, you can almost always predict how they will respond. (It's also important to note that while this approach works for sensitive children, it won't necessarily succeed with other children, many of whom actually do better when told specifically what, when, and how to do whatever it is.)

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With an oldest child, it's easier to make them feel special. But even if a child is not the oldest, treating a child the way he needs to be treated usually won't cause jealousy. Subconsciously, the other children understand that this child is more difficult and needs certain privileges or treatment. We have to be careful not to give the appearance of favoritism, but often parents are more concerned about jealousy than they need to be.

This means that you should try to spend more time with sensitive children. Children often compete for your attention and the fragile types can find it harder to push themselves forward, or to deal with others getting attention they want for themselves. If you can give them some private time, that might be all they need.

Don't use that time to lecture them about all the things they should be correcting. Just make them feel good and teach them to identify with the positive aspects of their characters. You can be open with a child who's having behavioral issues, but try not to talk about them too often. You don't want him to identify with his "issues." You can give him incentives, work out a program, but don't make this the crux of your relationship.

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On the flip-side, you shouldn't tolerate the things such children do wrong. However hard it is to find the balance between treating a child very well while not tolerating their wrongdoings, parents have to take care not to fall for their shtick or give in to their demands. Don't allow even the most sensitive child to control you. You can stick to your ground without putting a child down. "I love you dearly, and care for you and want you to be happy. This is not going to work. Let's see if we can come up with something else." You can say it nicely, but very firmly. It's important for the child to know that you're in control.

Often, a child will tantrum or throw things because they want to get something. It might be the way they've gotten things in the past. Be careful that they don't gain anything from unacceptable behavior.

In fact, if a child hurts you or breaks something, you're allowed to let him know that you feel hurt. "I'm sure you didn't mean it. I feel very hurt." You can express your feelings without blaming anyone. Don't be afraid of your child.

There's one thing I want to be very clear about: Never get into a fight with your child. Even if he has behaved unacceptably, your relationship with him in other areas doesn't have to be affected. It's not easy, but take care not to break off the connection entirely just because he did something wrong, even very wrong. Sensitive children don't deal well with that. If you get personal with him, it will be harder for him to climb down from his tree.

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When your child *tries* to do better, when he comes to give you a kiss after a blowup, try to see that as the real child. He's the child who wants to feel that he's good, who wants to do the right thing, who wants to feel loved — and yes, also, the child who feels sorry. With that perspective, you can tell him, "I love when you kiss me. I know that you love me. I was hurt by the way you spoke to me. Please don't do that again." But don't reject his overtures.

Having and maintaining the right perspective is so important. I once heard a principal say that he accepted a child to his school thinking that he seemed a good kid, but when the child misbehaved, he "saw him in his true colors." That's a terrible way to look at a child. Don't allow a child's misbehavior to paint the picture of who he really is. He's really a good kid who made a mistake. If you think of his bad moments as his "true colors," that's what he will feel about himself too. Children are good. People are good, even if we have to deal with their challenges.

Help your child feel good about his progress. Let him tell you about his struggles and his successes, and reward him for his accomplishments. Show him that you're being patient with him. Encourage him. Don't let him feel that you're frustrated that he slipped up again. Help him believe that he can overcome his difficulties.

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As children grow older and become more independent, the dynamics of a parent-child relationship change and naturally parents have less leverage. With younger children who need you more,

you can give more incentives, more consequences. It's easier to be firm and stay in control. Older children can do more things on their own. You have to deal with your child appropriately at different stages.

There's no quick-fix for dealing with the fragile child. These children are challenging. But when you deal with them properly, you should start to see a gradual difference pretty quickly.

It's hard. You may need to keep reviewing these principles and keep encouraging yourself. It's also very important that parents not blame themselves for not handling the child correctly. We're only here to try. We may not always have what it takes to stay a step ahead of the sensitive child. We may not be capable of preventing every single mistake. Again, we're only here to try our best. But it's worth trying.

We all want our children to be perfect. Still, as much as we should be focusing on the goals at all times to ensure we're doing what we should be, *chinuch* is not about results — it's about trying to do what's right. We have to keep the end result in mind when we are *mechanech* so that we deal with situations properly, but we're not responsible for the way things turn out.

When you remember that you're not responsible for the results, it can make it easier to do the right thing. It's not about controlling their anger or making them picture-perfect. It's about trying to do what we're supposed to.

These children also remind us that *we* aren't perfect. That we don't get all the credit for everything that *does* go right. It's normal for people to struggle.

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I appreciate it so much when parents who consulted me later tell me that once they understood their child's sensitivity, this child stopped being their unpredictable child and instead became the most predictable one. Less sensitive children can turn out to be less predictable, because although their spectrum of reactions may be smaller, it's still hard to predict how exactly they will react to the unexpected.

I can't predict the future of any sensitive child, but I can say this much: If a sensitive child grows up being challenged, blamed, and put down, he'll end up feeling bad about himself and will grow up a lot worse than the child who is dealt with sensitively. Sensitivity and fragility are part of a person's nature. But if a fragile child grows up feeling good about himself, with those around him being sensitive to him, he'll grow up healthier and more resilient, with much more tolerance for adversity.

It's the fragile children who have the most potential, but we need to let their light shine by washing their diamond-personalities and hopefully it'll pay off very quickly *iyH,* when they give us *nachas* along with all our other children.

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

Rabbi Gruen's books on bringing out the best in those with sensitive personalities,

Get Along With Everyone & The Fragile Factor

are available in both English and Yiddish and can be found in bookstores, on Amazon, or by contacting his office at 718-841-6557

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