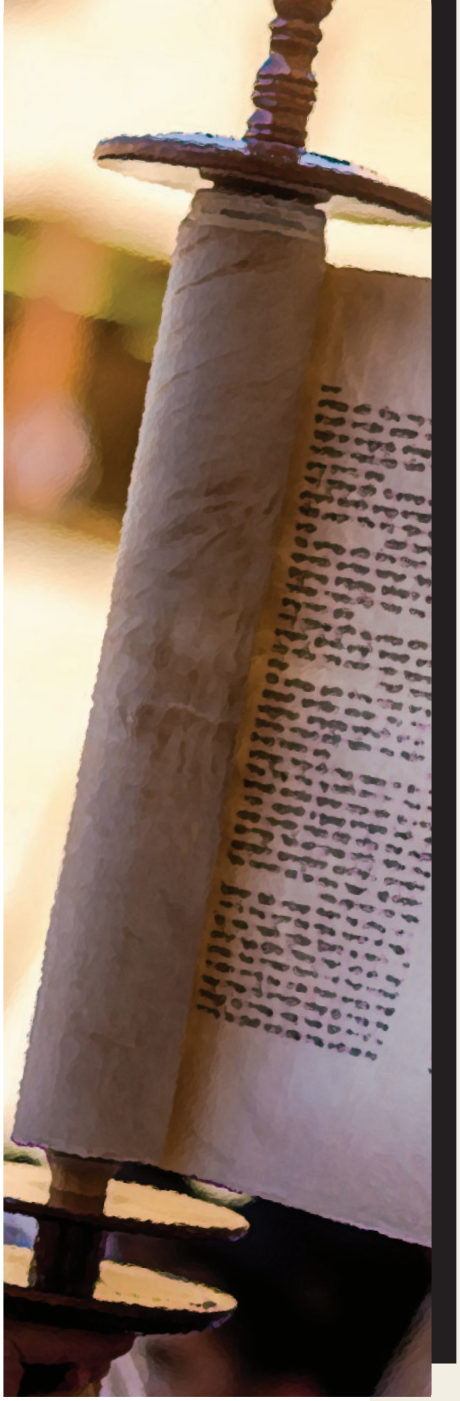


RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

DON'T PICK YOUR BATTLES

Twelve men were selected by Moshe Rabbeinu to spy out Eretz Kena'an before Am Yisrael was to enter. Before they leave, the Torah tells us how, "Moshe called Hoshea the son of Nun, Yehoshua," and Rashi adds that: "He [Moshe] prayed on his [Yehoshua's] behalf: May Hashem save you from the counsel of the spies." The Gemara in Sotah (34b) notes that the name Yehoshua is a condensation of the words, "May God save you."

Why did only Yehoshua merit this special *brachah*? The Imrei Emes explains that Moshe knew Yehoshua was a great *anav* and he feared that his humility could make him vulnerable to the influence exerted by the other spies, given that all were great men.

The Imrei Emes adds that this was not just a concern with regard to Yehoshua, but affects all of us. Whenever we are faced with a question of whether to stand up for a matter of Yiddishkeit or to give way, we need to know whether to choose the path of humility or of *azus de'kedushah*. Just as Yehoshua needed a special *brachah* to know which path was appropriate and when, so do we need immense *siyatta diShmaya* to know how to act.

Often, parents face disobedience from children young or old, and have to decide whether and when to hold their ground and when to overlook the incident. While parents are obligated to be *mechanech* their children, not all parent-child conflicts involve questions of right or wrong. Many are a matter of a parent's preference, or, worse, the results of an overly controlling nature in a parent clashing with an independent spirit in a child.

Knowing which approach to take involves honest contemplation, but the *parshah* teaches us that this is not enough — we also need to ask for *siyatta diShmaya*, as only Hashem can give us the necessary wisdom to know how to act, as well as the strength to do so correctly.

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Parshas **Shelach**

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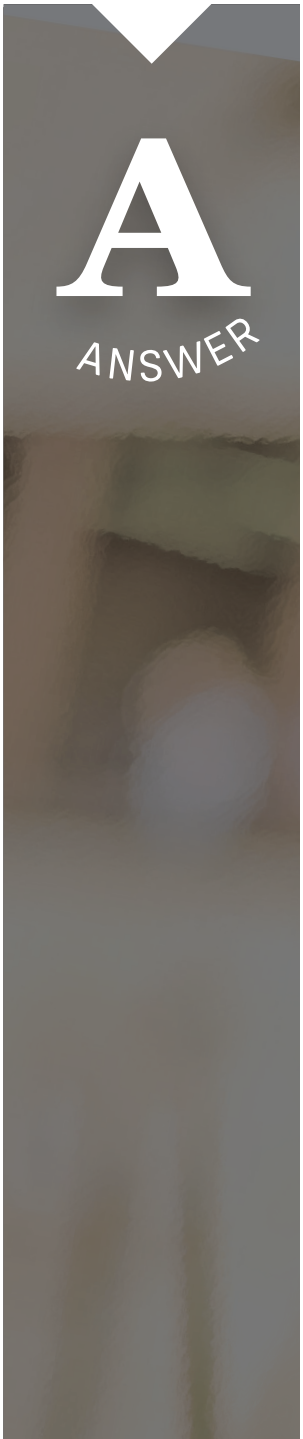


Dear Rabbi Gruen,

I have a question about my son, who is five years old. He's a very sensitive child, easily upset or triggered, and I'm not always sure how to treat him.

For instance, he has three shirts that he refuses to wear. I'm not sure what I should do. Should I give in and not force him to wear them, given his sensitivity? Or should I tell him that these are the clothes he has and that he has to choose one of them?

Thank you.



For all readers without sensitive five-year-old children, please don't stop reading. This question isn't only about a little boy and a choice of shirts. The issue it raises is one that affects all ages — even adults.

I remember being present when a *rebbi* ran into the parent of one of his students. "How's it going with Dovid?" he asked.

The parent sighed. "Not bad on the whole. I guess I need to learn to pick my battles."

The *rebbi* raised an eyebrow. "Why are you battling your kids?"

This encounter made me think. As parents, we are obligated to teach our children between right and wrong and guide them toward the Torah path. While there will inevitably be times when children disobey and do things we don't like, we should never see our relationship with them as a conflict we're looking to win. In most cases, we can work with them rather than against them. It's important to remember that they are the last people we want to "battle."

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Avoiding a battle will often mean showing flexibility, which is a positive trait when used correctly. If we feel compelled or pressured into backing down or changing the rules, it may not be appropriate to do so. In order for parents to be flexible appropriately, they must also be honest about their motivations. "The areas where ego gets involved are often the ones that generate the most tension. In fact, when a parent feels personally offended by a child's disobedience, it's usually a sign that the ego may need to take a step back."

Being overly controlling of our children is problematic not only because it causes unnecessary friction, but also because it turns otherwise good children into disobedient ones. While we don't need to pick "battles," we can and should try to limit the number and type of issues where we have to put our foot down and insist on compliance. And even then, there are ways of putting a foot down that don't involve warfare.

If it's a question of which shirt to wear, and the child has seven shirts and only likes four, it's often not worth making a big deal over it, especially if you haven't yet demanded that he wear each of them. And as you seem to know well, sensitive children take things so much more to heart than less sensitive types.

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The question you ask, like many others, is one of balance. The extremes of never backing down or always giving in are both wrong and damaging to both parent and child.

The Maor Vashemesh (in Parshas Matos) famously warns us in no uncertain terms of the negative consequences of lack of discipline. He writes, "All Jews are obligated to guide their children, while they are still young and don't yet have a *yetzer tov*. At this stage everything they do is due to their *yetzer hara*, which is why one must guide them and supervise them to ensure they are not stubborn or full of rage.Children need to moderate their behavior, and if a child doesn't [for example] want to eat a certain food, his father should force him to eat that precise food in order to divorce him from this terrible *middah*. If, however, the father ignores [this behavior] repeatedly, then he will end up accustoming his child to behave in this way and his character traits will only worsen over time and he will end up being an angry and arrogant person for the rest of his life..."

Wow.

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Allowing a child to grow up thinking that he can always get his way and that those around him will always guarantee his comfort is doing him no favor at all. Even if a child truly is sensitive and easily hurt and angered by any resistance to what he wants, his parents have to be extremely cautious about how far they indulge him.

The key to striking the right balance is knowing one's child. When it's a matter of shirts and not of *halachah*, involving the child in the shopping expedition can be a simple way to avoid conflict, even if he's only five years old.

But what if the child is twelve and the question is far more significant than dress preferences? The Torah warns us that once a child reaches the age of bar mitzvah, parents must be wary of meting out punishment, as hitting an older child could provoke them to strike back.

The Pele Yoetz notes that this warning is applicable not only to children who have reached the age of bar mitzvah, but to any child, even much younger, who, due to his nature and temperament is likely to respond inappropriately to being sternly disciplined. This is something that many parents struggle with, and understandably so, because it truly is difficult to know how to be *mechanech* a child who is trying to become independent and simultaneously behaving wrongly.

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Furthermore, what was right at age two is not necessarily right at age five; and certainly what is right at age five is no longer going to be appropriate at age thirteen, and so forth. This seems obvious, but it isn't always easy to notice how a child subtly changes as he grows up. It's not unheard of for parents to still be imposing their opinions on grown-up children, and for older children to be expected to continue to submit. Sadly, in many cases, teenage or grown-up children of overly controlling parents rebel against their parents' failure to recognize them as independent people and distance themselves from those parents.

I am not condoning active rebellion, and certainly children of any age are obligated to be respectful of their parents. However, parents also have an obligation to adapt their relationship style to the age and level of maturity of their children, and the *halachah* makes it clear that if they fall significantly short, they are considered responsible for the repercussions.

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Having now examined the extremes, let's now turn to the middle ground, the path of moderation. How can we show sensitivity to our children without putting the reins in their hands? How can we accustom them to discipline so that they learn self-discipline, without being overbearing?

In your particular case, what happens in the event that all three shirts your son likes are in the laundry? Should you wash them now, to accommodate him, even if it's not laundry day?

The best option in such a situation is to first show the child that you and he are on the same team, that you both want what's best for him. Before anything else, tell him, "I wish I could have your favorite shirt ready for you by the morning. I know how much you like it."

Then, and only then, should you add, "Those three shirts you like are all in the laundry right now. So, you can either wear the shirt you wore today again tomorrow, or wear something from the closet. I love when you have what you like, yet I won't be able to wash those three shirts until tomorrow. But I'm happy that you'll be able to wear your favorite shirt again the day after tomorrow."

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The success of almost any message you want to communicate depends not only on knowing what to say, but when to say it. Don't wait until it's time to get dressed for school and your child is gearing up for a tantrum. Preempt him the afternoon before and present him with the situation in a relatively calm moment.

When you choose the timing and have already made up your mind which approach you're going to take, it's much easier to resist the inevitable nagging and complaining. Children don't, in general, nag because they are "difficult" or demanding. They nag because they think it will get them somewhere.

Notice that children don't nag for things that they know they're not ever going to get. They only nag when it seems like it could pay off, and so, once you make your position crystal-clear with confidence, they will usually back down and resign themselves to the situation.

Similarly, children tend to nag one parent more than the other, simply because they are perceptive enough (even at a very young age) to know which parent is more susceptible. This is one reason why it's so important for both parents to be on the same page, at least in front of the children. Any disputes they have regarding *chinuch* should be carefully concealed and dealt with out of sight, until they are resolved.

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Inconsistency on the part of the parents is very hard for children to deal with; very often, what looks like disobedience or rebelliousness is simply an attempt to establish where the boundaries lie. Children want the certainty of knowing what is allowed and what is off-limits. They want to know that a certain behavior will always lead to a certain consequence. Even if that consequence is being yelled at, which is obviously NOT a good response, it might still be better than the response being totally unpredictable.

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To sum it up, while parents should not seek to control their children, they should never allow themselves to be controlled by them either. We should instead take the middle path, even though it's a far more difficult path to tread than the extremes on either side.

Taking the middle path requires lots of *siyatta diShmaya,* to know when to turn a blind eye and when to insist, when to remain silent and when to speak up, and how to be firm while still showing love and empathy. When we know what to aim for, and know to rely on Hashem, we will *im yirtzeh Hashem* get it right.



TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME: SHELACH 5785

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