

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

PERSONALITY *NOT* DISORDER

In this week's *parshah*, the Torah describes three types of *tzara'as*, that can be found on one's skin: *s'eis, sapachas,* and *baheres*. The Kli Yakar associates each one with a different character failing.

S'eis, he writes, is associated with *ga'avah*, considering oneself superior to others. *Sapachas* is associated with *ta'avas mamon*, desiring money even though wealth is not something we can truly possess as in the end, we have to leave it behind. *Baheres* is associated with *lashon hara* and shaming other people.

Therefore, the Kli Yakar continues, a person with *tzara'as* has to come to the *kohen* to be purified, as the *kohanim* are innocent of these three failings. It was Aharon Hakohen who, along with Moshe Rabbeinu, said, "What are we?" and it was also Aharon who "rejoiced in his heart" to learn that his younger brother had been chosen to lead the Yidden out of Mitzrayim. The *kohanim* also had no desire for material possessions; they received no portion in Eretz Yisrael, and were sustained via the *korbanos*. And it was, again, Aharon Hakohen who was a *rodef shalom*, the quintessential peacemaker who brought people together by focusing on their good points.

Given that *tzara'as* was thus the result of poor *middos*, the importance of good *middos* should be obvious. Unfortunately, people often fail to appreciate this.

This goes so far that, sadly, praising someone for his or her good *middos* can sometimes even be understood as a subtle hint that they're lacking in intelligence, charisma, or self-confidence. There's nothing wrong with intelligence, charisma, self-confidence, or any of the other traits that help people succeed and "get places" in this world. But only good *middos* will ensure that one gets to the right places, and doesn't trample on others on the way.

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Parshas
Tazria
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Q QUESTION

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

Thank you for all your *shiurim*. I listen to both Yiddish and English. I really like your *mehalech* and guidance and feel lucky that I found someone with the right perspective who is also realistic and practical. You've helped me understand and deal with my sensitive child and I've been seeing a big difference.

That being said, I'd like your opinion on how or if to deal with my oldest child, who is now 17.

When he was a young child, I was sure he had Asperger's. He had terrible tantrums whenever things weren't like he expected. He had a hard time communicating and understanding other kids and always ended up fighting with them. He would also play very nicely on his own for long periods of time.

In *cheider* he struggled socially for a long time and would just say Tehillim at recess or read. Then he started falling behind with his learning too and we were getting really worried.

B'chasdei Hashem, he got a fantastic *rebbi* in seventh grade and things started going uphill and are still going up *baruch Hashem*! He is now a gem of a boy, every parents' dream! He worked on his *middos* and never yells, is very nice to everyone, is doing great in *yeshivah* socially and scholastically, learns in his spare time, and helps out in the house. *Hodu l'Hashem*!

So what's the problem? An article in *Nafshi* magazine described kids exactly like him who turn out to be great *bochurim* until they get married... when they have a hard time communicating with their spouse. My son actually isn't the biggest talker and I have to pull answers out of him at times.

How can I help him communicate better without sending him to a therapist and have him feel like he has a problem? Or, should I just let it go and not take an article so seriously?

Thank you



A ANSWER

At the risk of sounding highly unconventional, I'll try to give you my honest opinion, knowing that many will disagree. It seems that an article describing your quieter child achieved nothing aside from causing you anxiety. Should you now start to see your son as a "problem case" and send him to a therapist who might or might not succeed in helping him to "communicate better"? I think you know the answer to that already as your final sentence indicates. Although I don't have enough information about your son's situation to answer responsibly, personally I feel that you should not take such an article so seriously. It's an article, a perspective, and that's it. Articles can be informative, but more often than not they cause magazine syndrome and bring lots of anxiety and uncalled for (and unhelpful) fear and worry in their wake.

There are, of course, articles which claim to be based on solid research, and it's important to understand what "research" in such areas means. Psychological research generally consists of identifying patterns found in case studies. It's possible that a number of teens who were diagnosed as being "on the autism spectrum" (which means different things to different people) go on to have problems "communicating with their spouses" (which, again, means different things to different people). It's also highly likely that most teens diagnosed

with Asperger's (hardly a clearcut diagnosis) go on to build happy marriages, and that many of those with "communication problems" are simply more quiet or reserved by nature.

If the only positive suggestion the article contained was to go to therapy, that's a great shame. There's a lot we can do to help our children to thrive even if they are more introverted and private by nature, and the majority of such children have no need of a therapist's involvement, I believe. In fact, as you mention, sending a child to a "professional" often only serves to stick a label on them, one which can do more harm than good.

Consider all the people who excuse themselves from their basic responsibilities by claiming that they have a diagnosis which "explains" all manner of failings from getting up late to not washing dishes for days to getting angry and yelling at others... While they truly may have more of a struggle than others to overcome certain challenges, they use the label to justify giving up the struggle before it even begins. It might be cute to hear people say: "Oh, it's my ADHD..." but where does it get them?

Consider also all those who carry a burden of resentment and anger at family members who decided that there was something wrong with them and then sent them for "help."

While it's bad enough when those family members mean well, tragically, there are those who label others in order to belittle and invalidate them. I've seen this mistake made both by parents and spouses. A man might tell his wife, "You must have borderline personality disorder. You're never happy or satisfied no matter what I do for you." Even when such a statement has some truth to it, it's rarely helpful to say it; when it isn't true, it serves as a way for a husband to justify his workaholism and refusal to make time for his wife.

Similarly, a woman might insist that her child has an oppositional "disorder" when the real problem is that she has no idea how to impose consistent, loving discipline. In such cases and more, a "diagnosis" is of no help whatsoever even if it is accurate, because all it does is describe one small part of a very large picture and present that small part as the key to the solution, which it most certainly is not. And, it leaves a hurtful wound that doesn't go away too soon.

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As I mentioned, I don't know any more about your son that what you write, so I can't comment on whether a diagnosis of Asperger's was in place, but it does seem that part of his "issue," whatever it was, somehow "resolved" itself over the years, in large part due to a special *rebbi* when he was around twelve years old. It's actually very common for very sensitive children to have "issues" both in class and socially and to be seen as "problem children," and also for them to start to blossom if they have a rebbi or teacher who knows how to bring out the best in them.

In my experience it's more helpful and productive to call a child "sensitive" (if one must call them anything) than it is to label them with anything resembling a problem or disorder, which implies that something is irreparably wrong with them. Sensitivity is a natural trait, part of one's personality. It's just one of many issues that are simply the outcome of a personality type and which shouldn't be seen as problems at all. If anything, perhaps it's the parents who have the issue, because they haven't yet been able to figure out what this particular child needs from them.

One of the main reasons why sensitive children are harder to decipher is their tendency to be so reactive. Given a strict, demanding teacher, they can lock themselves away and refuse to cooperate. With a teacher who sees their potential and knows how to encourage them, they flourish. At home, sensitive children do best in a calm and predictable environment and their entire personality can seem to change when things are tense or something unexpected happens.

Therefore, it seems that what happened in seventh grade is that your son had an excellent teacher who knew the secret of being *mechanech* "*al pi darko*," and suddenly your son's "issue" largely and miraculously disappeared...

It's interesting that you don't mention all the subsequent teachers your son had over the next seven years, but I'm actually not surprised. Often, all it takes for a sensitive child to start to blossom is one person who gives them the attention and support they need, and then they find the confidence and stability to start to thrive in all kinds of situations that they didn't deal well with before. It seems that the seventh-grade *rebbi* was this special person and this shows how much just one person can achieve.

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Might a therapist have achieved similar results? For a number of reasons, I doubt it. Firstly, therapists are trained to identify problems which in practice translates to making the *person* feel like a problem, hardly conducive to giving them the confidence they lack. Furthermore, what a therapist identifies as a problem

(which "must" stem from earlier problems which "must be" uncovered and magnified and addressed, before finding even earlier traumas and unaddressed sources for the current issues, in a never-ending search for the initial problem — all in line with psychological theories) is often simply a character trait which is inborn. There's nothing actually wrong with any trait — it's just that the person needs to know how to live with it, when to utilize it, and how to "break" it, when appropriate.

While there are therapists who are grounded in Torah and know how to build a person up rather than break their self-esteem by viewing them as disordered, in my opinion, and from my experience, positive results are far more likely following the intervention of a mentor, teacher, or friend. Sensitive children are, unsurprisingly, acutely sensitive to being sent to a "professional" for treatment and may see it as a diagnosis of "flawed" in general, making them give up on themselves entirely when what they really need is simply to feel good about themselves.

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Over the years, I've spoken with many parents of sensitive children, giving them ideas for how to help their children feel secure and thrive. They, like you, have seen tremendous changes occur, and they, again like you, worry that while things seem fine — even wonderful — now, what will happen later? After all, they point out, the rest of the world isn't likely to be as patient and understanding as their child's parents and teachers. What if they get married and their spouse is impatient and irritable, demanding and pressuring?

There are several answers to this question. One you have already seen for yourself: After that wonderful seventh-grade teacher, your son didn't necessarily need more wonderful, exceptional teachers to keep on growing and maturing. He got the boost he needed and then kept on along a positive trajectory. For other children, the boost might be provided by the parents themselves and it can give them what they need to build a secure and loving marriage with their spouse.



Another answer is that we can only do what we can do — the rest isn't in our hands. Even the most well-adjusted, confident, outgoing, charismatic person can flounder if he or she gets married to someone with poor *middos*. Even someone with excellent communication skills can suffer tremendously if married to someone with genuine issues. What you can do as a parent who understands your child is look for a *kallah* for your son who is gentle, refined, sensitive, caring, and warm-hearted. In short, you should look for someone with excellent *middos*. While this is advice for any parent, for your son it's critical that you focus on looking for a girl who has worked to refine her personality, rather than one who is "successful" or super-intelligent or a "go-getter."

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And meanwhile, you should continue to do what you've been doing until now — building up your son, noticing and appreciating his fine *middos* and all the hard work he has invested. Make sure he knows how much you admire his efforts and tell him so frequently. Don't assume he knows what you think. Sensitive children (and adults) tend to need much more praise and appreciation than others, although we should never stint on providing it to anyone. They may actually be the ones to reveal this need least, and even reject your good words at times, but don't let yourself be fooled.

And, most of all, *daven* that he should continue to flourish and will find his *zivug hagun* in the right time. Thank Hashem that He sent him the people he needed in the past, and *daven* that your son will continue to have the support and encouragement he needs in the future.

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