

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

REMOVING THE POWER FROM THE STRUGGLE

In this week's *parshah* we learn that a master who strikes his slave with a stick and kills him is subject to the death penalty. The Torah also tells us that if the slave only dies a day or two later, the master is not punished. The Rambam clarifies that if the master strikes his slave not with a stick but rather, with a sword, knife, or stone, then the master is put to death even if the slave lingers for a year before dying of his wounds.

The Ohr Hachaim explains that the difference between the two cases is based not on the nature of the wounds but rather on the type of weapon and what it reveals about the master's motivations. A master who strikes his slave with a stick might merely be trying to chastise him and teach him to do his job properly. If a master lashes out with a knife or rock, however, this indicates that he has murderous intentions even if the slave is not so badly wounded that he dies on the spot.

The Torah obligates those who own slaves to treat them in a humane manner, even though they are essentially the property of their owners. While the *halachos* related to slaves are not currently relevant, we can derive important lessons from them that concern all types of relationships, especially those with our children.

Sometimes, parents justify what they consider to be *chinuch* methods by claiming that "I'm the parent; I can act as I see fit." There is some truth to this as long as the parent is truly engaging in *chinuch*. But if the parent is simply giving vent to his emotions, "I'm the parent" is no justification at all. If it isn't justified with a slave who is his master's possession, how much more so when it comes to our children, who are *not* the property of their parents.

The results of our misguided attempts to mold our children are not always immediately visible, but when we are honest with ourselves, we are quite capable of figuring out whether a "*chinuch*" method is truly motivated by a genuine desire to set a child on his right path.

Thank you to

R' Yoel Schlesinger

for kindly sponsoring this week's essay

as a Zchus for all those in need of Shidduchim iyH

Parshas **Mishpatim**

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Dear Rabbi Gruen,

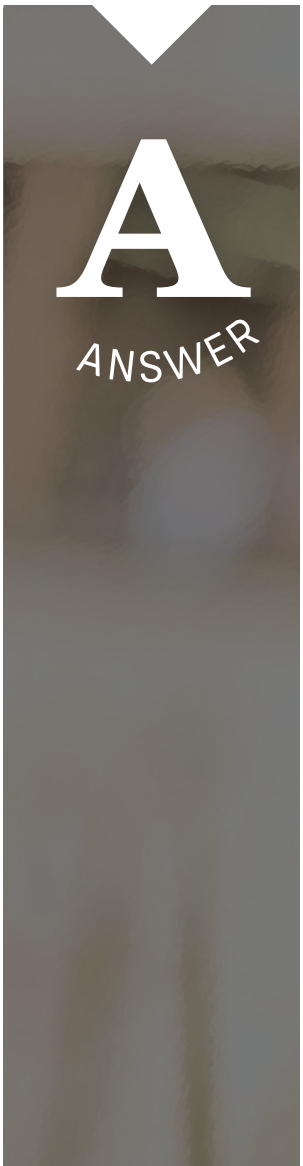
First of all, thank you for your essays. They're really inspirational and I gain a lot from them.

I have a question regarding my daughter who is turning 10. She doesn't want to get a haircut and she's been giving us a hard time for the past three years. We've tried bribes and all kinds of things, but nothing works.

In the end, we did one haircut by force and another time we got someone to come over and give a haircut in the house and she eventually agreed to get her hair cut after giving us a very hard time. But by the next time we had someone come over to the house she refused to get her hair cut.

I feel like we're going through too many power struggles in this one area. (In other areas she's really well behaved.) If you have any advice about this topic it would be greatly appreciated.

Thank you!



Let me start where you end: "In other areas she's really well behaved." That's wonderful. Focus on that for a moment before reading further. Your daughter is basically a great kid — not rebellious, antagonistic, rude, or nasty. Next time you look at her, see all these good aspects of her before you see the long hair. And, make sure she knows you see her this way.

Unfortunately, many parents do get caught up in seeing the problem rather than the person, even when the person's good points massively outweigh the problematic aspects. This can lock both parents and child into a negative spiral where the parents hyperfocus on the isolated difficulty.

When parents are obsessed with overcoming the single major struggle, that alone often causes a child to respond by stubbornly clinging to her autonomy in that area and seeing any backing down as the loss of her entire personality. If the parents then double down and insist that all treats and privileges are suspended until the child becomes compliant, the intensity of the power struggle will probably increase, making the chances of a resolution even slimmer.

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In most cases, either the parents or the child will have to let go, even if just temporarily. Given that your daughter is ten and generally well behaved, it's possible that it's best for you to be the one to back down for the meantime.

Backing down doesn't mean that you tell your daughter that she was right all along, or that she can make her own decisions from now on. It simply means that you let go of the fight and place it on the back-burner, to be addressed at a better time.

Knowing when this can be safely done is an art; it's never clear-cut, and there aren't clear guidelines on how to assess this. However, given that this situation has been going on for three years, you and your child are probably too emotionally invested to be able to look at it with totally clear eyes, and it might be helpful to get someone from the outside to weigh in.

Someone impartial will, firstly, be able to assess whether the hair length really is extreme or whether it's still borderline. They'll also be able to help you to separate your emotions from the plain facts.

This doesn't mean that addressing emotions isn't important — it is. However, one does not address one's emotions via other people, and certainly not one's child. In practical terms, we don't yell at a child because we're frustrated at something they did if yelling is not part of the solution. Yelling might be part of a solution if a two year old just ran into the street, but it isn't if they accidentally knocked over a pitcher of juice.

Similarly, if you "just can't bear the way your daughter's hair looks," that doesn't necessarily mean that she has to solve your discomfort by getting it cut. Your "inability" to deal with her appearance may be your problem, not hers.

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Once we accustom ourselves to taking a step back and seeing where we were allowing our emotions to make the decisions, it becomes easier to distinguish between issues that must be dealt with and those that can be either ignored, temporarily side-stepped, or addressed differently. Each situation demands a customized evaluation and sometimes, it can even be helpful to use a method that can work well with at-risk children — namely, overlooking a behavior that we see as genuinely unacceptable. While this is not always appropriate or effective, even just considering such an approach can help us to gain perspective and realize that the issue, terrible as it seems, can actually be endured as we pursue more long-term and sustainable goals.

Thankfully, most issues we face with our children are not in the red-flag category. Many are problems that time alone will resolve. Children grow out of a lot of crazy stuff (as do adults) and trying to reason with them and speed up the process often doesn't work. Children are, after all, notorious for being unreasonable... **They also tend to grow more stubborn as parents push for change, with certain personality types reacting more strongly than others**.

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Sometimes, someone from the outside may have more influence over a child — someone from school or from camp, for instance. It can be upsetting for a parent to see a teacher or counselor being able to "get through" to their child after years of failing themselves, but no parent should take that as a personal slight. It doesn't mean that the child cares more about what the other person thinks of them; it could be precisely because they know that their parent cares so much more.

Therefore, it might be best (just for the time being) to remove the direct pressure on your daughter to have a haircut. You could try indirect pressure as long as you are gentle and subtle about it: "I keep trying to sign you up to summer camp, as I know how much you want to go. But they keep insisting that they don't take girls with such long hair." You will have to come across as genuine if you want to ensure that your daughter doesn't feel manipulated.

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This doesn't mean that you hang out a white flag. It's important to notice where this affects others directly and to draw a line right there. If your daughter asks for a new hat because the old one is too small with such long hair, you can say no. If she spends hours in the bathroom washing her hair "because long hair needs more maintenance," you can clarify that you understand her before

pointing out that she's inconveniencing others and that such behavior is not okay.

While the following is a bit of a sensitive idea and not always applicable or appropriate, you can even refuse to accompany her to certain places if doing so makes you feel uncomfortable. You can simply tell her that, "I'm sorry, but I don't feel able to go there with you when you have such long hair. I hope you'll understand. I'm really looking forward to going with you one day in the future." If she objects or accuses you of caring more about what other people think than you care about her (something more often heard from teenagers or young adults), you can clarify, "I care about you, and I care about myself as well. I don't feel comfortable accompanying you there, and I hope you can respect my feelings." You might be surprised how even younger children are often capable of understanding that just as they have feelings they want their parents to respect, their parents have feelings that they should respect too.

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You don't give any clue in your letter to what might be motivating this stubborn behavior though I imagine that you must have given it some thought over the past three years. Just as it can be beneficial to enlist someone impartial to help you disentangle your emotions from the facts of the situation, it can also be helpful to ask for them to help you figure out what lies beneath your daughter's aversion to getting her hair cut.

Since she's generally well behaved, this isn't just a resistance to authority. It's possible that she's embarrassed to tell you the reason and that it will be easier for her to open up to someone else. It's also quite likely that once you take the pressure off her and she sees that you're no longer so emotionally invested in getting her to comply, she will ease up herself and either agree to get her hair cut, or at least tell you why she doesn't want to.

It would be a shame to treat this as a weakness in *tzniyus* or *hashkafah* when it might be a phobia of some kind, or as a *derech eretz* issue when it's a peer pressure struggle or caused by lack of self-esteem or confidence. Often, gaining clarity on what lies beneath an issue transforms it into something relatively simple to address and resolve effectively, without having it spiral or escalate and even spill over into other areas.

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When a child refuses to comply with what a parent sees as a reasonable request, this is a red flag. However, becoming enmeshed in a power struggle with one's child is also a red flag, a bigger and brighter one that usually needs to be addressed before the underlying issue.

Each situation must be assessed individually, but taking the power out of the struggle is usually an essential first step to defusing the entire situation, which allows all the parties to take a step back and figure out what is really going on.



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