

Parenting Perspectives

Teshuva With Our Children

By Dr. Judy Belsky

ELUL is a special time for the repair of relationships, a return to the pure core of love. As we tap into the power of Elul, we devote ourselves to coming closer to HaShem. We can also look at ways to improve relations with our children.

A mother of five came to see me to discuss one of her children. She sees that four of her children are fine, but one is difficult. He is eight years old, and he functions well at school and with friends but not at home. I spoke with her at length about what goes on at home and the history of the problem. We can learn much from this because this is a common pattern that happens with children who are difficult. The child was behaving in some way that was annoying to the parent, and the first step in the decline of the relationship was when the mother (or father) lost patience. She then felt angry and irritable, and blamed the child. Next, she distanced herself from him, and she now dreads the after school hours. She dislikes him and doesn't want to spend time with him. His behavior causes her to be miserable, and now her question is: How can she control him? How can she get him to behave better?

The question that really needs to be answered is how she can mend the breach that occurred in the relationship. How can she change her feelings and get close to her child again.

As long as she feels this alienated from him, she will not be able to succeed with educating or guiding him. This child desperately needs his mother's love to grow. She needs to rekindle her love for him, and once her love is rekindled, the loving relationship will set the stage for his progress.

Mending the relationship is key, and I might start with these two ideas:

1. Is the parent responding to the child, or to something else or someone else, when she gets so irritated?

If a parent is not reacting appropriately to a situation, she may be reacting to something we call remote determinants. Here is a basic example of the influence

of remote determinants: A four year old spills milk. The parent REACTS. She says, oops (I hope that's what she says) and hands the towel to the child and encourages him to clean up. The parent is REACTING in proportion to the act. But, if when the child spills the milk, the parent GOES BALLISTIC, then something ELSE is driving her behavior, something more than spilled milk. The causes or determinants of her response are not to be found in the moment. Then she is OVER REACTING. We need to investigate and discover the remote (not immediate) determinants.

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In psychotherapy, patients explore remote determinants. An example could be something like this: If the parent goes ballistic because she was harshly criticized when she was a child, or the parent goes ballistic because the child reminds him of his spouse, or of a difficult boss, then these "crossovers" have to be unraveled. Being a parent isn't easy, and it's part of a parent's job to mature and get clarity about why children "push their buttons", and why

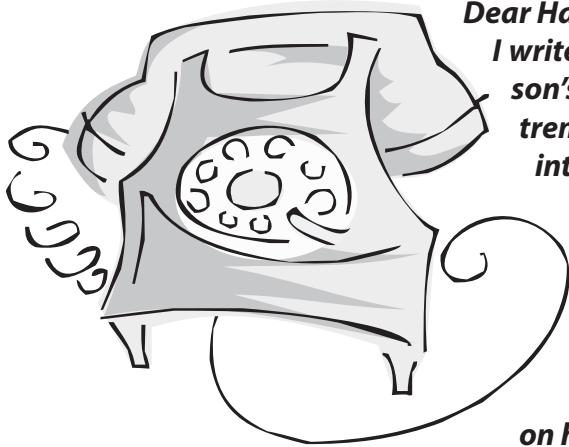
a parent may be acting in ways she doesn't completely understand. It may not require therapy to get the necessary clarity to parent in the present tense; to parent according to what the child needs and NOT according to over-reactions. But if it requires therapy, strong parents go for it.

The first step in repairing the relationship is for a parent to work out why she over-reacts, and learn how to react appropriately. A parent-child relationship simply cannot carry the weight of a parent's old baggage. Staggering under all that weight, the relationship is AT RISK, and this may put the child AT RISK.

2. Invite yourself and your child back into the relationship.

Just as it took time to injure the relationship, it will

continued on back



Dear Hakshiva,

I write to you with much pain and anguish in my heart. Ever since our son's bar mitzvah 6 months ago (which we had hoped would be a tremendous positive milestone in his life) we have seen a decline in his interest in coming to shul and other areas of his Jewish observance as well. With the Yamim Noraim approaching, I feel very conflicted. I don't know how much to push him to come with me to shul. On the one hand, I feel a sense of achrayus as a parent to be mechanech my son and teach him the proper derech, but on the other hand I don't want to feel like a policeman, shoving yiddishkeit down his throat. I would like my son to ultimately want to come to shul on his own. How can I assist him in achieving that goal? I would really appreciate some guidance in this area.

Dear Parent,

YN (Yamim Noraim) is a calendar pressure, don't make it into a psychological pressure as well. As my old chavrusa was fond of telling me whenever I spoke out a gemara, Markson, he would say, you're mixing kasha and borsht again. Don't mix his 'decline' in yiddishkeit with the upcoming YN. Yes, it would be great if your son sat next to you in his white shirt and shuckled about for hours on end, but...as Rav Dessler once said, if you push a beachball down in the shallow end of the pool, sooner or later, it's going to pop up in the deep end. Say to yourself that he may be in decline mode, but he is not yet in failure mode. Define for yourselves what and where the 'decline' is exactly, and then check yourselves against an objective third party whether it is normative (developmental), situational, or perhaps clinical, in nature. For this you might want to extract some wisdom from a Rav or a therapist. Again, his decline should be treated by itself, don't let the upcoming yomtov exasperate an already tenuous situation. Discern in your mind how you frame the situation. The ikar is your son, the tuffal is his yomtov performance.

A word about age appropriate expectations. A large part of your pain is based on a premise that he is capable of performing all the tasks at hand. Developmentally speaking, it's not necessarily so. Some kids don't 'ripen' until much later. Talk with him and map out an acceptable (minimum) standard where he can feel he has 'shown up', and so can you. If it is a menschlich discussion where he participates, great, live with it and be happy. Shofar blowing, the gemara tells us, is a chochma, not a malacha. So too your approach to your son. Today the words chinuch and relationship are almost synonomous. Reach out, ask questions, hold off on judgements and assumptions. That being said, forging a new, closer relationship with your son won't necessarily result in a new, improved 'performance' in yiddishkeit, but it will

give him safe adults to bounce his adolescence off of, which is the ultimate in chinuch. The converse is also true, his 'decline' is not necessarily a reflection of a lack of relationship. Just after bar mitzvah is a time when many demands are being made, learning can become challenging, the yoke of heaven can feel like a noose, the core identity years beckon, and his psychological self is chaotic. In short, back off, consult with his rebbi, talk to Hakshiva (it's a great resource), check his room for anything suspicious, know who his friends are, be open and honest with yourself about what you were like at this age, what your wife's family (especially the males) were like at this age, what genetic disposition can inform any potential diagnosis or offer insight, and at the end of it all, even if he doesn't go to shul, make sure to put extra honey on his plate for the y'hee ratzons.

Chasiva v chasima tova

Mordechai Markson

Mordechai Markson is a psychotherapist in private practice in Jerusalem and Ramat Beit Shemesh. He attended kollel in Monsey, NY, and was educated at Cornell University and Yeshiva University. He lives with his wife and children in RBS.

Dear Parent,

While reading your question I really felt the emotional struggle you must be going through trying to balance your own emotions while trying at the same time to be mechanech your son and help him through his difficulty. Balancing these two separate issues is going to be the basis of my answer. The scenario described has to be looked at as two different issues entirely. One is your son's struggle with Yiddishkeit and two is YOUR struggle WATCHING your son struggle with Yiddishkeit. If you treat those two aspects as one problem you are going to be headed for disaster. The single MOST powerful tool a parent has in

helping his child and keeping him on the derech is his/her relationship with the child. Your child may or may not struggle with his own issues, but please do not make his/her issues YOURS. He/she has to know that you will not fall apart, being too emotionally invested while they are going through a hard time. A child has to own his/her own issue, do not beg, do not cry (at least to your child), do not blame, do not shame him into going to shul. Your end goal is to have a grown child who has a connection to Yiddishkeit and a relationship with Hashem. Think long term, how I am going to accomplish this? What can I do now to help that goal happen? Stay focused on what you can control, your side of the relationship, your attitude, your warmth, your talking etc. What I would also advise you is to keep in mind that a 14 year old is NOT a finished product (think back to when you were a teenager, what did your parents think of you?), you still have opportunity to be mashpia if you KEEP the relationship.

You cannot force a child to daven, but you can let him know that it's ok if he davens in a different shul or even at home, or even not the whole thing. Hashem appreciates any attempt that we make to be close with Him. You can also tell your child that you would still like him to be at the Yom Tov meals. This would help in two ways. One, to keep him part of the family and the Yom Tov atmosphere, and two, it would also show him that his relationship with Hashem is separate from his relationship with you and YOU would still like him to be part of the family Yom Tov. Your relationship with your son should reflect that same rachamim, understanding and forgiveness that we daven that Hashem should have at this time of year for all His children.

Lauren Greenberg LMSW, LMFT

Lauren Greenberg has a masters degree both in Social work and in Marital and Family Counseling. She currently works as a therapist in Tzofiah, a therapeutic high school in RBS for girls at risk, maintains a private practice and has facilitated parenting groups for Hakshiva.

Dear Parent,

First and foremost please remember that Rosh Hashana is a time when we go back to the beginning and things return to their natural state. Pray to the Ribbono shel Olam, that the intrinsic orientation for good, which is our core of existence, reasserts itself in your son's life.

You are right in not wanting to shove Yiddishkeit down your child's throat and must therefore rethink the way in which you present the demands of Torah to your children. Since today's child sees himself (at least in terms

of privileges even if not in terms of responsibility) as an adult, we must convey that what we are aiming for is the child's happiness and welfare rather than the fulfillment of our own parental obligations.

For example, tell your child, "I want you to have a great year and I am sure that the key lies in talking to the All-Powerful about it" or perhaps something like, "I want to share a secret that life has taught me; He's the one to be tight with, since we are ultimately in His Hands". If we are passionate about the message that we seek to convey rather than framing our expectations in terms of "religious obligations" we may have a chance of getting through to the child.

Ask your child to come to shul and spend time talking in his own words to Hashem (if he doesn't feel a connection to the words in the machzor). Tell him that he could pray for the happiness and success of his parents and his siblings and most importantly for himself, that he be happy, content and taste success at every turn. It can be very empowering for a child to feel that he can affect his own future well-being as well as that of his loved ones.

Finally, tell him how much you love him and really want him to be happy, and then continue, "While I'll understand if you find it too difficult, it would make me feel so good if you could stand next to me when we both daven Shemoneh Esrei and we each ask the All Merciful to help the other."

With the Ribbono shel Olam's help your child will respond to some extent. Make sure to compliment him for doing so no matter how short the time he spent in shul. If you don't see immediate results, don't give up hope and certainly don't let your frustration out on your child. Every prayer and every selfless earnest effort moves us a step further toward the goal of helping our children give nachas to HaKadosh Baruch Hu Who wants all of his children to be happy- including you and yours.

May the sweetness of a new year make your relationship sweet for the both of you.

Rabbi Moshe Lieber

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Teshuva with our Children *Continued from cover*

take time to repair the relationship. Relationship is 99% of success. Techniques are just 1%. If you have relationship, it is as if you have money in the bank when you must demand results. If your bank balance is in minus, you are in trouble. If you have no feelings of love toward a child, your relationship is in trouble. In the extreme case, the child has ceased to listen, and you hate being with him or her. When your relationship is at this low point, how can you demand or expect anything from your child? A loving relationship gives you leverage with your child. Without that relationship, what will you use to influence your child?

You can recapture that natural love between a parent and child. If you have lost your feeling of love and connection, create a situation with your child that will avoid any difficult behaviors. Take the child for a ride

or an outing to a place that is pleasurable for you both. Choose carefully. Create an environment in which he or she is likely to be happy and fun to be with. Go for ice cream, or swimming. The sense of pleasure that begins between you, the relaxation, the absence of anger and any need for you to discipline, will give your relationship a huge boost.

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She is the Director of MASK Jerusalem, a support service for parents of kids at risk.

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