

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

HELPING OUR CHILDREN SHINE

In this week's *parshah*, the Torah describes the process of extracting olive oil to be used in the Beis Hamikdash. Rashi explains that for the Menorah, only the first drop of oil removed from the olive can be used; for the offerings, the oil extracted by grinding the olives is also acceptable.

The *sefer Siach Sarfei Kodesh* quotes the Chiddushei Harim *ztz"l* who explains Rashi's famous wording: "*Kosis lema'or*—crushed for lighting, *v'lo kosis lemenachos*—and not crushed for meal offerings," as follows. If a person wishes to criticize himself by acknowledging his shortcomings and feeling bad about them, this should only be done *lema'or*, to lift himself up and shine. If someone finds that self-criticism only brings to *menachos*, to feeling put down (in a play on words) and going into a state of despondency, he should use a different method of working on himself.

The Rebbe R' Mendele Vorka *ztz"l* expresses a similar idea. If you're going to point out someone's failings, he writes, only do so if it leads to *lema'or,* to that person improving himself and shining even more brightly. But if you try to get someone to change his ways and the result is *menachos*—depression and despair—then stop.

This idea is very relevant when it comes to *chinuch habanim*. Despite the way things sometimes look, virtually no parent actually sets out to destroy his child or break him with unkind or harsh words, even if the child does end up broken. Parents invariably want the best for their children—they just don't always know how to go about achieving it. Still, if a parent sees that his approach isn't leading to *lema'or* but rather to *menachos*, he should stop, take stock of things, and plot a new course.

Of course, we aren't always in control of the results when it comes to *chinuch*. However, what matters most are the intentions we have, combined with the effort we invest, as well as lots of *tefillah*. If we keep using a method or approach that isn't bringing about the *lema'or* that we're striving for, it's certainly time to take a fresh look at the situation.

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ויה"ר שתמיד יהיה מהמזכים את הרבים ויתברך בכל הברכות של העוסקים בצרכי ציבור

Parshas **Tetzaveh**

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Dear Rabbi Gruen,

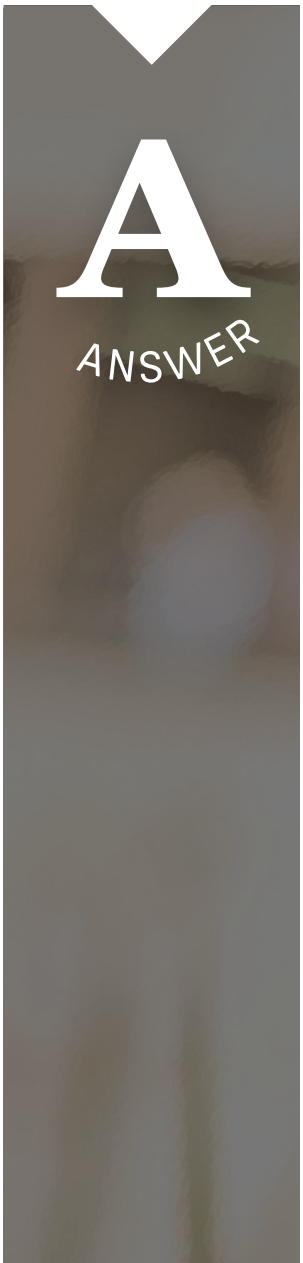
I'd like to ask your advice on my ten-year-old son. He has so many issues, and my husband just doesn't want to discipline him or teach him how to behave. So my son doesn't want to go to *cheder*, doesn't review his learning, doesn't take tests, disturbs his teacher and the other students in his class, and generally behaves terribly.

Worse still, in public, such as at a wedding or a family Chanuka party, he embarrasses me terribly with his awful behavior. He never says please or thank you. He yells if he doesn't get what he wants, and if he doesn't like the food he'll push it away or even throw it, and say how "disgusting" it is—even if the person who made it is sitting right there.

I would really rather not go anywhere with him as it's so embarrassing, but it's not fair on my other children if we stay home because of their brother. But I just don't know what to do, I don't know how to get him to realize that he can't just do what he wants. He's ten, not two!

I've been trying for ten years to get him to behave, and it just doesn't help. I'm at my wits' end. I feel so ashamed, because when we go out, people must be looking at me really strangely when they see a big boy like him refusing to do what I tell him and behaving so badly.

What can I do?



Before I offer my suggestions, I'd like to mention a few fundamental ideas about advice in general. Many situations need individualized help, not just general advice obtained in a *shiur* or from an article. This may strongly apply in this particular case. While it's easier for people to ask questions anonymously and rely on answers which are designed to be applicable to the general public, this is not always productive.

In a case such as this, it's important to find someone who can listen to the details of the situation, get to know the family dynamics a little, and come up with a personalized approach. What's also important is for that someone to follow up a week or two later to hear how the advice worked out—was the person able to implement it? Did it work? What has changed? Seeking out advice without any follow-up often isn't helpful, as the situation needs to be monitored to ensure that the advice was appropriate, and properly implemented.

In general, there is no one-size-fits-all in *chinuch habanim*, and that applies to parents as well as to children. Advice that is easy for one parent to implement will be very challenging for another. That's not to say that a parent should only do what's easy. But the person giving the advice has to know the person receiving it, in order to come up with ideas that can be put into practice.

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Another pitfall to be avoided is expecting instant results. Many people assume that if the right advice was given, it should work right away, and if it doesn't, they reason that it must not have been good advice in the first place. It can take time to see results, and again, someone who is familiar with your situation will be more qualified to know how long to keep trying something before giving up and coming up with another idea.

Just recently I spoke with a father who was having trouble with one of his sons, a young teenager who wasn't going to *yeshivah*. I listened to him, gained an impression of the situation, and offered my take on what he should try doing.

A day, two days, three days passed and nothing changed. But the father figured he'd give it another few days, and lo and behold on the sixth day, the boy went back to *yeshivah*.

It's not easy to be patient, especially when a problem has been going on for a long time. But sometimes, that's what's needed.

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That said, too much patience and perseverance (read: stubbornness) can be a bad thing. The mother writes that she's been trying to teach this son how to behave "for ten years" and it's not working. People have different tolerance levels for trying things and not seeing results. Some people will press the button to call the elevator a hundred times before giving up and taking the stairs. Some will press ten times. And some will press once, see that the elevator isn't showing up, and head right for the stairwell. But by the time ten years have passed using the same methods for *chinuch*, parents should have figured out that they need to research some new ways of doing things.

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It's actually hard to change techniques once we're used to doing them a certain way. That's part of the reason why people will keep doing the same thing, even when they see it's not working. But there can be other reasons, too. One, is not taking responsibility, blaming things on someone, or even just something else.

This is a problem I've seen countless times, in both *chinuch* and *shalom bayis* issues. One spouse says, "I'm doing things right, but my wife/husband keeps messing up. If only they would fix what they're doing wrong, everything would be fine."

You can't make the other person change, so you can only do your personal best. But if you're sure that you're already doing that, and that it must be the other person who's ruining your chances of success, think again.

Maybe you're right. Maybe the other person really is getting it all wrong. Maybe the father of the ten-year-old in the question really isn't exerting himself to be *mechanech* his son. But even if he's not being a responsible parent, it still doesn't make it right to blame him. It's not productive, and sometimes, it's better for both parents to be on the same page, even if that page is less than ideal, than it is for them to be fighting over which page to turn to.

But it's always wise to consider the flip-side too. Maybe it *isn't* your husband's fault. You think that he's not being strict enough, but perhaps you're actually being *too* strict. Maybe it's your husband's more laid-back style that gives them the space and quiet they need to endure your harsh methods. I know nothing about this family beyond what is contained in the letter. I have no idea if one or either of the parents is too strict, too lenient, or whatever else. I'm just offering some points to consider based on my experience of spouses arguing over whose approach is "best," and suggesting other ways of looking at a situation, the less natural and easy-to-swallow ones, which often have merit.

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The mother also expresses her concern that punishing this child by not going to a wedding or other event isn't fair on her other children. The unwritten assumption is that it *would* be fair on this difficult child—after all, he brought the punishment on himself with his terrible behavior. Many parents think along these lines, but it's often wrong to do so.

Interestingly, the opposite is often true. The other children, who seem to have less "issues" and difficulties, will do just fine even if they miss a wedding, or Chanuka party. But this child, the one acting so disruptively, might take it so much harder, and it probably won't make him improve his ways.

There is a concept of letting children face the consequences of their actions as part of *chinuch*. However, it's important to first assess that the child is emotionally mature enough to handle those consequences, and a child who is behaving as this ten-year-old is, sounds like a very sensitive and fragile child who would be broken by being excluded from the family.

Anything that feels like exclusion can easily be interpreted as the parent withdrawing his love from that child. A child doesn't need to "earn" the love of his parents. It should always be a given. There are plenty of other places where he will need to earn attention and praise, such as in school, and of course later in life. But in the home, love should always be present and given in abundance, regardless of how a child behaves.

It isn't easy. But it's so important. Years ago, I was a guest at a Seder and one of the host's sons was acting out, right from the start. He didn't participate, made noise, and generally disturbed everyone. When we reached Yachatz, I watched as the boy's father broke the middle matzah, wrapped it, and handed it to that son with a smile, asking him to hide it for him.

I'm sure it wasn't easy. And, knowing the father, I'm also sure that he knew that this son needed the extra attention and that there was no thought of "but he doesn't deserve it."

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All our children deserve our love, and all children deserve enough attention. And some children need more attention than others—that's just a fact. If they don't get positive attention—for the things they're doing right, for their good character traits—then they'll seek out negative attention. It's such a shame to end up having to deal with negative behavior when more positive attention at the right time would have nipped things in the bud.

A child who throws food around, who speaks disrespectfully to his parents, and who generally misbehaves, probably isn't crazy; he's broken, he's despairing, and he needs support and encouragement. When you take him and your other children to the family Chanuka party, don't wait for things to happen—*make* them happen. Take your son with you when you greet your Bubbe and tell her how good he is at organizing games for the younger children, or how nicely

he can sing (or whatever else it might be, even if you have to exaggerate). Make him the star of the show.

Recently, a parent asked my advice on a younger child who keeps taking other people's things without their permission, even though he's old enough to understand that it's wrong. I suggested that the next time he does that, he could give the child a wink and a smile and gently say, "You know that's not yours, right? I know you understand," and just wait for him to give it back.

You can use this method for a ten-year-old as well. Obviously if he's doing something truly terrible this may not apply, but if you catch him before things spiral out of control and show him that you *know* that he knows better, it might be enough to stop him in his tracks. When he sees that he's getting positive attention for negative behavior, it could confuse him enough to make him rethink his own methods.

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Many, if not most, parents deal with at least one challenging (read: difficult) child. Many parents wonder how they can devote so much attention to that one child. Teachers often feel the same way about their students—how can they exert themselves so much on behalf of one struggling child without the rest of the class suffering?

In many cases, as mentioned above, the other children don't actually need any added attention and will get along just fine without it. Furthermore, when the struggling or difficult child starts to do better, the entire class or family benefits.

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I don't want it to appear that I'm making light of the challenges involved in raising an explosive or very difficult child. Some children, especially those who are by nature sensitive and even fragile, can be very demanding and parents need a tremendous amount of energy, wisdom, advice, and support to deal with them in the best possible way.



It's absolutely normal to feel devastated when your child behaves badly—it's often only an irresponsible and uncaring parent who wouldn't feel that way. Very often, even what seems totally out of range for a child's age and stage might feel that way only due to how the behavior makes the parents feel. When they discuss it with an expert, they realize that it's not really all that uncommon or extreme.

It's also completely understandable that you feel terribly embarrassed when your son acts out in public. It's important to remember at such times that you only feel the way you do because it's *your* child. If it was someone else's child, you would probably just think to yourself, "Oh, he's ten. He'll grow out of it," or something similar—and that's what people looking at your son are thinking, too.

What people *will* notice is your response, and if you manage to stay calm, display patience, and still insist on proper behavior, they are likely to be impressed at your parenting skills, even though all you can see is what looks like failure. Remember that other people see all your children, not just this one. They know that you're a good mother dealing with a difficult situation, and they will admire you when they see you dealing with it patiently.

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In conclusion, I would like to stress again that as much as I can be encouraging and supportive in my words, I think that any parent in such a situation really needs someone at their side, on a regular basis, giving not just advice but also *chizuk*. Anyone dealing with a difficult situation needs not only guidance, but also a large dose of encouragement.

If you're "*kosis,*" crushed by your situation and challenges, to the extent that you're broken and despondent, stop criticizing yourself and give yourself *chizuk*, and get it from others too. And if your child is crushed by the way you're doing things, even though that was never

Be'ezras Hashem may we all find the tools necessary to extract the pure olive oil from ourselves and our children and give Hakadosh Baruch Hu true *nachas ruach*.

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