

חנוך לנער על־פי דרכו  
גם כִּי־זקין לא־יסור ממנה

RAISING AMAZING  
CHILDREN

A Torah Approach to Parenting

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## ***INTRODUCTION***

Raising children is a monumental task that occupies a large portion of our life. What does it take to raise amazing children? Obviously davening to Hashem for *siyata dishmaya* is a prerequisite in any effective *chinuch* approach. Without Hashem's help and constant guidance, all plans are doomed to fail. What else does it take to raise children who possess a passion and love towards *Yiddishkeit*? Using the Torah as a guide, a number of profound ideas emerge. Firstly, love and friendship are two of the most powerful forces in the world and absolutely critical in effective parenting. When Esav came to Yaakov his four hundred soldiers, he was burning with such an intense hatred that his emotions solidified into a law of nature – *halacha hi bi'yadua, Esav soneh es Yaakov*. Yet when Yaakov offered the possibility of friendship, Esav's hate evaporated and he tried to make peace with Yaakov. Such is the power of love. Even the possibility of its presence can be enough to melt the hardest heart. This story illustrates that the very possibility of friendship and love can even affect someone who felt tricked twice by the offending person.

Additionally, there is another powerful tool that can be utilized to raise amazing children. The feeling of being validated as a person and respected for one's positive qualities is one of the primary drives of every human being. The Hebrew word for happiness

- *osher*, shares a root with the word *ishur* - validation. When children feel respected and appreciated as a person, their entire being fills with brightness and opportunity.

When Rav Nosson Zvi Finkel zt"l, the Alter of Slabodka, was opening his yeshiva he approached Rav Yisroel Salanter zt"l for advice on how to approach the task. Rav Yisroel Salanter's advice was remarkable and created a revolution in the concept of yeshivos. He quoted the *pasuk* in *safer Yeshaya*, "the purpose of a yeshiva is *li'hachayos ruach shi'falim u'lihachayos leiv nidkaim* - to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the spirit of the despondent."

Being a good parent or a successful educator requires understanding the key motivators of the human spirit. The Alter of Slabodka created a yeshiva that taught each of its *talmidim* to appreciate their own incredible value and discover their hidden strengths. It was this ideology of validation and encouragement that our *rebbeim* taught us as the central approach to *chinuch* and that we, in turn, teach our *talmidim*. Few tools are as influential in shaping children's behavior than uplifting them and giving them the respect of a proper human being.

I remember one of the most troublesome *talmidim* to ever walk into one of our yeshivos. A bright and energetic young man, Yitzchak was one of the biggest troublemakers I had ever encountered. I have been

teaching for close to half a century, yet in all those years few people have managed to cause me as much tension as Yitzchak.

From lighting fires on yeshiva property to picking fights to drinking alcohol, I found myself dreading the ring of my phone alerting me of Yitzchak's latest exploits. During the time that Yitzchak was a *talmid* in the yeshiva I spent more time in the dormitory settling issues than almost any other time in my life.

I often felt like expelling Yitzchak, but always held back, hoping that perhaps somehow he would change for the better.

One day, after around six months of mischief, Yitzchak showed up for *shacharis* on time, a rare occurrence. The next day I noticed another peculiar sight, Yitzchak was sitting with a recorder trying to write up the day's *shiur*. Yitzchak was transforming. My phone stopped ringing with staff members asking me to come down and deal with Yitzchak's latest escapades. Before long, Yitzchak had completely transformed into a productive and well-adjusted *bachur*. I was thrilled with Yitzchak's transformation and one day asked him to explain to me what changed. I will never forget what he told me.

“Wherever I went I was always a troublemaker. I was not good at learning and was a disruptive force in any classroom. Looking at my teachers and parents I knew that they looked at me as a failure. I

internalized the fact that I would never amount to anything and embraced the life of a troublemaker. Until I got to this yeshiva. The rebbeim here believed in me. They saw a potential in me that I did not believe I possessed. It was that faith in my abilities that pushed me to change my behavior and become a proper *ben Torah*.

Aside from the Slabodka tradition, one of the greatest influences I had in parenting was my own parents. Growing up, it was obvious to me that my parents lived for me. They made me feel that I was the center of their existence. My father had a prestigious job in the New York City Department of Purchase. His division was responsible for all the government purchases and contracts and my father had a powerful job. Despite that, my father spent two nights every week working in a shoe store as a salesman to supplement his income. Why did he need to lower himself to working as a shoe salesman twice a week? To pay for his children to get a good education. The strength that I gained from feeling that love has carried me throughout my life, giving me the courage to face life's challenges.

I hope you find the ideas in this book helpful and may we all be *zoche* to raise families that bring *nachas* to our Creator.

Rabbi Shaya Cohen

*June 12th 2018*



## **LOVE**

From the moment the doctor hands us our newborn child, we are tasked with one of the most significant challenges we will ever face. It is our sole responsibility to take our helpless young children and turn them into healthy, normal, well-adjusted, *shomrei Torah u'mitzvos*. We all want to be great parents. We want to have loving relationships with our children, and we want them to follow in our footsteps. Yet raising children is no simple matter. Over the next few chapters, this book will try to lay out a Torah based approach to parenting to help raise great children.



### ***Showing your love***

I recall a chilling meeting I once had with a parent of one of my students. My student felt a coldness from his parents that caused him to lose all sense of self-worth. Despite being a talented young man, he had failed out of every yeshiva and was on the brink of abandoning Yiddishkeit. “Your child does not feel connected to you,” I told the father. “If he felt that you loved him and cared about him, I think he will be able to stabilize his life and reintegrate into yeshiva.”

“I love my child.” The father said. “But, I don’t like him. I am sorry, but there is nothing I can do.”

I was speechless. I had never heard a parent say something like that about their child. This case is extreme, but we can all work on improving our relationship with our children. Growing up, I felt the tremendous power of my parents love towards me. As a small child it was clear to me that I mattered to them more than anything in the world. I honestly believed that my parents lived for me. It was that love that gave me the strength to face the world and to keep fighting in the face of hardship. Unfortunately, times have changed. Our world is shifting, and the differences between each generation are widening with astonishing speed. As our children grow up in a world so different than ours, it becomes increasingly difficult to relate to them. But children need our love.

Children need love. Unconditional, never-ending, constant, and intense love. They need it as much as a fish needs water and a person needs air. Without love, children break. To grow, children need to feel cherished, validated, heard, and respected. It sounds simple. After all, as parents we have a genetic predisposition to love our children. But children need far more than simple parental love to thrive.

Without care, love can become perfunctory and shallow, reduced to a rushed, “I love you” at the end

of a phone call. Here are some tips to help express and cultivate a more passionate and profound love towards our children.



### ***Communication***

This may sound obvious, but to build a relationship with our children, we need to engage with them. When your child comes home from school, talk to him. Ask him how his day went. Be interested. Life gets busy, but it is critical to make time to sit with our children and let them vent about math class and regale us with stories about recess activities. Let your child do the talking and give them your undivided attention.

There are many different ways of communicating, but when interacting with your children, the most critical role that you can take is that of an empathetic listener. Some people love giving instruction or teaching life lessons, and while that has an integral place in a parent-child relationship, the most meaningful interactions you can have with your child is those where you are an empathetic listener.

If your child gets into a fight or is upset about something, hear them out. Just listen, and let them feel that you fully understand their pain. It is vital to understand the difference between sympathy and empathy. Sympathy is a form of expressed pity that

is inherently condescending and often counter-productive. Empathy is the emotion of connecting with someone else's feelings. Nothing is more soothing to a wounded heart than feeling understood.



### ***Put away the phone***

There are few things more irritating than trying to talk to someone who is always checking his phone. Put away your phone during mealtimes or when you are talking to your children. Looking at your phone and mumbling “uhuh uhuh” while your child is trying to speak with you sends a loud message that you do not think your child is a priority. Put away the phone!



### ***A bissel mit'gifeil***

*Professor Halpern was a renowned Israeli doctor during the twentieth century. Occasionally, people would come to him suffering from severe depression, and, despite his best efforts, he was unable to penetrate their melancholy. When faced with those cases, Dr. Halpern had one address, Rav Aryeh Levin zt”l. No matter how deep his patient's misery was, after talking with Rav Aryeh Levin zt”l they seemed to walk away uplifted. Rav Aryeh Levin’s success stupefied the doctor. How was it that he, a trained*

*psychologist fluent in all the latest research, could not connect with these broken people, yet an elderly rabbi connected with them so quickly? One day, Doctor Halpern posed this question to Rav Aryeh Levin zt”l himself.*

*“How do you do it?” he asked. “What do you tell my patients that has such a profound effect on them?”*

*“It is simple” Rav Aryeh Levin zt”l answered. “I do not tell them anything. All I do is listen to them share their sorrows with a bissel mit’gifeil (a little empathy).”*



### ***Spend time with your children***

The reality in today's world is that our lives are getting busier and busier. From long hours at work to a never-ending stream of *simchos* that require our attendance, spending time home with our family can become a rare phenomenon. Quality time with your family, however, is critical to maintaining deep and loving relationships. It is worth making every effort to structure your day in a way that allows the family to spend some time together. Also, utilize whatever time you have with your children to build positive and fun memories. View bedtimes as an opportunity to bond with your children. Be present at the Shabbos meals. Believe it or not, the time you have with your family is limited. Children grow up quick,

and before you know it, they will all be out of the house building their own families. Now is the time to forge the unbreakable relationships that keep families together throughout the rest of their lives.

Tip: Spend individual time with each of your children. One-on-one time with your children will create memories that will last their entire lifetimes.



### ***Show your love***

Leave little “I love you!” or “you’re amazing!” notes in your children’s lunch box. Buy them their favorite food for Shabbos. Slip them a five dollar bill as they get on the bus. Pick them up early from school one day and go out for pizza. Find ways to show your children how precious they are to you. Each one of these actions leaves an indelible impression on your child. They understand that they are essential in your life. This gives them the confidence to face life's challenges fearlessly.



### ***RESPECT***

We all want to be happy, and the pursuit of happiness is a common goal that binds all mankind. Yet what exactly is happiness? Happiness comes in different forms, but one of the highest manifestations of happiness is the sense of contentment that one feels

when they feel good about themselves. When someone thinks that they are a valuable person who is using their talents and living a life that is true to themselves, then they are filled with happiness. This definition of happiness exists across the spectrum of human experience, from the youngest child to the most elderly adult, we all want to feel good about ourselves.

The next question then becomes - how do we quantify our actions to decide that we are worthy of self-respect? There are many barometers we use to gauge our self-worth, but one of the most utilized indicators is the way others perceive us. Do other people appreciate our qualities? Are we loved and respected by our friends and family? We recognize love as the warm feeling engendered by those that appreciate our personality and strengths. When we feel loved we feel validated as human beings. This feeling, in turn, allows us to rejoice in our life accomplishments and form a healthy sense of identity.

For children who are still forming their own conception of self, outside confirmation of their intrinsic value is especially critical for their development. One of the primary roles of a parent is to give their child the sense of self-confidence that comes with knowing that they are capable human beings. When a parent pours love on their child, they

fill their child with happiness and empower their child to succeed. But parental love, as necessary as it is, has a limited effect. Children sense that their parents are genetically predisposed to love them and shower them with affection. As such, parental love does not necessarily send the message that their strengths and character traits are worthy and valuable. ‘Maybe I’m a loser’ they think, ‘and the only reason my parents love me is because they are my parents.’ So how does one convey to their child that they are fantastic human beings? The answer is simple – respect your children.

The concept of respecting your children may sound odd. Aren’t children supposed to respect their parents? Yes, of course, children must respect their parents. Yet a prerequisite to raising healthy children is treating them with dignity and respect. Children need to feel good about themselves to grow properly, and feeling respected by their parents fills them with a profound sense of self-worth. As we said, children know that you are pre-conditioned to love them and there is only so much that your love can accomplish. Showing your children that you respect them demonstrates that you consider them capable human beings worthy of honor and dignity. This fills them with happiness and allows them to soar. Practically speaking this means a few things:



## ***Respect their opinion***

The most significant validation that you can give your children is to show them that you value their opinion. As a parent, it is your job to run the house, but you will gain much by including your children in family decisions. If you are trying to figure out which day works best to visit bubby, ask your children for their thoughts. When you are preparing the Shabbos menu, ask each child what food they would like to eat. Let your children be part of the conversation. Show them that you value their perspective. Nothing tells a child that he is worth more than being treated like a respectable individual.



## ***Reaching our lost children***

*One of the greatest tragedies for a parent is to have one of their children leave the path of Yiddshkeit. I often meet parents who have experienced this nightmare and one of the pressing issues we discuss is how to protect the younger children from following in their sibling's path. I always tell parents that the smartest thing that they can do is directly ask their estranged son or daughter for advice. Ask your child, "What can we change in our parenting approach to keep your younger brothers and sisters on the right path?"*

*Not only may your child have valuable insights that are worthy of your consideration, merely asking them for advice is incredibly uplifting. You are showing your child that, while you may have made mistakes with them, you are open to change and are interested in their perspective. That act of acknowledgment, sending them the message, ‘we respect your opinion and feel that we can gain from you,’ is often the first step in healing the relationship and bringing the child back to Yiddishkeit.*



### **Respect their taste**

Allowing your children the freedom to make their own choices empowers them with confidence. The more your children are allowed to choose the events and decisions in their life, the more confident and capable they will become. It is never too early to start allowing your child to explore their individual tastes. When your child is getting dressed, let them choose what shirt to wear. Bring them to the store and allow them to pick out the decorations for their room. Do not force them to eat what is on their plate, instead include them in the decision regarding what you will cook for supper or what food you will put into their lunchbox.

This may sound easy, but can become challenging as children grow older and you will often have to walk

a delicate balance between respect and caution. If the issue is not one of spiritual sensitivity, then it is wise to acquiesce to your child's wishes. It is your child's body, and they have a right to wear clothing that pleases them. Give them as much autonomy as is practical. They may choose fashions that seem strange to you, but the odds are that their clothing choices are likely considered fashionable in their social circle. Do not impose yourself on their lives unless necessary.



### ***Respect their time***

What I am about to say may sound radical, and many parents have a hard time accepting it at first. In our many years in *chinuch*, we have seen the unfortunate effects of parents who ignore these dictums. Children are helpless and cannot survive without their parents. As such, parents have complete authority over their children's lives. Parents buy the children clothes, pick their schools, enforce family rules, and set their schedules. Total control. Because of this, it is easy for the parent-child relationship to devolve into a dictator style framework that can hurt your children's development. It is critical to give your children a degree of freedom of self-determination. Children, even very young ones, grow from being given some autonomy over their schedules. Imagine your child is building a Lego

tower and you tell him that it is time to take a bath. What is a typical response?

*“Please mommy, five more minutes.”*

If you feel on insisting that the Lego blocks must be put away now, it is worth pausing and reflecting for a moment. Does it really make a difference to you if your child plays for another few minutes? To an adult, Lego blocks are just silly toys, but to your child, he is a king, building an empire one Lego tower at a time. That is his reality, and a wise parent will respect it. Yes, your child needs to learn self-control, and it is bath-time, still, show your child that you appreciate his world. Tell your child that you understand that he wants to keep playing, and because it is essential to him, you will give him four more minutes before he must clean up and go into the bath. This validates him and shows that you respect him. After that period of time is up, gently but firmly insist that playtime is over.



### ***Respect their space***

Firstly, it is critical for children to have their own space. If your children share rooms, ensure that their bed and surrounding area are very clearly demarcated as their private space. Additionally, parents will often get annoyed if their child's room gets messy. But, as odd as it may sound, dictating by

fiat that he must clean up his room is lousy *chinuch*. As a parent, you must teach your children to be clean and orderly, but you must acknowledge and respect the fact that their room is their space and talk to them with dignity. Let him know that you appreciate that it is his room and he is entitled to treat it as such. As a parent, however, you feel that it is unbecoming for him to live in a messy room and would appreciate if he cleans it up.



## **CRITICISM**

Children misbehave. Sometimes they hurt other children or act in a way that demands swift correction. But, understand this, criticism can be dangerous and should be used with caution. Children need their parents to be proud of them. Directing disappointment or anger towards your children can be devastating to them and should be avoided when possible. One overly harsh word can undo years of work building your child's self-worth.

Parents will often react to this idea by pointing out that they are commanded to fulfill the *mitzvah* of *chinuch*. "I must teach my son not to misbehave. That is my responsibility."

True. Parents must guide their children to follow the correct path in life. This does not mean, however, to react negatively whenever your child misbehaves.

The *mitzvah* of *chinuch* is to give your child the tools to serve Hashem. You must provide them with the self-confidence to reject wrong friends, the inspiration to believe in himself, and the emotional fortitude to persevere in the face of hardships. A parent succeeds if his child grows up knowing that Hashem and his parents love him completely. That is one of the pillars of true *chinuch*. Scolding your child for waking up late or talking in shul can often be the antithesis of proper *chinuch*. It is the opposite of *chinuch*. Your harsh words may make your child develop a distaste *mitzvos* R”l.

The way to truly influence your child is to take the long view. When your child does something wrong and you want to reprimand him, ask yourself, have I thought about the best way to approach this situation? Are my actions going to help my child grow to love *mitzvos* and Hashem? Is my response proportionate to the misdeed, or am I being reactionary? These questions will allow you to analyze whether your criticism is well placed or not. Practically there are three general rules to proper criticism.



### **Wait, Wait, Wait**

Unless your child is engaging in an activity that requires immediate interference, it is ill-advised to

reprimand your child at the moment of his misdeed. Our instinctive knee-jerk reactions are often harsh and ineffective. If you reflexively criticize your child, while they may desist from the inappropriate behavior, they will resist and learn to tune you out. Your admonitions will become irrelevant and you will be perceived by your child as someone who cannot control their temper. Whatever constructive effect you hoped to achieve will be transformed into needless resentment. If your child did something wrong, wait until the situation passes before taking any action. Approach your child later and calmly and gently explain to him why his actions were incorrect.



### ***Never criticize the person***

When you are reprimanding children, never make them feel like they are the problem. “What you did was a mistake,” is far more effective than, “What is wrong with you?!” If one makes their child feel like a failure, they have damaged their child and have hurt their ability to be an effective parent.



### ***Be gentle***

If your criticism is overly harsh, you will hurt your child and he will eventually learn to ignore you. Couch your criticism as gently and softly as possible.

Give your child every way to save face. I will often advise parents to never bring up the issue directly. For example, if your child took something without permission, at the Shabbos table mention a Torah thought that bears upon the subject of private property and reinforces the need to respect other people's belonging. If it is possible, spare your child the shame of directly 'calling him out' for what he did.



### **CONFRONTATION**

Sometimes parents discover that their child has committed a severe religious violation. This violation can involve, listening to inappropriate music, stealing, viewing inappropriate material, or any number of *divarim assurim*. When making this discovery, many parents find themselves overwhelmed with a visceral panic. "How could my own child do that?!" "What was she thinking?!" This overwhelming flow of horror and disbelief can cause parents to make some critical *chinuch* mistakes. For your child's sake, take a deep breath and calm down.

Your child is human, and every human makes mistakes. If you catch your child doing something wrong, the worst thing you can do is confront your child without first reigning in your emotions. Your gut reaction will almost certainly engender a

response that is out of proportion for the level required for effective *chinuch*. Such an emotionally charged response will hurt your child and teach him that you cannot be trusted to know his failings. If you react too strongly too often, your child will learn to vigilantly hide his wrong behavior, unable to muster the courage to open up to you when he needs help. Your reaction will resurface in his conscience, leading to a severe loss of parental control.

Conversely, passivity and the adoption of the attitude that everything is okay is also misguided. Your child did something very wrong, and, unless reprimanded, will grow belligerent and audacious, viewing your tame response as consent to his activities. Aside from reinforcing harmful behavior, this haphazard approach can hurt the child's self-esteem. He knows that his actions were wrong and your indifferent behavior sends a message that you either do not care about your child or do not care about *Yiddishkeit R"l*.

The appropriate way to respond is to quietly, calmly, and seriously sit down with your child in a private place and discuss his actions. Let your child know that you are aware of his wrongdoings, but quickly turn the conversation towards the incredible power of teshuva and what can be learned from this slip-up. Make it clear to him that you understand that everyone makes mistakes. Most importantly, help

your child work on a plan of growth so that he is prepared for the next time he is inclined to repeat the negative behavior.

Remember, the act of being caught in a severe wrongdoing is traumatic, and your child is probably feeling mortified and humiliated. Aside from proper direction, your child also needs comforting and assurance that you still love him. When reprimanding your child it is critical to repeatedly stress that their actions do not affect your relationship or how you look at them. Tell your child what a fantastic person he is and that no matter what, his parents and Hashem still love him completely. Make it clear that mistakes are the first step towards growth and that nothing stands in the way of sincere repentance.



## ***TEACHING MITZVOS***

Every Jew's relationship to *mitzvos* exists somewhere on a spectrum of meaning. On one end is the immature view of *mitzvos* as a long list of rules, devoid of any profound significance. On the other end of the spectrum is the view of *mitzvos* as infinitely precious opportunities to connect to our Creator. Without guidance, it is the nature of children to relate to *mitzvos* as rules rather than as an opportunity for growth. This is true because the

entire existence of children is inevitably tied up with rules. Rules govern the vast majority of their existence. Children have little control over their lives and have been conditioned to follow rules regardless of whether they appreciate or understand their function.

The key to getting your children to love and appreciate mitzvos is to teach them the context of their *mitzvah* observance. Teach them - on whatever level they can understand - the meaning of the *mitzvos* they perform. For example, when they make a *bracha* or put on *tzitzis* or wash their hands in the morning, talk to them about what they are doing and try to give them a broader sense of the importance of their actions. Even if they are not old enough to understand the deeper meaning and profound benefits of each mitzvah, continually stress to them the fantastic role they play as a member of the *am ha'nivchar*. Your children should feel that they are not just washing their hands or mumbling some words before they eat, rather they are performing a meaningful and vital act as essential players in a cosmic mission.



### ***Yeneh Velt (The Next World)***

*When I was a young child a pressure cooker exploded in my grandparent's kitchen, deeply burning my*

*grandmother. I was a small child but I will never forget my grandmother's reaction. She spent several weeks in bed, recovering from her burns. Whenever the pain would bite into her she would repeat to herself, "in yeneh velt svet zein gliklalch (it will all be good in the next world.)" It was that phrase that comforted her through her pain, and in my young mind I understood that she looked at life from a unique perspective. To my grandmother, life was transient and fleeting, no matter the pain - all that really mattered was what will happen in yeneh velt.*

*I remember being struck by that worldview. I was not interested in waiting an entire lifetime to finally reap the benefits of Yiddishkeit in the next world. While my grandmother is, of course, correct, what really matters is The Next World, it was a difficult concept for me to comprehend. As I grew older, I realized that what bothered me about her approach represented a truism in the mental framework of children. Children value the present and will resist Yiddishkeit if it is presented as an investment that only pays dividends in the next world. For children to appreciate our heritage, the benefits must also be tangible and in the 'here and now' and they must feel that the joy and happiness of Yiddishkeit are readily accessible in this world.*

*To address this reality, parents should continuously point out to their children the little acts of hashgacha*

pratis that occur during their daily life. Continuously stress the chesed of Hashem and how it impacts the entire family. Every week, go around the dinner table and have every child relate an event from their lives for which they are grateful to Hashem. If you want your children to be passionate about Yiddishkeit you must inculcate them with the sense that Hashem loves them and is actively and positively involved in their lives.



### **SHOW THAT YOU LOVE MITZVOS**

Children learn how to view the world by looking at their parents. If you want your children to love *mitzvos*, show them your passion and excitement towards doing the *ratzon* Hashem. Conversely, one of the easiest ways to turn your child away from appreciating *Yiddishkeit* is by showing them that *mitzvos* are a burden to you. Even if you are passionate about *Yiddishkeit*, your children will not necessarily pick up your feelings unless you make a conscientious effort to express your excitement and happiness over *shmiras ha'mitzvos*.

Additionally, parents must always be working on building a passionate relationship with Hashem. We are not angels and at times *mitzvos* can be challenging. But remember, children are always watching their parents - both consciously and

unconsciously - for cues on how to view the world. If you glance at the clock every five minutes towards the end of Shabbos waiting to turn on your phone, your children will internalize the fact that you do not appreciate Shabbos. If you grumble to your wife about a long davening at shul, your children will pick up the fact that davening is a burden to you.



### **Why Was He Zocheh?**

*Rav Moshe Feinstein zt”l was once speaking at the levaya of a particular layman. During that time period, American Jewry was suffering an epidemic of youth abandoning Yiddishkeit. This particular person boasted a sizeable frum family with every one of his children remaining committed Jews.*

*“Why was this man zoche to raise a family in which all his children remained frum – despite many other good people having children who strayed from the right path?” Rav Moshe Feinstein zt”l asked. “The answer is simple. Throughout his lifetime his children never heard him utter the words, s’iz shver tzu zain a yid (it is hard to be a Jew)”*



### **SACRIFICE**

As much as we want our children to love *mitzvos*, sometimes the Torah demands sacrifice. What do you

do if your son asks for a gadget that you feel will hurt his spiritual growth or your daughter wants to buy a dress that pushes the boundaries of modesty? When it comes to proper *chinuch* it is essential to approach these situations with tact and understanding. The instinctive reaction is to just lay down the law and force your child into compliance. But pressure evokes resistance and you are setting up the groundwork for a frustrating power struggle.

Yes, you are the parent and you must train your children to follow the right path, even in the face of our child's protestations, but you must also be smart and careful if you want to fulfill your objective. The two primary strategies to get your child to cooperate are communication and substitutions.

**Communication:** Do not deny your child's request without explaining your reasoning to them. Explain to your child exactly why Hashem wants them to forgo this particular pleasure. Empathize with their difficulty and try to make them understand that their sacrifice is a massive treasure in Hashem's eyes. Even though your child may be too young to understand the deeper understanding and importance of the *mitzvos*, it is still important to try to explain to your child the basic understanding of the problematic nature of their desire before insisting that he comply with your wishes. The message this sends is that he deserves an

explanation and is not merely an insignificant pawn who must arbitrarily sacrifice the things he cares about.

**Substitutions:** If your child asks for a fancy toy or ice cream after supper, you do not have to cater to his or her wishes. Children need to learn that they cannot always have what they want. But if the reason for your refusal of your child's request is because of a spiritual sensitivity, then it is essential to keep a broader picture in mind.

If you continuously limit your child in the name of religion, your child will begin to feel stifled by *Yiddishkeit*, viewing our *mesorah* as a towering list of rules that impinge on his happiness. This is a poisonous mindset and it is often worth indulging your child in order to counteract its influence. Ask yourself, if not for spiritual considerations, would I grant my child's request? If the answer is yes, then a smart parent would consider finding a way to compensate his or her child for their sacrifice. If your daughter wants to wear something that is not modest, tell her, "I know you love this particular dress and I am sorry you cannot wear it. Let me take you on a shopping trip next week for a new fancy Shabbos dress." Your goal is to 'reimburse' your child's sacrifice and counteract the negativity generated by your refusal of their request. Do not worry that you are spoiling your children. By giving

your children a positive attitude towards the strictures of *Yiddishkeit* you are ensuring that as they grow older they will begin developing their own religious sensitivities and willfully eschew things that hurt their spiritual development.

A common area where this issue crops up is with technology. Secular culture is all around children and we should not be giving our children unfettered accesses to technology. Nevertheless, if your child wants some new gadget and you must refuse him or her, understand that you are asking for a considerable sacrifice from your child. Think of some legitimate alternative that is equally exciting to give your child as a substitution.



### ***A spark of inspiration***

Rabbi Nechamia Gottlieb, the Founder of TAG, related the following story:

I was once speaking to the parents of a certain *mosed* about the dangers of technology. After the *drasha*, one of the attendees approached me.

I am very motivated to try to protect my home, but I have a problem. Until now I have had a permissive attitude regarding technology in my home. My children have the latest Apple gadgets and gaming systems. I want to clean up my home, but what

should I do, my children already are attached to their devices?”

I told the person that as a father he is the guardian of his children’s *neshamos*. Of course it will be difficult, but he must set and enforce the rules in his home. As far as addressing his children’s resistance and disappointment, I told him to find some way of “making it up” to them and find some way to convey that he understands how painful the sacrifice is for them.

A few months later I happened to meet this parent again.

How did it go with your children? I asked.

“They were initially very disappointed with the new family rules. However, while still standing firm, I told them that, in order to show them what a fantastic act of *misrus nefesh* they were undertaking, I would take them all on a three-day skiing vacation.

This was a huge deal for our family and it did wonders to ease the transition to an internet-free household.” (As appeared in The Voice of Lakewood)



## ***MAKE MITZVOS PLEASURABLE***

A human being is comprised of both a body and a soul. The body demands physical pleasure, while the

soul yearns for spiritual connection and fulfillment. These two impulses are always tugging at us, and some of the most exceptional experiences that a human can feel is when the physical and the spiritual fuse together to create an act that combines both of these innate drives. Eating a good meal stimulates the body's senses while doing mitzvos ignites the spirit. When the two drives are fused, for example, by having a scrumptious Shabbos meal, where the spiritual and the physical combine, one has the opportunity for a sublime experience. And when it comes to teaching a child to love *mitzvos*, it is essential to incorporate both these drives in a useful *chinuch* methodology. *Mitzvos* are a way to connect to Hashem, but a *mitzvah* that taps into core human desires has a stronger *chinuch* impact than *mitzvos* that are purely spiritual activities. Here are a few practical tips to engage your child with *mitzvos*:

Buy your child a beautiful *chanuka menorah*. A pretty or expensive *menorah* may not technically be a component of *hiddur mitzvah*, however, it is a tangible and real way of making your child love the *mitzvah* of lighting *Chanukah* candles.

Buy all your children big and beautiful *lulavim* and *esorgim*. While younger children can technically share one *arba minim* set, the fact is that your children will swell with pride when given their very own beautiful set of *arba minim*.

Make Shabbos a magical experience for your children. Make the meals lively and fun. Give your child candy for *parsha* question they can answer correctly. Buy expensive Shabbos toys and treats to make the day special. Give your children new clothing for Yom Tov. Make a point of stressing how special Yom Tov is and how appropriate it is to approach Yom Tov dressed as royalty.

Remind your child that every time we make a *bracha* we are expressing that the good in our life is not just a happy accident; it is a gift from Hashem and an expression of his love.



## ***LEARNING WITH YOUR CHILD***

Learning with your child can be a fun, bonding, and educational experience. It can also be a stressful, grueling, and unproductive experience. Here are a few pieces of advice to make learning with your child an enjoyable activity.

Set aside time to learn something other than the material your son is learning in school. This is important for two reasons. Firstly, your son is expected to be familiar with the material he is learning. Therefore, when you learn those topics, he will feel you are testing him and trying to gauge how well he is paying attention in class. This sours the experience and puts your son in a defensive mindset.

Secondly, if you are learned it is possible that you will find yourself arguing with the approach your son's *rebbe* used to explain the *gemara*. It is not productive or healthy to tell your child that his *rebbe* is teaching the *gemara* incorrectly.

If you have time, prepare the subject martial that you will be learning with your son. Find intelligent questions and points to stimulate your son's mind. This will make the experience fun and refreshing and will give your child a thirst for more significant challenges.

Always remember that one of the primary goals of learning with your son is to give him a positive experience where he can bond with you in a learning context. If your son is not enjoying himself, stop. Rethink how you are conducting the session and strategize ways to make your time with him more enjoyable. I was once talking with a wise and elderly *melamed* in Yerushalayim about the proper approach to *chinuch*. In our conversation the *melamed* told me an important principle in effectively teaching children. “Whether you are learning with your son something as simple as *alef bais* or you are learning something as sophisticated as the Rambam, always remember – your child should find the experience as a complete delight (*shashua*).”

It is important to remember that your son, even if he is advanced in his learning abilities, should not be

treated as a typical chavrusa. If you disagree with him over a point in the *gemara*, unless you are confident that a debate can remain friendly, do not get into a protracted argument with your son. You may want to keep arguing your point, but remember that your primary objective is to make your son feel competent and accomplished. You are trying to instill in your child a love for learning, a goal more critical than ensuring that your son has the correct understanding of this specific Talmudic passage. If your son makes a mistake and insists that his interpretation is correct, find a way to deflect the argument while still maintaining your position. Say something like, “I am proud of what a *talmid chacham* you are becoming. While I believe that you are making a mistake, I am thrilled that you are taking the issue so seriously.” Your goal is to give your child the feeling that you respect his intelligence while still pleasantly expressing your disagreement with his position. No matter how you approach the situation, butting heads and getting into a heated argument will only ruin the father/son learning experience.



### ***The Chazon Ish***

*Our family has letters that the Chazon Ish wrote to my father-in-law discussing various Torah thoughts. Reading the letters, it is remarkable to see the respect*

*and dignity the Chazon Ish displayed when voicing his disagreement. When engaged in an argument, no matter where the other person's level of scholarship stands relative to your own, it is always wise to talk respectfully and with humility.*



## **STABILITY**

Children need clean and stable environments in order to flourish. There are few things more disturbing to a child's development than chaos or instability. Here are a few tips to run an orderly home:

**Cleanliness:** A clean environment is essential to proper development. When a house is cluttered and messy, it becomes difficult to maintain an emotionally stable state of mind. No house is perfectly clean, but your child should never be embarrassed to bring a friend home because of the mess filling the house. In today's economy parents must work extra hard to support their family and it is easy to let things slip. But children need a clean home, and if you are unable to maintain a relatively clean house, it is essential to understand that you have a problem that requires a solution. You may need to hire cleaning help, enforce family rules regarding leaving messes or even hire a professional organizer to help you maximize your living space and

de-clutter your house. It is worth spending the money to give your children a clean home environment.

**Mealtimes:** Children need healthy meals at regular intervals. When newly married, many busy couples regularly skip meals, grabbing protein bars and coffee to maintain their energy. Once children enter the scene this habit must be broken. Meals do not have to be extravagant, but they do have to be consistent. Children should never have to scrounge around the fridge looking for food. If you have a busy schedule, talk to your friends and figure out how to prepare easy meals and plan at the beginning of the week what you will serve your family. Your goal should be to give your children the stability that accompanies consistent meal times.

**Answer your phone:** Part of maintaining a stable home is giving your children the confidence of knowing that they can reach you when necessary. Discuss with your children what times they can call you during the day and how to best contact you. During those times keep your phone on, and if they call, try not to let your phone send them to voicemail.

**Be on time to pick up your children:** There are few things more upsetting for a child than being the last kid picked up from school, camp, or an extracurricular activity. Life is busy, but part of maintaining a stable home is giving your child the

knowledge that they can rely on you when they need to.



### ***SHALOM BAYIS AND CHINUCH***

Every couple has disagreements, but parents should never fight in front of their children. There is a famous pearl of wisdom, "the best thing you can do for your children is to love their mother." This proverb applies to all fighting but is especially applicable to visible strife. Watching parents be antagonistic towards each other can be deeply traumatic for children, and no matter how upset you are with your spouse, it is selfish to fight while children are watching or listening. Once you have children, it is imperative to keep any marital quarrels private. Children are finely attuned to pick up on tension and even fighting quietly is problematic. Marital strife is poisonous for children, and learning strategies how to maintain a peaceful and happy marriage with your spouse is critical to raise happy children.



### ***ADDRESSING HASHKFAH QUESTIONS***

Curiosity is part of life, and at some point, many children or teenagers can turn a probing eye towards *Yiddishkeit* and begin contemplating its fundamental

underpinnings. Where did Hashem come from? Why does Hashem want our *tefillos* if he can read our thoughts? If Hashem is good, then why do people suffer? What happened before Hashem created the universe? As believing Jews, we understand the limits of the human mind in grasping these concepts, and a mature truth seeker understands that not every question needs an answer. Because of the developing temperament of children and the deep and delicate nature of these topics, addressing matters of *emunah* to your child is a sensitive matter that requires wisdom and foresight.

The most damaging thing you can do is try to suppress your child's questions. "That question is treif," is a statement that should never leave a parents mouth. If you present *Yiddishkeit* as a religion that does not value or appreciate questions, your attitude will send a damaging message to your child. He will perceive your discomfort and irritation as clear indications that you have something to hide. If your child does not feel that his questions are being taken seriously, he will choke on them.

When your child asks *hashkafic* questions he is typically looking for two things, validation that you are proud of him for using his mind and applying himself to understand *Yiddishkeit*, and genuine curiosity and a desire to understand the world.

Shutting down the discourse leaves your child hurt and baffled by your attitude.

The correct approach is to calmly and sincerely address your child's question. If you have an insight, share it with love and confidence. If you do not know the answer to your child's question, tell your child, "That is an amazing question. I do not have enough clarity to answer it right now. I will think about it / ask someone and make sure that you have a satisfactory answer." Make your child feel good about asking the question. It should be apparent to him that you value his insight and encourage him to probe and explore as much as he wants.

Another important rule is not to offer a half-baked answer. If you are unclear on the subject, there is nothing wrong with saying that you do not know the answer and will try to find out. Your child will sense if you are answering thoughtlessly and will feel that something is wrong.



### ***Be Respectful***

*As a general rule when someone asks a question, especially one that the questioner has invested intellectual energy into formulating, it is important to refrain from immediately launching into an answer. It is respectful to first acknowledge the question before proceeding to give an answer. Always preface your*

answer with something along the lines of, “that’s a great/amazing/thoughtful/fascinating question, what comes to mind is...”



## **TIPS TO ENSURE YOUR CHILD’S CONTINUED LOVE FOR YIDDISHKEIT**

**A strong relationship:**

The most important element in keeping children growing in the right path is to build and maintain a strong family relationship. It may not seem like actual *chinuch*, but spending quality time interacting with your children and building a robust loving relationship is one of the greatest elements of *chinuch*. The reality has been proven time and time again, an ‘at-risk’ child’s relationships with his or her parents is the most reliable indicator of whether they will abandon Judaism or return to the fold. A child with a great relationship with his parents will hold out against powerful negative influences, while someone with a bitter relationship will feel an urge to run away from the religion of his parents.



**Positive experiences:**

Rav Yaakov Kaminetzky zt”l used to say, “*Kinder daf shpilin*” – kids need to play. Part of helping your children develop into normal adults is providing

them with a variety of fun experiences. Life cannot just be an endless series of homework, chores, and rules. Let your child feel like they are living an exciting and fun life. This is especially true when it comes to *Yiddishkeit*. If you ever have to ask your child to sacrifice fun and excitement in the name of *frumkeit*, make sure to find an equally enticing replacement for your child. Children raised in a restrictive household are at risk of growing up with a pressing urge to rebel and taste the pleasures of the world. Giving your child happy, pleasant experience obviates any desire to go out and discover forbidden pleasures.



### ***Autonomy***

Give your children as much independence as possible. It is very easy for a child to feel that, between his school, parents, and the Torah, his entire life is being dictated to him. Children need rules and structure to thrive, but having too little control can lead to a sense of powerlessness and repression that can ultimately lead to a child ‘throwing off the shackles’ as soon as he or she gets a little older. Choices are empowering and validating. Give your child as much control over the actions in his life as possible.



## ***Individuality***

Let your child grow as an individual. Every child is different and it is deeply painful for a child to feel shoehorned into a mold that does not express his individuality. We are a very academically oriented society and we want our children to succeed in school and yeshiva, yet every child has their unique strengths and weaknesses and what comes naturally for one child may be very difficult for another. Kids are hurt if they feel that they are being forced into a metaphorical box and it is important that your child does not feel forced to conform to a standard that does not necessarily fit his personality or temperament. Find your child's special talents and abilities and find a way to allow him to express and nurture them.



## ***The right kind of success***

When a child is not succeeding in yeshiva, many parents will try to help their child find success by pursuing an outside hobby, for example, music, sports, or handiwork. While this sort of hobby can help bolster a child's self-esteem, it is important to understand that this approach suffers from a severe

handicap. To a large degree the children internalize the correct messages sent from our *chinuch* system – Torah is everything. This message penetrates very deeply into our children's psyche and even if a child is great at sports he will still consider himself a failure if he cannot succeed in Torah. There are many different branches in Torah and avodas Hashem and, aside from giving your child hobbies to develop, ensure that your child finds a way to excel in a particular miktzoa of Torah. Whether it is *halacha*, *mussar*, *chumash*, *bekius*, or *mishnayos*, find some area that works for your child and lets him feel accomplished in learning.



## ***MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS***

For many years the frum community harbored a distrust towards the mental health profession. This distrust was based on the reality that many psychologists and psychiatrists did not operate under the guidance of *da'as* Torah and often were openly biased against religion. During the past decades the state of affairs has improved dramatically. A large number of *Bnei* Torah and *erlicheh* *baleh* *batim* with proper *hashkafos* have become trained in the psychiatric profession as therapists who operate under the guidance of *da'as* Torah making therapy a viable option for those that need it.



### ***ABOUT THE AUTHOR***

Rabbi Shaya Cohen has been the Rosh HaYeshiva of Yeshiva Zichron Aryeh and Kollel Ner Yehoshua for almost 30 years. Before that, he founded Valley Torah High School in Los Angeles and served as its dean for a decade.

Rabbi Cohen founded Priority-1 in 1987 to help at-risk teenagers and their parents and families. Using his experience of over 4 decades in Jewish education, Rabbi Cohen has developed a keen ability to identify and deal with issues that children face in our education system. He also has a unique ability to give over to others the ideas and tools necessary to prevent these issues in the future.

## **WHAT IS PRIORITY-1?**

Priority-1 is an organization that was created thirty years ago by *askanim* and educators to tackle the growing challenges in the field of Jewish education. Since its inception, Priority-1 has been a leading organization in the field of *chinuch*, expertly addressing the latest issues facing the Orthodox community. With a diverse range of programs, Priority-1 has significantly helped thousands of parents, educators, and students across a wide range of issues. Some of these initiatives include



## **YESHIVA ZICHRON ARYEH**

Yeshiva Zichron Aryeh, a cornerstone in the Priority-1 edifice, was created with one goal in mind, to create tomorrow's leaders. Built with this lofty goal, Yeshiva Zichron Aryeh has earned its reputation as a happy, intellectually stimulating, *middos* based environment which allows its members to thrive. At Yeshiva Zichron Aryeh we are proud to carry the torch of Slabodka, working to give our talmidim a powerful sense of self-respect by creating a vibrant, challenging atmosphere that encourages them to discover their unique talents and personalities and to grow into true *Talmidei Chachamim*.

An additional objective of Yeshiva Zichron Aryeh is to create exemplary *Mechanchim*. Our goal was ambitious, to design a program that produced *Talmidei Chachamim* who are bursting with passion and fully trained in reaching today's youth. To achieve this goal, Yeshiva Zichron Aryeh created a six-year chinuch program for *yungeleit*, Kollel Ner Yehoshua, giving them first-hand, intensive training, in addition to advanced learning, and providing them the tools to enter the world of *chinuch* with confidence. The yeshiva has also expanded beyond Far Rockaway, creating the Beis Midrash and Kollel Ohr Hatzafon in Israel Yeshiva Zichron Aryeh and growing to a network of nearly one hundred and fifty students. Over the years, Yeshiva Zichron Aryeh has produced a generation of educators and community leaders who credit their success to the educational system pioneered under Priority-1.



### ***TEACH TO REACH TRAINING PROGRAM***

Our world is rapidly changing. Today's environment is radically different than the one we grew up in, and an educational system that worked thirty years ago is doomed to fail in today's world, without certain adjustments. In a lengthy meeting between the Priority-1 leadership

and *Maran* HaRav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv Zt”l, the Posek Hador stressed that creating a training program for *Mechanchim* to give them the capability to effectively respond to today's bochurim is a matter of *pikuach nefesh*. Working with top experts in the field of chinuch and using proven methodologies, Priority-1 created a comprehensive teachers training course to enable *Mechanchim* to reach their students with a passionate and lasting commitment to *Yiddishkeit*. A resoundingly successful program, the Teach to Reach Initiative has been warmly received and has already trained over 450 teachers across the globe, positively affecting over 6,000 students.

In addition to hosting training workshops, the Teach to Reach Initiative is currently developing an extensive online resource center containing a vast repository of audio, video, and written educational material for *Mechanchim*. This will allow unprecedented access to Priority-1 training materials and give educators a powerful new chinuch resource.



### ***THE LEGACY SEMINAR SERIES***

One of the tragedies of our generation is the shocking degree of assimilation and intermarriage

amongst the secular American Jewish population. Quelling this tide and drawing our brothers and sisters towards *Yiddishkeit* is the singular goal of *kiruv* in America. After much research, Priority-1 has concluded that one of the most empirically successful *kiruv* methods available is those employed by Arachim, an Israeli based *kiruv* organization. Using an approach that shows its participants the truth and the beauty of Judaism, Arachim has successfully transformed the lives of hundreds of thousands of Jews, creating an unprecedented *Baal Teshuva* phenomenon.

Based on the Arachim model, Priority-1 launched the Legacy Seminar Series in America. Using proven and time-tested methods, Priority-1 hosts seminars to connect unaffiliated Jews with their roots.



### ***THE ELIEZER INSTITUTE***

There are few things more devastating to a person's spiritual growth more than a lack of *Emunah* and *Bitachon*. Unfortunately, in recent years a growing crisis of *Emunah* has surfaced amongst the frum community. To address this issue, Priority-1, along with Westwood Realty, created the Eliezer Institute with the goal of

implementing a broad range of approaches to help our communities tap into the tremendous power of *Emunah* and *Bitachon*. These initiatives include weekly lectures, follow-up groups, yearly conventions, and weekly bursts of inspiration sent to all members.

Another component of community strengthening is the online resource center at [eliezerinstitute.com](http://eliezerinstitute.com). This extensive collection of information, available in the comfort of your home, supplies a large variety of free books, and thousands of lectures and publications to provide strengthening in *Emunah* and *Bitachon*.

Priority-1 has also become a leader in addressing the alarming reality of disaffected yeshiva educated adults leaving the fold. With extensive experience in the field, our staff has been instrumental in averting numerous tragedies.