RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

Parshas Vayigash

Justified Consequences

This week's parsha begins with a dramatic scene: Yehuda confronts Yosef about the false accusations leveled against Binyomin. The Midrash describes this as a confrontation between two kings - Yehuda and Yosef. The Midrash continues painting a scene of Yehuda's intense protests which threatened to destroy all of Egypt!

This is in stark contrast to Yehuda's attitude just a couple of *pesukim* earlier, at the end of Parshas Mikeitz. In those *pesukim*, Yehuda *offered* to surrender as a slave, along with his brothers. "*What can we say, my Master, what should we speak? How can we explain ourselves? We are ready to be your slaves – all of us, in addition to the one in whose hands the goblet was found*."

Why the abrupt switching of gears? Did Yehuda change his mind? The Alshich Hakadosh explains as follows.

Yehuda assumed that the time may have come for him and the *shevatim* to be punished for selling their brother Yosef. He figured that Hashem chose this evil viceroy as his messenger to mete out their justly deserved consequence. That was why he meekly offered to accept upon himself whatever the viceroy decreed.

However, as soon as he realized that they were all being let go, and only Binyomin – who didn't even have a part in Mechiras Yosef – was being held in custody, he concluded that this was *not* a consequence for their actions. This was simply the wickedness of the viceroy. At that moment, he resolved to fight this till the end so that justice is restored.

There is a lesson here; most people, even young children, can accept a consequence that is justly deserved. This is especially true if it was only implemented after they were clearly notified of what will happen and why, which is the way it should be. They might not like it very much, but deep down they know that they deserve it.

But the moment you go too far, and the punishment exceeds the crime, it's no longer a consequence or a punishment. It's now simply an unjustified wrongdoing on your part. Your child will not understand why he deserves to be so harshly punished and will resist. He might even end up justifying the wrongdoing to himself, because he will think your reaction

was so over the top that *all of it* was an overreaction.

Another lesson, if a consequence is justified, it's enough! It will be understood and its lesson will be taken to heart. But once you start overdoing it, it may cause your listener to reject what you're saying.

For example, when your child doesn't listen to the rules you set in playing with a new toy, you can confiscate the toy. But don't tell him that he also won't be able to get the treat you promised to give him for getting a good grade, and don't show him the cold shoulder for the rest of the day. There was a consequence and you can move on.

Try to remain consistent and measured in your responses and messages to your spouse and children, so that they can grow into the best people that they can possibly become.

Question:

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

My 14-year-old son is extremely bright, and comes up with good and challenging questions. I often am as creative as he is and come up with answers that satisfy him.

One of his recent questions stumped me, partially because I've been bothered by this myself in the past: He is enrolled in a regular mainstream yeshiva and learns the common "*yeshiva masechtos*", i.e. Gittin, Kiddushin, Makkos, etc. He asked me why he needs to learn subjects that have no practical value to him at his current stage and possibly never. He wants to know why there is only one option. Is there a way for me to explain to him the logic behind this practice or that he will develop a taste for it?

Thank you in advance,

Answer:

You ask a very good question: Is there a way to logically explain this practice? I'm sure there is. And a yeshiva faculty member might be able to explain it to you best.

It is possible that it's done this way because this is how it was done until now, or because these *masechtos* prepare a *bachur* to be able to understand other *masechtos* later on.

You can try explaining to your son that we sometimes learn things, not for practical use, but because Torah feeds the soul and broadens the mind. You can tell him how all parts of the Torah should be learned, and maybe because *bachurim* have more leisure to learn, they study the less-relevant topics now.

If you wish, you can tell him that we don't have to understand everything, doctors sometimes dispense medication which we take even if they don't make sense to us. If you want, you can give your son examples of people who have tried to be smarter than the system and were unsuccessful, because this system works – even if it's hard to explain why.

You can also try a host of other reasons. It doesn't hurt to give it a try and see if your son accepts it.

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It's quite likely that he is not looking for these answers, though. It's very important that you answer *your son*, not his question. There seems to be an underlying sentiment hiding inside his question. Most of the time, fundamental questions do not just pop into children's heads. There are certain underlying emotions that cause these questions. You need to pinpoint what your son's feelings are and talk to him about them.

He might be feeling resentful or bothered by the idea behind this system. Maybe he feels controlled or like he isn't being given enough choice. Maybe he doesn't like the people who are telling him what to learn. Maybe he feels rushed or bored.

Perhaps he didn't have this problem in the younger grades because the subjects were easier for him to grasp, and only now when the learning became a bit abstract, he's finding it a struggle. Instead of coming out and telling you that he's finding it difficult, he faults the entire system and claims it's not working. It might be subconscious, and if you don't remove the underlying reason for the question, it remains a question – because that feeling remains a feeling. Often, once you address the underlying issue, the question falls away on its own.

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Aside from whatever you can do to make him feel better, it's important to remember that you may not always be the one to answer your child's questions, even if you think you know the answer. If you don't feel like you have an answer or that you're the right person to give the answer, feel free to encourage him to go to someone you know he respects who can answer it for him. Often a child will accept an answer from someone he respects, even if he would reject the exact same answer coming from you.

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But even before you try to come up with an answer, a solution, or a suggestion whom to ask, there's an important idea for you to consider. Your son needs to feel like he is allowed to ask questions.

Never make him feel like there's something wrong with him for having this question. You don't want him to hold back from asking you or to feel like there's something

not right with him for having questions. On the contrary, tell him how much you admire how smart and analytical he is and how he uses his brain so well.

Even a question that should not have been asked, should first be addressed by you telling your child that you appreciate his curiosity – and then, explain to him that this is not a question that you have the ability to answer. You can even say that you have the question yourself! If you fail to acknowledge it, he will keep looking for answers and might end up finding it in a less than ideal source.

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Even after allowing questions, there is no rush to answer. Don't be afraid to say, "Let me think about this", or "Let me ask someone" before you answer. When you quickly dispense an answer, your child might feel like you're just trying to fend him off or that you think the answer is so elementary, he should've known it himself. Maybe he was trying to impress you with his questions, and you're just rebuffing.

It's fine to not know the answer too, and being humble enough to admit it is a good Chinuch lesson as well, unlike those who will reprimand a child for not accepting what he's being taught to protect their fragile ego. Make space for questions, and appreciate them.

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In regard to the topic your son is asking about specifically, it's also important to point out that your son isn't entirely wrong. There may very well be certain practical *halachos* that should be given more time in the *yeshivos*. Acknowledge to your son that he has a valid point, and offer to make a *shiur* with him on Shulchan Aruch or Mishnah Berurah – not on the yeshiva's time, but separately. Make him feel special for wanting to do the right thing.

Sometimes, giving a bachur his own additional *seder* in which he can excel – even if he doesn't need to expend so much effort on it – will build him up for success, even in the subjects which he previously did not enjoy as much.

Thanks for your letter. May you see much nachas from your son as he shteigs in yeshiva,

All the best,
Rabbi Shimon Gruen

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