RABBI
SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the home

PARSHAS BEHA'ALOSCHA

DIFFERENT AGES, NORMAL STAGES

The Imrei No'am relates a story of a chassid who came to see the Kozhnitzer Maggid. The Maggid asked him what he needed, to which the man responded that he already had everything he needed; all he wanted was for the Maggid to daven for him to never need to visit the Maggid again. The Imrei No'am uses this story to explain a *passuk* in this week's *parshah*, "*Velo yihyeh Bivnei Yisrael negef begeshes Bnei Yisrael el haKodesh* – so there shall be no plague afflicting Bnei Yisrael [so that they have no need] to approach the Kodesh." This is a *berachah* we all wish for – to never need to be "saved" from difficulties and instead to avoid them entirely.

Although there are, BH, ways of dealing with all kinds of "problems" and challenging situations, the best way to deal with difficulties is to avoid them entirely. Solving problems usually demands one-on-one guidance. But if you gain clarity and guidance from a *shiur*, an article, or just some contemplation and discussion with your spouse, before problems arise, this can help you avoid problematic situations to begin with.

Avoiding difficulties is not just a *berachah*, as in the story and the *passuk*; it's often simply an attitude. People are ready to exert themselves in a crisis, despite the immense expense of time and money this may entail, but somehow unwilling to invest a fraction of that time and money in order to avert the crisis in the first place. Aside from being a shame to wait till then, it is harder for the person you turn to at that point to provide solutions. And even after a crisis has BH successfully passed, scars often remain – which is just another thing that could have been avoided if the difficulty had been anticipated and preempted.

If you have an issue with a spouse or a child, deal with it before it becomes difficult enough to prompt a crisis. An ounce of prevention is worth much more than many pounds of cure.

This week's essay is dedicated by

The Schlesinger family

May it be a Zchus for the family and Klal Yisroel!

Question:

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

My husband and I enjoy your *shiurim* on TorahAnytime. We gain a lot from your advice and insight.

My seven-year-old daughter likes to play with board games and toys with small pieces that are not safe for toddlers. She is very responsible and takes care to keep the pieces away from our toddler, and always tidies up when she's finished playing. However, my five-year-old son takes everything apart and uses broken pieces of toys and games for his "inventions." Then, after a few minutes of playing, he gets bored and leaves the pieces lying around the house where my toddler finds them.

My children usually play together so I can't really keep their games separate, even though that means that just about every single board game and most of the toys in our house get wrecked as soon as my son discovers them. This really upsets my daughter and it frustrates me, to see the games get ruined so quickly, and I'm reluctant to buy my daughter anything new even though it's not her fault.

My son is very sweet and doesn't mean to ruin the toys. He just doesn't seem to be able to stop himself from taking things apart and still doesn't have the attention span or ability to put things back together and put them away. He is very easily distracted and has difficulty focusing on clearing up.

Aside from the frustration and waste of money on games that get destroyed, it is very stressful for me as a parent because the small pieces that he leaves all over the house are dangerous for my toddler. I would love to hear your advice on managing the situation.

Thank you very much.

Answer:

If you had written your question differently, blaming your seven-year-old for wanting to play with games with small parts, your five-year-old for being irresponsible, your toddler for picking up the pieces, or yourself for getting frustrated, I would probably have started by explaining that your children are behaving like normal children and stressing the importance of accepting that, as well as your own frustration with the situation as a normal human reaction. These are regular issues. *Gezunte da'agos*. As much as we always want to be in control and avoid problems, some issues are normal and unavoidable.

With regard to the concerns you mention, let me start by saying that there's probably no novel idea I can come up with that you haven't already thought of or tried yourself. Many of us, myself included, have been through this situation and it's a fairly normal struggle. It's important to realize that some normal and common situations are just that: normal and common situations. In a family with children of various ages and needs, it's not always possible or practical to meet all of those needs at once. That's what makes running a family different and more challenging than running a classroom, in one sense.

A friend of mine who is a nursery *melamed* once told me that he finds it easier to manage a classroom with 30 three-year-olds than his family of five children aged between one and eight. In a classroom, the needs and skills of the children are largely matched whereas within a family, needs and skill sets vary. (As an aside, this can help us understand why some children who do well at home struggle in school, and vice versa. At home, the child is the only one at his age and stage whereas in school, he is one among many similar peers. Each child thrives in a different setup.) A family with children aged seven, five, and two, will often struggle to balance the differing needs of the children.

Our generation seeks clarity and solutions, but they don't always exist. Some situations just have to be accepted and dealt with, especially situations that will essentially resolve themselves on their own. Issues that are age-related and not personality based will, with the passage of time iyH, become non-issues, another comforting idea to remember when dealing with challenges like these.

A man once visited the Chazon Ish and complained that he wasn't able to learn because he was so often up all night with one or other of his children. "I guess this is just *tza'ar gidul banim,*" he concluded.

The Chazon Ish objected. "That is not *tza'ar* – it is simply *gidul banim*." *Tza'ar,* he explained, is when unfortunate things happen, not normal things. The Chazon Ish did not have children of his own; most childless people long to be dealing with such issues. "*When will I also have Lego all over the floor?*" These are the fortunate facts of raising children.

Bear in mind the famous Serenity Prayer (used in 12-step programs) which often applies here: "G-d, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

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You mentioned that you listen to my *shiurim* together with your husband. It sounds like you are a couple with a good relationship and open communication, in which case your husband is probably your best partner in brainstorming a solution. The two of you know your family's personal dynamics best. I can only offer general suggestions which the two of you can then sift to figure out which might work best. It's important to use your synergy to conquer the challenges in your home.

One idea I can offer is to try explaining to your daughter that until her younger brother and sister get a bit older, she won't be able to play with certain toys and games. Although you mentioned that she's upset at the situation, maybe you can help her work out her feelings, making sure she truly knows it's not her fault, and then compensate in some way.

Also, although you write that your children usually play together, perhaps you can create the occasional time and place where your daughter *can* play with her favorite games without being disturbed by the younger children. Maybe she can play in a room with a closed door, or save certain toys for times when the younger ones aren't around. Even if it's not her ideal solution, sometimes just knowing that there are options is comforting, when they're communicated gently and at the right time. In general it's good for you –

and for her – to know that it isn't necessarily all-or-nothing when it comes to issues like these.

Additionally, over time, you *can* slowly teach your five-year-old to take more care with small pieces. He may need an incentive to do so, and you can also help him feel good about acting more grown-up.

These ideas may not be immediately helpful, but perhaps they can be implemented gradually, and I imagine that together with your husband, you'll also manage to come up with other ideas.

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I would also like to mention another, related, point. Often, we prefer that our children occupy themselves so that we can be free to get on with other things. While it's good for children to have what to do, and while parents are *not* obligated to be constantly entertaining their children, it's also important to spend time *with* our children, not just fill the time for them. Maybe one solution to your dilemma is for you to play with your children whenever they want to get out games with small pieces. This could be a way of compensating your daughter for her disappointment. Alternatively, you could read a book to your children. Sitting down and giving ten to fifteen minutes of undivided attention, whether to both children together or one at a time, can work wonders.

It's so healthy for children to have that bonding time and undivided attention. We sometimes overlook it, but it's important to make the effort. There's something so special about enjoying the company of a parent (or a spouse, for that matter) without distractions, and everyone gains from it tremendously.

In conclusion, keep reminding yourself to thank Hashem that you're busy raising healthy, normal children, and continue to see each challenge as a chance to grow, bond, and join forces with your partner in life, using each situation and setting as a way of becoming closer to one another.

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

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