RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME

PARSHAS SHEMOS

APPROACHING SENSITIVE TOPICS

When Yocheved gave birth to Moshe Rabbeinu she was 130 years old, yet the Torah doesn't make a big deal of it. On the other hand, when Sarah gave birth at age 90, it was a major sensation. The Dubno Maggid asks why the reaction was so different, and answers with a *mashal*.

Two poor men had visited the same town to collect money. As they exchanged experiences afterward, one of them marveled at the generosity of the townspeople while the other complained about their stinginess. The mystery was solved when they realized that the first man had been there on Purim whereas the second man arrived a few days later and didn't do well at all.

The Dubno Maggid then explains that in Mitzrayim, at a time when Jewish women were giving birth to six babies at once and the birth rate and process was entirely beyond nature, a woman giving birth at age 130 wasn't considered especially remarkable. When Sarah Imeinu gave birth at age 90, however, during a period when birth rates were completely natural, the event garnered far more attention.

Everything depends on context. In our day and age, raising happy, healthy, and *ehrliche* children is a bigger *chiddush* than it used to be. To achieve even just the same results as our grandparents and great-grandparents, we have to invest far more effort—and although the results may seem similar, they really are far more remarkable.

A great Rebbe once commented on the well-known saying: "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree," pointing out that this is only true when background conditions are normal. If strong winds are blowing, however, or if the tree is situated on a slope, the apple can easily fall a long way from the tree. In this generation, it's definitely quite windy out there and we're trying to nurture trees located on very steep slopes. This is also one reason why people are more involved in *chinuch* today, asking questions and looking for guidance—this wasn't the case in the past. Our parents and grandparents didn't have as many questions, didn't listen to so many lectures, and yet for the most part, they raised fine, healthy families. The "fine weather" and the "level ground" made their task far simpler. Hashem should help us be responsible, get the right guidance, and give us the *siyata diShmaya* to implement the right ideas properly, countering the influences that challenge our children.

THIS WEEK'S ESSAY IS DEDICATED IN MEMORY OF

מוה"ר יעקב ישראל ב"ר משה יהודה ז"ל

MAY THE BENEFIT IT BRINGS BE לעילוי נשמתו

QUESTION

HELLO RABBI GRUEN,

First of all, thank you for your weekly *shiurim*. We really enjoy them.

We have a question that we would like you to discuss if possible. What we'd like to know is: How should we talk to kids about being *tznius'dig*. Our son is in second grade and he told us that a boy in his class was giving prizes to his classmates if they pulled down their pants. Also, we'd like to know how to talk to our children about being careful of people who touch them inappropriately.

Thank you.

ANSWER

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN RESPONDS

This is a very sensitive topic. Since there are different approaches to this issue, it's important to speak to your *Daas Torah* and receive personal guidance. Some *rabbanim* advocate being more open and explicit while others are more reserved and cautious. Whatever ideas I may suggest are only possibilities and should be discussed with your *Daas Torah* before you decide to implement them.

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It isn't clear from your question whether your son participated in the activity or not, but in any case, definitely don't label your child with a negative term (such as *chazir*) that he might identify with. It's never good to label children, even if your intention is for him to want to avoid the label. But especially with something like this, you don't want your child to think that you're looking down on him or that this is what he is.

Try to appeal to your child's ego. Make him feel greater than. "Smart kids don't do that." This distances him from the behavior: "I'm so good and so smart, and that's why I don't do that." Even young children have an ego and like to feel good about themselves. If it happened already, and he committed whatever inappropriate behavior, you can still appeal to his ego, not by minimizing the severity of the act, but, again, by instilling in him that he's "bigger than that." It's also a good idea to add, "It probably wasn't your fault. I'm sure some silly boy made you do this. What he said is really dumb. Never listen to a silly boy like him. You're much smarter than he is." Make him feel good about himself and don't associate him with what happened.

If your child tells you that it was his own friend, not just a classmate, who did something like this, you should still call out the behavior as "silly" and "babyish," so that it won't sound appealing to him. Sometimes, especially with a second grader, when you call something *bad*, you're actually encouraging him to *be* bad. If your son ever finds himself in a bad mood or in the mood for bad behavior for some reason, you don't want him resorting to this specific behavior. It can be tempting for a child to be "bad," which is why you don't want him thinking that "this is what the

bad kids do…" Stupid or disgusting things, on the other hand, are far less appealing.

Harav Avigdor Miller *zt"l* used to say that when you put on your pants every morning, you should thank Hashem that you're not a rabbit. When explaining this to a young child, you can tell them that privacy and *tznius* is what makes people special. "You're not a doggie. Only stupid boys act like dogs. Dogs don't wear pants. Any boy that tells you to pull your pants down is being stupid and acting like a dog." Again, you're not labeling the behavior as *bad*, as much as *stupid*. Make it unappealing. For older children, you can emphasize that Yidden are *Bnei Melochim* and are far more similar to *malochim* than they are to animals. Make them feel special and "more than." Call them smart and *chashuv*.

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Similarly, when it comes to inappropriate touching, sometimes labeling it as *bad* can tempt a child to try it when he's in a "bad" mood or when nobody's looking. All the same, it's obviously necessary to use any opportunity that arises to teach children to avoid anything like this, especially as it's not a topic that comes up often. Don't be afraid to say something when you see that it's needed.

Harav Michel Yehuda Lefkovitz *zt"l* used to advise teaching children from a young age that touching oneself where one isn't supposed to is unhealthy. It can cause infections and health problems (both physical, hygiene problems and spiritual ones). (With older children, you can also explain about the concept of the *neshamah* and how it's affected by such behaviors.) It's not just avoiding what's wrong—it's about not harming yourself. Be very clear and firm about this. You shouldn't assume that you have to wait until your child is older and has more self-control. You want to inculcate these ideas when he's young enough to easily absorb them into his psyche so that behaving in a *tzanua* way is the most natural thing.

As you do so, take care not to put your child down or label him negatively if he has done something like this. Instead, try to give him the sensitivity to understand why he wants to avoid such behavior, and give him a healthy message.

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At a recent wedding, I noticed a child's *yarmulke* fall off during the dancing. Instinctively, he put his hand on his head and three people ran to pick up the *yarmulke*. We don't spend much time teaching children how terrible it is to walk around without a *yarmulke*—there's little need to do so, because we have this instinctive reaction to rush to get it back on our head if it ever falls off, so that our children know how important it is to keep it on at all times. Nobody carries on dancing when a child's head is uncovered and that itself is a great *chinuch*. Similarly, when you see a child behaving inappropriately and give an instinctive gasp, it doesn't make him feel bad but it does make him aware of what a serious issue it is.

There's a story about a *gadol* who spent Shabbos at the home of a rich man that illustrates this point well. During Shabbos, the host told the *gadol* that his children weren't turning out as *ehrlich* as he hoped, and that he had no idea why. A short while later, one of the children accidentally broke an expensive dish and the family reacted in horror. Later, however, when another child mistakenly shut the light, he was politely reminded that, "We don't do that on Shabbos."

The *gadol* then turned to his host and said, "In my home, if someone turns off the light on Shabbos by mistake, everyone gasps: 'Shabbos!' If a child accidentally breaks something, it's not such a big deal…"

Nobody labels their child a *mechalel Shabbos* for making a mistake. You can even make your child feel better about the mistake *after* the instinctive gasp. But it's precisely that instinctive reaction that gives children sensitivity to the *kedushah* of Shabbos. That's what *chinuch* should look like.

Going back to our original question, when your child tells you about something inappropriate that

happened in *cheder*, you *gasp!* Your instinctive reaction, followed up by, "That's such a silly thing to do. Those boys are acting like doggies," will help to instill a sensitivity to *tznius,* to *eidelkeit*, and to *kedushah*, which is far more likely to be absorbed when children see how seriously their parents take it.

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You don't want to tell your child to tattle on other children. What you can do is tell him that if someone ever tells him to do something silly, he should right away come and tell you and you'll give him a prize. Try to make him feel good for doing the right thing, and make sure he understands that he should never be afraid to come and tell you about something that's happened, no matter what it is. There are crazy stories happening. You may want to get guidance about how explicit you should be in what you tell your children. But if a child in second grade is telling you about something like what you describe, you're being presented with the opportunity to tell him that if something like that ever happens again, he should come and tell you exactly what and who was involved, adding that you'll make sure that nobody will hurt him for it. You can certainly offer him a reward for telling you (but just be careful that he doesn't start to make up stories in order to get rewards).

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It's very important to be very careful with our children, but we shouldn't become paranoid or OCD about letting them out of our eyesight, and we shouldn't make them paranoid either. It's normal for children to go to their friends' homes, and although it's hard to know when to say "no," we shouldn't lock our children up at home either, which will just make them feel imprisoned.

Chinuch is a gradual process. As careful and protective as we want to be—especially with something like this—try not to be shocked if your child still does something you told him not to. As much as we want to avoid these kinds of issues, they're almost to be expected. Don't become hysterical or discouraged if your child does something you wish he would never have even thought about doing, and even if it happens again, it's still normal. You may want to show your child how upset you are, but just because your first attempts to work on this in a gentle way didn't bring about permanent results, it doesn't mean you should resort to heavy-handed punishment. Young children are still in the process of being trained and taught, and that's all part of *chinuch*.

Above all, and especially when children are still little, you should be *mispallel* for a *Shemira Elyonah* and that your children should have the strength to overcome whatever they need to.

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

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Thank You & Tizku Lmitzvos!