

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

WHEN TO WORK WITH NATURE, WHEN TO RISE ABOVE IT

Seemingly trapped at the Yam Suf, the Yidden cried out in terror; Moshe Rabbeinu's response was to tell them that this was not the time for *tefillah*: "Hashem will fight for you and you shall remain silent."

The Zohar Hakadosh explains that saving Klal Yisrael at this point was such a lofty matter that even heartfelt *tefillah* could not accomplish it — only Hashem could, and would, rescue the Yidden. The Rebbe R' Meilech of Lizhensk adds that the language of the Zohar also suggests that in order to merit their salvation, the Yidden were expected to rise above their nature and go beyond their limitations. This would prompt Hashem to respond in kind and rescue them in a way that was similarly "beyond nature."

Rising above what we see as the confines of our nature is our mission in this world. We are often willing to extend ourselves significantly and take on huge challenges in order to "find favor" in Hashem's eyes. It's when it comes to our relationships with our fellow humans that we are less willing, or see ourselves as less able, to break our nature and move significantly beyond our comfort zone.

When it comes to our children, many parents, including those who are truly loving, devoted, and well-meaning, unconsciously expect their children to rise above their natures even though they don't necessarily demand it of themselves. Interestingly, at times, expecting a child to change is actually motivated by the parent wishing to remain in his comfort zone — he wants the child to do the hard work he won't, or thinks he can't, do himself.

If we want to see success in *chinuch habanim*, we are far more likely to do so if we stop outsourcing the *avodas hamiddos* and take it on ourselves. Seeing us break our natures is the best inspiration for our children to follow suit, at their own pace.

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Parshas **Beshalach**

VOL. 8 | ISSUE 16



Dear Rabbi Gruen,

Thanks so much! I learn so much from your weekly lessons, *baruch Hashem*!

I'm writing now because of a question I have about my five-year-old son, who is a very sensitive child. My main issue is with his refusal to eat breakfast before going to *cheider*, and lately he even refuses to drink anything!! It makes me really anxious to send him off this way.

I've tried telling him that he doesn't have to eat and that it's his choice but that he'll feel better if he does eat before leaving the house. I've also tried forcing him... but basically nothing works.

Do you think it's a valid concern? Should I continue telling him that it's his choice and that I'm only insisting because it's for his benefit? He tells me that he can't eat because his stomach hurts if he eats in the morning. But I know that within an hour or so he'll feel starved and won't be able to eat then as he's in class.

And what about drinking? Should I force him to at least drink?

Thanks so much for all the awareness you provide. It really helps me a lot with him in general.



It's absolutely normal for a parent to worry about a child who insists on starting the day without breakfast. And it's just as normal for a highly sensitive child to have a variety of sensory issues which may include stomach pain at stressful times. In fact, most of us can relate to the idea of feeling unable to eat when anxious. Sensitive children are more easily emotionally triggered and the early-morning rush to get ready and leave the house is an obvious trigger. Furthermore, being pressured to eat contributes to their anxious state.

There isn't always a simple response to emotional issues like this one, but let me share a few ideas you might find helpful.

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Practically speaking, your son is only five. He may well grow out of this stage as many children do. Reasoning with such a young child is rarely helpful; he doesn't really understand his feelings of anxiety which is why all he can tell you is that his "stomach hurts." Telling him that eating when he feels nauseous is for his own good will not fall on receptive ears.

Furthermore, while it's obvious that if he asks for sweets or other unhealthy foods to start his day, that probably isn't something you want to consider, there may be food options that he is more open to trying and that you feel comfortable with. Looking at his eating patterns and preferences at other times of the day might give you some clues to which foods he responds better to. You might also want to consult a dietician or doctor.

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On a deeper level, however, you clearly realize that this isn't primarily a physical problem but rather an emotional one, which is why you introduce your letter by stressing that he is a very sensitive child. You can probably identify other areas where your son's sensitivity creates difficulties that you don't experience with your other, less sensitive children. It's also likely that taking a confrontational attitude in other areas produces similarly unsatisfactory outcomes. Sensitive children tend to become extremely stubborn when they are challenged, especially if they sense that they can't logically defend their position.

This is why arguing with your son and trying to prove that you're right (specifically because you are!) is likely to backfire. The more you prove your point, the harder it becomes for him to back down. In any case, once he falls back on "my stomach hurts" as his position, there is very little you can say to counter it.

It's common for parents to start with the best of intentions and on Sunday, to insist that the child eats; the child refuses, time runs out, and he leaves the house without eating. On Monday, the parent begs the child to eat; again he refuses and leaves. On Tuesday, the by-now thoroughly frustrated parent threatens the child with a punishment if he refuses to eat; the child bursts into tears and… refuses to eat. On Wednesday, the parent feels guilty at his explosion of the day before and tries to tempt the child to eat with incentives; the child stubbornly refuses… All this can be avoided, or at least minimized, by planning in advance.

Trying to problem-solve in the morning rush is counterproductive for both of you and tends to lead to unpredictable strategies and outcomes. While all children need consistent parenting, sensitive children become more swiftly disoriented by inconsistency. Therefore, all you should do at stressful times is try to defuse the tension. The time to address this problem is at any other calm moment during the day. Choose a time in the afternoon or evening when your son is in a relaxed mood and discuss things then. Come ready with a list of food options that you consider acceptable and allow him to choose from among them. You can also suggest that he get up half an hour earlier, giving him ample time to eat at a leisurely pace. It might be possible to pack him a snack-breakfast that he can eat during recess. But common to all the options is that eating in the morning is non-negotiable.

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Once your son realizes that you mean business, he may be more willing to consider at least one of the options you're offering. You should of course make it clear that you understand that mornings are stressful times and that it can feel hard to eat, which is why you have thought of all kinds of possible solutions. Repeat that not eating at all is not one of them.

Don't be afraid of offering incentives to help him make a mental shift that comes harder to him than it does to other, less sensitive children. Of course, you will be the one deciding which incentives are acceptable; you aren't handing over the reins to your child entirely.

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Frequently, parents trying to implement this advice fall into a common pitfall where they secretly hope that their child will make the "right choice" among the options they present, and become discouraged and frustrated when it doesn't happen. When you allow your son to choose when to get up in the morning and what to eat before leaving (or which snack to take along with him), you have to internalize that the

choice really is his, and accept whichever option he chooses.

Very often, when parents show confidence in their child's ability to choose wisely, they are rewarded — but it can take a long time to see results. That means weeks, and possibly even months, and it is definitely hard to show patience. Meanwhile, remind yourself that it isn't the end of the world if your son takes a bag of pretzels to eat at recess instead of eating a nutritious breakfast before leaving the house. It's not ideal, but forcing a child to do something that he feels unable to is far less ideal.

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Once your son has made his choice, you should not only accept it but also praise it. Even if from your perspective it's the worst of the options from which he was choosing, tell him how smart he is for making that decision, and for accepting that eating in the morning is the best thing for him. Now that he feels part of the process, he will find it easier to accept this idea as "his own" rather than feeling forced to admit that you were right all along.

Something a child chooses on his own is far more likely to remain with him long-term than something he feels forced into, and this applies to all children, not just sensitive ones (and to adults as well...) Even if he knows that what he's being made to do is right in a certain sense, he will still instinctively try to find a way to get out of doing it. By contrast, a child who feels trusted to make the right decisions will also feel freer to adapt his decisions later on, when he is older and wiser and realizes that he could be doing things better.



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In a sense, parenting sensitive children is not so different from dealing with sensitive adults — or, indeed, any adult. Almost everyone responds far better to praise than to criticism; almost everyone prefers to choose among several options rather than being forced to comply. Everyone enjoys being respected for their wisdom and ability to make sensible decisions.

Parents do, generally, know best. And simply because our children are small and lacking in common sense and life experience, it can be so tempting to guide them along the path that we have already decided they need to travel. However, in many areas, even though the parent is right, their "right choice" is only one right choice among many others that are equally legitimate. Forcing a child to do things one way is easier for parents as it allows them to remain within their comfort zone, but in the long term, things often backfire once children realize that other, valid options were discounted for no good reason.

When we are open to looking at situations from a new perspective and to looking at each of our children through a different lens, a lens that allows us to see their unique characteristics and limitations, we will *b'ezras Hashem* have far more success in guiding them along their path of success.

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME: BESHALACH 5786

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