

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

EVERYONE'S A *MALACH* IN DISGUISE

This week's *parshah* begins with Avraham Avinu at the entrance to his tent and three "men" approaching. Of course the men were actually *malachim*, but to Avraham Avinu it didn't make any difference and he ran to welcome them, with the same *mesirus nefesh* he displayed for any guest.

The *tzaddik* Reb Leib Sorah's *zy"a* points out that when two *malachim* later came to Lot, they are described not as men but as *malachim*. Lot indeed welcomed them in the manner he had learned from Avraham Avinu, but he hadn't learned the lesson all the way. Whereas Avraham Avinu dedicated himself to anyone, even the most *poshute* guests, Lot would only extend himself for important people.

The experiences of the Rebbe R' Zusha also illustrate this idea. During the years when he wandered from place to place together with the Rebbe R' Elimelech of Lizhensk, both disguised as regular people, they were not usually treated so well—but in later years, when R' Zusha was known and respected as a great *tzaddik*, he was accorded great honor. Then, when offered a bowl of soup by a respectful host, R' Zusha would say, "*Bekitsche*, eat." He felt that the honor was being paid to the outer trappings, not the person within.

A similar idea is sometimes at work when we're *mechanech* our children. It's easy to devote time and energy to a child who always brings home good report cards, who always does what he's told, who always shows respect. It's not so easy to devote time and energy to those children who test us, who come home with less-than-glowing reports, or a "call the teacher" note.

But which child needs the attention more?

Sometimes, it's a matter of perception, the way we choose to see our children, for whatever reason. There's a joke about a little boy whose mother adored him to no end and would always refer to him in loving terms: "Go to sleep, *tzaddik'l*." "Good morning, *shefeleh*!" "Have a wonderful day, *malach'l*!" After his first day in *cheder*, the mother asked her little *tzaddik'l,* "Nu, *shefeleh*, what did you learn today?" to which he replied: "I learned that my name is Dovid."

As long as the child is "*tzaddik'l*" in our eyes, everything's fine and we can find the necessary time and patience. It's when he becomes "Dovid," in his true colors, that we find out that he might not always behave like such an innocent *shefeleh*, and suddenly it's a challenge. And the challenging children are the ones that need our time, patience, and love more than ever.

Let's learn from Avraham Avinu to treat each person like a *malach*, even if they don't resemble one—and thereby help them to uncover their *malach* within.

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Parshas **Vayeira**
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Q QUESTION

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

Thank you for your *shiurim*; I enjoy listening to them very much.

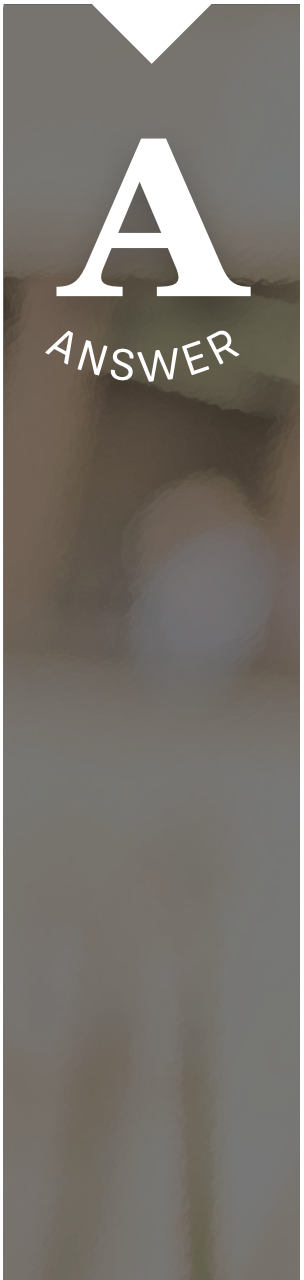
I have a question about my son, who was just recently married.

Sometimes, I feel that he just doesn't respect certain *hanhagos* that we're accustomed to, that we consider important. Some have to do with his wife—perhaps her family doesn't appreciate our standards. He just doesn't seem to have the sensitivity that we have.

For instance, he and his wife and her family went on a boat trip, with both the men and the women on the boat. Of course they were seated separately, but it's just not something that's appropriate for a *chassidisher yungerman*, and not something he was brought up with

What I would like to ask is, whether I should just swallow and put up with this, or whether I should try to say something to him nicely, to try to get him to understand what's required of a *chassidisher yungerman* once he's married.

Thank you



A ANSWER

The first thing I'd like to point out is that the person asking the question isn't asking whether he should tell his son off. It seems obvious that this wouldn't be a productive approach, conducive to growth and improvement. I think it's also safe to assume that the question would not be asked if it was the neighbor who was doing something that *his* father disapproved of. No one would dream of intervening in such a situation. The question here is: With regard to one's child, when does the *mitzvah* of *chinuch* end? Here the issue concerns a person's adult, married son and the concern of his parents that he lacks the sensitivity to act as he should. How should his parents respond?

There is actually a *machlokes* in *halachah* regarding whether the *mitzvah* of *chinuch* stops at bar mitzvah or later. What no one would dispute, however, is that a parent's well-placed and well-phrased word to a child of any age, whether four or forty, can have a positive effect on that child (and even the neighbor, for that matter), whereas a word that isn't well-placed or well-phrased won't have a good effect—even on a four-year-old.

In some situations, a parent is able to provide the guidance a married child may need, for all sorts of reasons, and it will be taken well. A newly-married son could easily make a mistake with an *eiruv tavshilin*, for instance, because in the past, he relied on his father's and didn't know all the details. Now his father can step in and point out: "This is the way it's done..." and the son won't feel that his father is intruding. He understands that he needs the guidance and doesn't take it personally or the wrong way.

On the other hand, the *halachah* is clear that when actually reprimanding a child, the age of the child does make a difference. A parent is told not to strike his "older son," out of concern that he might strike back. This falls within the *geder* of *lifnei iver lo sitein michshol*—not putting an obstacle before a blind person. If you think that your older child (married *or* single) will have a hard time accepting your words or giving you the kind of *kavod* you're demanding, the Torah warns you to take care not to push your child too far.

On the flipside, there's no *machlokes* about when the *mitzvah* of *kibbud av v'eim* stops. It doesn't. Even if you're 90 and your mother is 110, you're just as obligated to be *mechabed* her as you were when you were 10. The only exception is

for married women, whose obligations to their husbands come before their obligations to their parents, *if* they clash.

So the balance boils down to this: Within their obligation to be *mechanech* their children, parents need to be considerate and sometimes hold back from saying or doing certain things; children, however, cannot use this as an excuse for unacceptable behavior. Sometimes, older or married children think that it's their job to educate their parents on how to treat them, now that they're grown up. This is a big mistake—the *mitzvah* to be *mechabed* one's parents doesn't change regardless of age or married status.

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That said, aside from any halachic issues that you should discuss with a rav, there are several issues to consider before speaking up.

The first, and what should be most obvious, but isn't always, is: Will it work?

So many times people try the same approach again and again and again... and just keep trying, even though they can see it's not working. Sometimes people ask me for advice on whether to try to be *mechanech* their child a certain way: "Should I wake up my son for Kriyas Shema?" I often reply, "Try it, and see what happens." The key is to learn from experience.

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The second issue is: How is he going to take it, even if he listens?

A newly married child is just setting out in his new, independent life, a life that he is choosing for himself, of course within the proper boundaries. When you step in and criticize his choices, he could easily interpret it as you criticizing *him*.

When a child is still living at home, there's an ongoing relationship—you're still interacting on a daily basis, eating meals together, speaking often. So even if you say something that upsets him, the relationship isn't broken off—there are plenty of other things going on, and it's often water under the bridge.

Once a child is married, however, and no longer living at home, the relationship isn't as close. Even if you're still speaking on the phone regularly and visiting from time to time, it's not the same. If a married child feels hurt by something a parent says or does, it could lead them to withdraw, physically, emotionally, or both.

That doesn't mean that you have to approve of everything your married children do just because you want to maintain a good relationship. But just be aware that if the relationship is positive, the likelihood of your children taking your sensitivities into consideration is much higher than if a distance grows between you.

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The third thing to keep in mind is the most important.

When you disapprove of something your child does when he's still living at home, it's between you and him. Once he's married, however, it's between you, him, his wife, and her family. Parents mixing into their married children's lives can cause much more damage than many people realize. The question here is: Is it worth it?

As already mentioned, if it's a matter of *halachah* and you asked your rav and he told you that you're obligated to speak up, that's something else entirely. But this doesn't seem to be a halachic issue (although you can verify that with your rav). It's a matter of different standards, and here you have to be much more careful.

Remember that you make a *shidduch* with a family, one which has its own *minhagim*, sensitivities, and so forth. That doesn't mean that you have to accept everything your *mechutanim* do as okay for you as well, but you should acknowledge that there are different ways of doing things, all within the *geder* of *halachah.* Presumably when you made this *shidduch*, you considered your daughter-in-law's family to be *ehrlich*, and now, even though you've discovered that their standards may differ from yours in some ways, they didn't necessarily stop being *ehrlich*.

What's more, virtually everyone has *mechutanim* who are more *meikel* with some things—and with other things, they're more *machmir*. Each family has things they're more or less particular about, and it's not for any of us to judge others on their standards or priorities.

Sometimes, people get very stuck on issues where they could learn to be more flexible with no harm done. For instance, it's well known that on the very first Shabbos after his rebbetzin was *niftar*, the Gerrer Rebbe the Lev Simchah made Kiddush after seven o'clock in the evening. While his wife was alive, he hadn't waited until after seven as it bothered her, but now that he only had himself to take into consideration, he did what he felt was appropriate.

But aside from whatever the other family (or the new daughter-in-law) introduces and the effect this has on your married child, once children get married, we find that their priorities, sensitivities, and also standards do change somewhat, simply because now, they're running their own home. If you expect your children to do things on their own exactly the way you want them to, or trained them to do, you might be in for disappointments. In general it's important to give married children the space to make decisions and take responsibility for them, especially when it comes to matters that are likely to affect their *shalom bayis*.

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Sometimes, parents are afraid of giving that space, and think that it's good for the relationship if they stay as close as possible to their married children and let them know if they do anything they don't approve of. The idea is that the child will take care not to upset the parent—and they're right. But a married child is often more likely to just

conceal whatever it is their parent disapproves of, rather than stop doing it, in order to avoid upsetting them.

Other parents feel an obligation to let their children know that they don't approve of whatever it is—otherwise, they won't know. Most of the time, that's a fallacy. Children know very well what their parents think of what they do, and it doesn't always influence their decision about whether to stop doing it or not.

It also doesn't necessarily stop children from telling their parents about, for instance, the boat trip they took, or the vacation they're planning, or the new couch they bought. Why would a child tell a parent about something they know their parent could be upset about?

The answer is that they want your acceptance. They want you to acknowledge that they're an adult now, and making their own decisions, in a reasonable way, and although it might not be the decision that you would have made for them, it's what they have decided to do.

You don't need to like everything your children do, of course. But you do need to like—to love—your child. You do need to accept your child as a capable adult and an *ehrliche Yid* who is leading his own life. You do need to make that message sound louder and clearer than any doubts you have about standards or sensitivities.

And the more love and acceptance you show, the more likely it is that they will show respect and sensitivity for your standards.

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Part of accepting that your married child has grown up is recognizing that they are allowed to set their own standards, just like you. This is not because it's a free-for-all and we approve of liberalism, but because there is no one truth and standard that everyone approves of and abides by. This is especially true if your married child has his own rav and *moreh derech* who can help them make healthy decisions. And the importance of having a rav is something that all parents should instill in their children from the youngest age.

Each generation has its own challenges and each person has his own personality, so the rav that is appropriate for you is not necessarily the best rav for your child. But once he has a rav, you should encourage him to ask him for guidance: "Ask your rav. What did he say? Wonderful." It's always wonderful, because he asked *daas Torah*. The answer he was given is none of the parent's business—you're not your child's rav's rav.

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There's no doubt that it can be difficult to see our children doing things that we hoped they wouldn't do, even though there's nothing technically wrong. It's a challenge, like any other challenge in *chinuch habanim*.

Chazal tell us that Avraham Avinu was *niftar* a few years earlier than he would otherwise have been, to protect him from seeing how Eisav grew up and turned out. *Chalilah* there's no comparison between this and the question here, but it does suggest the idea of "not seeing."

A parent doesn't have to see everything. He doesn't have to look, and he doesn't need to ask questions. This is part of respecting our children as Yidden, even if they're not *malachim*, because as hard as it is, it shouldn't make any difference.

Hashem should help that children should be *mechabed* their parents, parents their children, and that we should all be *zocheh* to the Geulah Sheleimah *bimheira beyameinu*, Amen.



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