RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

Parshas Vayeira

The Importance of Chinuch

In this week's Parsha, we learn an important Chinuch lesson. The *passuk* relates how Avraham Avinu was sitting at the opening of his tent, looking out for wayfarers, whom he could welcome into his home. Indeed, as soon as Avraham saw the three *malachim* from afar, he ran towards them, bowed down, and begged them to come inside his home. He then told Sarah to quickly bake fresh bread and he rushed on his own to prepare the choicest meats for his guests. He also asked his son – Yishmael – to help him prepare the meat.

Why did Avraham need the help of his young son? Rashi explains that it was *lechancho b'mitzvos* - to train him in mitzvah observance.

Avraham loved the mitzvah of *hachnasas orchim*, so much so that he was willing to sit out in the sweltering heat, three days after his *bris*, and search the horizon for guests. Yet, even while being so focused on doing his beloved *mitzvah*, he did not forget about the other *mitzvah* he had as a father – that of being *mechanech* his son to *mitzvos*.

Sharing the mitzvah with his son did not diminish from his own zeal for the mitzvah, as we can see from the *pessukim*, "*He ran towards them and bowed down*", "*He ran to the cattle*", "*He took the food and served them*". Rav Moshe Feinstein Zatz"al says that even though Avraham wanted to be *mechanech* his son, he didn't give away the whole job. It wasn't because he wanted to save it all for himself, either. It was because he understood that the whole idea of *chinuch* is to lead by example and show the child what needs to be done and then have him do it together with you.

The Bardichever Rav said that every Purim his father would send him to deliver the *matanos l'evyonim* so that he would get used to doing *mitzvos*. As parents, we don't only have to make sure that we do the right thing; we also need to involve our children in the process so that they learn what is right.

I received a question this week on a related topic, which we will now go ahead and address.

Question:

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

I would like to ask you a question that has been bothering me for a while. When I was a bachur, and even for several years after I got married, I used to do certain things according to the way I grew up, and the way I knew was appropriate for a *chassidishe* **Yid. Truly, I would have liked to keep on doing these things, but due to certain difficulties and circumstances I don't do them anymore, even as it pains me greatly.**

What hurts me even more, is that I often find myself telling my children that they need to do the very things I dropped. I won't hit them or yell at them when they don't do it, but I do tell them that this is something they need to do so that they know that I would like them to do it. Some examples would be waking up early to daven, saying *birchas hatorah*, *Krias Shema* **on time and saying some** *tehillim* **every day. I try not to contradict myself when they can see, because then I would just be a hypocrite, but still it gnaws at my conscience and I am in a real quandary.**

On the one hand, I feel silly when I demand something from them that I don't do myself, but on the other hand, this is the right thing to do, I also used to and still want to do it.

How do I work out this situation?

Answer:

This is a very good question, and you ought to know that you are not alone. Many people struggle with this issue, wondering how they can instruct their children when they themselves don't feel up to following their own advice and direction.

Even more people don't ask the question and just blunder along without realizing how foolish they look. They either have a whole list of justifications why there's nothing wrong when they do it, or they think their kids don't realize or notice. They might even surmise that their kids also understand their parents are different.

The truth is that most of the time children *do not* understand why they can't do a certain thing and their parent *can*! The message that they get is that when they will be all grown up, they will be able to do whatever they want, too. Think about the father who shushes his son during *minyan* right in the middle of his own heated conversation with his cronies. Will his son quiet down?

Perhaps. But will he learn that talking in *shul* during *davening* is not okay? Very unlikely.

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Someone showed me a letter that a girl sent anonymously to one of the magazines and addressed it to her mother. She writes how her mother has taught her right from wrong and spoken about all of the wonderful ideals that she should aspire to. Over the years, though, she noticed her mother disregarding her own words and doing things that were contrary to what she had been teaching her this whole time. Sometimes she did them when she thought she wasn't being watched, and other times she did them openly.

It's very possible that even if the mother read the letter, she didn't see herself in it. We are so quick to justify and explain why it isn't quite like it seems. But even if the mother had a valid excuse and assumed her child understands the difference, most often children do not quite see it that way. Furthermore, when they witness their parents contradict their own words, it breaks down their respect for them in every regard and it makes it hard for them to trust their parents or their values in general.

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Unless it is something clear cut, like underage driving and the like, children do not comprehend why adults are any different than them. Sometimes, everyone else understands them but their own kids don't!

Once, after I gave a lecture about how children think differently from their parents, someone approached me to tell me about a certain way he dresses, while at the same time he tells his *bachur* not to imitate him. He wanted to know how he can explain to his son why he's different. I said to him, "Before you explain it to your son, why don't explain it to me?" Guess what! Even after he explained it, the difference was still very unclear! It's safe to assume that his son also wouldn't understand it.

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The idea of behaving properly when others – especially your children – see you, exists in the Gemara. *Halevay sheyiyeh moreh shamayim aleichem k'moreh basar v'dam* - It is okay to refrain from doing something because you're worried about the opinion of others. Sometimes avoiding wrongdoing because you are afraid that others will see you, will inspire you to continue doing the right thing even when they don't. Being a 'hypocrite' may not be so bad after all because your 'hypocrisy' has potential for long lasting improvements.

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We recently spoke about the idea that picturing your father's image can save you from sin. For some people, picturing their "son's" image can save them from sin. Even if the only reason you do the right thing is so as not to confuse or embarrass (or not to be embarrassed) your son, it is still good enough.

Someone once came to the Ahavas Yisrael and complained that he is a simple villager and his children are growing up without any role models. They don't have anyone to look up to. They never get to see the Rebbe or witness his *avodah* at a Shabbos *tisch*. The Ahavas Yisrael told him, "Why don't you become the Rebbe? You can "*fir tisch*" every Shabbos, you can do as I do, and you will be the Rebbe for your children to imitate."

The villager argued that he's not on the level to act like the rebbe at tisch, he doesn't want to feel like an actor; a faker! The Rebbe agreed with him. "In general you're right that a person shouldn't fake *hislahavus,* that may be considered *eish zarah,* the sin of Nadav and Avihu. However the *possuk* says that Nadav and Avihu were killed for their *eish zarah* because *"Ubanim lo hayah lahem - they did not have children"!* If you have children, you must even be a faker for their sake!"

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I once heard from an *adam gadol* that a person needs to imagine that his child will only turn out half as good as him. When a child sees his father do something, he might be duly impressed, but also subconsciously think that as nice as it might be, his father is so much older and wiser than him and he isn't on that level yet. He might push himself to at least do part of it, though. So when a father does something he would like his son to imitate, he needs to give it his absolute all – or even more – so that his son will at least be half as good.

A 40-year-old father who learns one hour on Shabbos afternoon can't expect his 11-year-old to learn for a full hour as well. But if he learns for three or four hours, there's a chance his young son will be motivated to put in an hour. When a person commits

himself to something, he gains ownership of it and then his children can inherit that trait as well.

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Chanoch l'naar al pi darko can also be understood as a parent is being *mechanech* his child according to *his own* way. When you are careful to do the right thing and be a *mentch*, it is the most effective method of bringing up children who behave properly.

Of course, there are no guarantees. But there are rules, and then there are exceptions to the rules. People love to sensationalize when a guy who was a health nut and never smoked a cigarette dies at 50, or his father who smoked a pack an hour dies at 106. But honestly, how many such cases exist? Does a single incident disprove an entire concept? After all, a person who leads a healthy lifestyle has a much higher chance of living longer, if Hashem wills it, of course. The same thing is true for *chinuch* as well. Generally, a person who is *ehrlich* and is stringent in his mitzvah observance has a bigger chance that his children should learn from his example. Sometimes they might not be 100% like him, but they might be 85% like him. That is why it is so important to give it our all.

In last week's Parsha we learn how Lot defied the Sodomites and took in guests, at great personal sacrifice. Lot was not an exceptionally good person. What was it that compelled him to do this act of kindness? He saw the *hachnasas orchim* in Avraham Avinu's house, and that was what spurred him to do the right thing, even if it was against popular opinion. Did he do it exactly like Avraham did? Probably not. But seeing Avraham's example gave him the push to do at least part of it.

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Now, even if you don't feel capable of being perfect for your children, or even if you don't feel comfortable putting up an act, that still does not absolve you from your responsibility to be *mechanech* your kids. In fact, *chinuch* is a *mitzvah* just like any other, and even if you don't get up on time, or learn enough, you should still talk to your children about the beauty and their obligation to do the same. You can even be vulnerable and admit that it's very hard for you, but you try your best.

Don't live a double life or be hypocrite. It's not that when your child looks your way you quickly start to *shuckel* and concentrate on your *davening*. It's that you realize that you have children who are looking up to you as their role model and you have no other choice. You must set an example for them!

And at the very least, when for whatever reason you feel justified for not "practicing what you preach" you should be very careful to ensure that your children don't see you contradicting yourself, instead of hoping that they won't be bothered by the question.

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One part of *chinuch* is to push yourself to be a better person, even if it's only when your children see you. Sometimes a person lacks motivation to do the right thing for himself, but when he thinks about his children and his future generation, he gets the push to at least pretend to do so. The good news is that this often has an actual effect on him and he really does become a better person.

Real *chinuch* happens by example, even if the example is fake at first. As long as you don't openly contradict yourself, you don't have to worry about appearing foolish to your children. In fact, the best way to push your kids to reach the level you want to see in them is to force yourself to reach that level, too.

I hope you take my words to heart, and may Hashem guide you on the right path in life.

All the best, Rabbi Shimon Gruen

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