

PRACTICAL GUIDANCE - PART III

by Rabbi Dov Brezak

Read Part I and Part II of this discussion.

Using the power of positive discipline and incentives is especially helpful in training a child to enjoy experiences which require maturity and self-control. One good example is during the Yamim Noraim (High Holidays), when children find it hard to stay in the shul throughout the considerably longer davening. Even those children who do stay in shul the entire time may do so begrudgingly. This can lead to a build-up of resentment and even dislike for the tefilla (prayers). Our goal, though, is the exact opposite: we seek to develop in each child a love for tefilla that will grow with time and last a lifetime. Positive discipline can accomplish this.

A father recently related that his son complained about the tefillos in shul. "They're too long," the boy said, "and I don't have the koach (strength) to stay for such long, drawn-out davening."

When his father forced him to come to shul to daven, the boy would attend begrudgingly-all the time looking for the first opportunity to leave. At 11, the boy was fast losing his cheshek (desire) for davening altogether.

With Rosh Hashana on the horizon, the father became very concerned. He decided to use positive discipline. He took his son aside and said, "I know it's hard for you to stay for all of Shacharis and Mussaf (the two morning prayers), so I'm going to offer you an incentive. If you stay for the tefillos, you will get a prize worth five shekels after Yom Tov. If you daven nicely, you will get a prize worth 10 shekels. And if your davening is exceptional, you will get a prize worth 20 shekels." (Naturally, the amounts will vary from family to family.)

The boy davened exceptionally well, and after Rosh Hashana his father brought him a walkie-talkie set that cost NIS 20. The boy was thrilled, and the father pointed out to his son how his efforts in davening were worthwhile even if done for personal gain.

When talking with the boy, the father also noted how he cried during certain parts of the davening, such as Nesaneh Tokef. The father also mentioned that the boy sneezed a number of times at the beginning of Mussaf and told his son that the Shulchan Aruch states that this is a sign that one's tefilla is being accepted.

It seems that the shelo lishma (doing not for it's own sake) allowed the boy to daven lishma (for it's own sake).

In other words, the incentive made the actual davening itself pleasant for the boy, who davened sincerely and with emotion.

This doesn't mean, though, that the problem is solved. This boy may have davened beautifully on Rosh Hashana, but still feel davening is a burden. However, this method of positive discipline can be used again and again until the boy begins to develop a cheshek for davening for its own sake.

If, at the same time a parent gives his child an incentive, he tells him how important his tefillos are, the impression made will be even stronger.

Once, a man fell off a roof and was so seriously injured that his life was in danger. In this emergency, we called all the children out of class to say tehillim (Psalms) together for him. The boys screamed and davened with great intensity in a crescendo of fiery tefillos.

A short time later, we received word that the man died. Someone came over to me and asked to see the name of the ill person. He looked at the piece of paper on which the name was written and said there was a mistake. We had davened for the wrong person.

Months later, before the yamim noraim, I used this example to show the children how important their tefillos are. Hashem had decreed that this man should die at that specific time. Yet, the tefillos of children are so powerful that if the children had davened, the man wouldn't have died. Since it had already been decreed that his time had come, Hashem caused a mistake in the name so that the children would not be really davening for him.

Offering our children an incentive to make the davening more pleasant for them while at the same time explaining to them how significant their tefillos really are, is a winning combination. With it, we can help them develop a love for davening.

We once wrote about a child who entered our school a number of years ago and had been labeled hyperactive. He had a hard time in his previous school because his teachers were not equipped to deal with him. Our main approach in working with him was to give him as much encouragement as we could.

When he had been in our school for only a short time, his father exclaimed to me, "My son has started to eat again!" It seems this boy had lost his appetite as a result of all the pressure and aggravation he was experiencing. Encouragement gave him renewed hope.

Before Yom Kippur, when I spoke to all the students in our school, I discussed the following mashal (parable) of the Dubner Maggid:

Once, a father and young son were traveling to a distant city. On the way, they came to a stream. Turning to his father, the son complained, "Abba, it's too deep for me. I can't cross this stream." The father answered him, "Don't worry, son. I will take care of you." Immediately, he lifted his son and carried him across the stream, and they continued on their way.

Suddenly, they were attacked by a band of robbers. The father said, "Son, stand behind me, and you will be safe." The child obeyed, and with the stick he was holding, the father fought the robbers and warded them off. (When I was about 8 years old, my father did the same for me. We lived in an Italian neighborhood, and once, when I was playing with a friend, an Italian boy approached me, called me a derogatory name and shoved me. I was no pushover, so I shoved him back. He left, but a quarter of an hour later he was back with some 30 friends, apparently to teach me a lesson. My father came running out of the house with a baseball bat, screaming at the top of his lungs, and the gang ran away, terrified.)

The father and his son continued on their way, but soon came to a high fence. "Abba, how will I climb over this fence?" the boy asked. His father replied, "Don't worry, son," and, taking the boy on his shoulders, he climbed the fence with him.

When finally they reached their destination, they found the gates to the city locked. They searched everywhere for a way to enter. Suddenly, the father cried, "Son, look! There is a small opening. I would never be able to get through it, but you can.

Gently, he continued, "My child, I've carried you and taken care of you on this entire journey. Through all our trials and tribulations, I have helped you. Now it is your turn to help me. This opening is too small for me, but you will be able to fit through it. Once you are inside, you can open the door for

me!"

In the same way, said the Dubner Maggid, at times the gates of tefilla are closed to adults. We are too big and carry too many transgressions. It is now the time for the children to enter through the small opening that remains. "Go in, children," he would say, "and open the gates for us. Daven for us, and your tefillos will be accepted."

After telling the children this mashal, I explained to them that many children make a mistake in assuming that the main tefillos are those of the adults, and that their tefillos are of secondary importance. In fact, just the opposite is true! The children's tefillos are the main ones, and their tefillos can help and support us, the adults. I then urged them to daven for their parents, for their siblings, for other family members, and even for their neighborhoods and for other people and causes.

Note that I also told the children I would give a prize to anyone who davened sincerely and with great kavana.

After Yom Kippur, the hyperactive student in our school brought me a note from his father describing how he stood for hours davening with great kavana (intensity) on Yom Kippur. "He literally went through a techiyas hameisim (resuscitation of the dead)!" his father wrote.

Realizing how important his tefillos were brought him to love the tefillos and to daven with all his heart, something no disciplinary measures could have achieved. Davening shelo lishma (praying not for it's own sake) led the boy to daven lishma (pray for it's own sake). And, as we said, the incentive makes the tefilla itself all the more enjoyable.

After writing about this incident (I wrote this in an article about a year ago), I received a letter from a reader saying that such a change was only temporary and wouldn't last. "I'm sure," he wrote, "this boy didn't change overnight."

He's right. From that one improved davening experience, the boy will not change. Nor will a person lose 50 pounds from successfully sticking to a diet for one or two days. It's the consistent use of these methods that brings about permanent change, be'ezras Hashem (with G-d's help).

The follow-up? The next year, after the yamim noraim, this student brought an equally enthusiastic letter from home. His parents ended it by saying, "He is a changed boy."

Positive discipline, using incentives, is a tried-and-true method that many parents find invaluable.

Why? Because it works.

And, as many parents ask, "Aren't we teaching the child to always expect a prize for what he does?"

If the discipline is played right, this is not an issue. A child expects prizes when he gets something for nothing. But when he has to work hard to receive what he wants, he does not develop the feeling that he's got it coming to him.

It is also important to make sure not to offer too many incentive prizes at the same time. If the child receives a prize for everything, he then learns that one does not do anything without getting paid for it.

Some practical applications of this rule:

1. "My son Aharon didn't want to put on his pajamas and was fighting me every step of the way. I kept putting them back on while trying to make a game out of it. 'See the little fish trying to wriggle away?' I'd say, but he still fought, trying hard to take off whatever I put on.
2. "When he takes something off that I've put on, I give him a patch or remind him that he'll get a patch from me if he takes off what Mommy puts on. That is a general rule that I follow when dressing or undressing him, and it works well in stopping him from taking the clothes off.
3. "The patch is only effective if I give it on his bare leg. Otherwise it doesn't hurt, and he doesn't care."

When a child goes to bed, we want him to do it with a good feeling. In this case, although routine discipline may seem easiest to do, it will not accomplish the desired goal. Positive discipline will.

Positive discipline means that the child works toward receiving a positive consequence, one that will give him an incentive to keep to the routine. For it to be effective, there must first be a routine.

A parent should sit down with the child and plan exactly how bedtime should go. What time should the child begin getting into pajamas? When should he brush his teeth? When will he actually go into bed? Is he allowed reading time? At what time should the lights be put out?

All of the above should be decided upon beforehand. It doesn't hurt to call your child over and plan it together with him. Of course, cooperation in the planning will vary with age.

After you have worked out a routine together, tell him the incentive prize he will be working toward. One idea is to have two prizes worth different amount of points. The child will earn the prize he can "afford," according to the points he has earned.

After both you and the child have a clear understanding of what the prize(s) will be, the child should be told how many points each activity is worth. For instance, two points can be awarded for brushing teeth without being told and one point if they are brushed immediately after being told.

Points should increase according to how hard it will be for the child to fight his yetzer hara. For example, going into bed on his own and shutting the lights on time might deserve three points, with a reduction to two points if he does it immediately after being reminded.

It's helpful to keep record the points earned in a small notebook or on a wall chart. Adjust the point system so the child does not have to wait more than two weeks to earn a prize. With smaller children, they should not have to wait for more than one week.

After a number of months, the habit of the bedtime routine will be sufficiently developed to allow the parent to tone down his incentives gradually. Still, it is impractical to think that children will willingly go to bed on their own - ever. Yet we need not despair. There are many ways we can offer incentives without offering incentives.

As a rule, any positive consequence a child receives as a result of properly following bedtime routine is considered an incentive. For example, if a child gets into bed at a certain time, he can have the light on for another 10 minutes to read; or, Mommy or Tatty will sit with him for five to 10 minutes and talk with them. Children will cooperate wondrously when they stand to get something they want, even if that something is not a prize but a privilege or a positive consequence.

One point to remember, though, is that once the agreement has been made the parent should be firm and not give the child the reward if he isn't making a serious effort to keep to the routine.

One father used this method when one of his children was older and wanted to use the family car. Parent and teenager agreed that driving laws must be obeyed and that the car would be kept clean and properly maintained. It was also mutually agreed that sometimes the child would have to chauffeur his parents, plus he would have to do any chores around the house willingly.

If the child agreed to these conditions, the parents would pay for the gas, insurance and, of course, allow use of the car.

The agreement was that simple. As long as the child kept his part of the bargain, he could continue using the car. If he did not stick to the agreement, he would not be allowed use of the car.

This method proved highly effective, and the child stuck to it realizing that the privilege was contingent on him keeping his part of the deal.

Giving a child a reputation to live up to is also a positive consequence.

The school year has just begun, but one of the boys in the older classes already started causing trouble. He would disturb in class, became belligerent on occasion and would even make fun of the rebbe behind his back.

We knew we had to take immediate action, right now, at the beginning of the year before it went any further.

Our assistant principle came up with an ingenious plan. The next time the boy was sent to his office for misbehaving, he asked the boy if he wanted his parents to know about it. This particular boy is very afraid of his parents and naturally answered no.

Rabbi L. then picked up the phone and asked the boy for his phone number. He dialed the number and got the voice mail. He then began to speak.

"Shimon is in my office, and we just had a nice talk," Rabbi L. said. "In fact, I am convinced that this year will be the best year Shimon has ever had in his life. I think it's worthwhile to give him a treat when he gets home as a sign of encouragement and recognition for his resolution to be very successful this year" - and he hung up the phone.

The boy was in shock, but he now had a reputation to live up to.

I cannot say that this one incident cured the problem entirely, but we continued dealing with this child along these lines. When I gave the class an oral quiz, I tried to catch him at moments when he was doing something right and compliment him on it. I would tell him he was excelling and so on. Interestingly enough, in just a short time, the boy has improved tremendously. In fact, just yesterday I tested his class (which I do once a week), and after class I took him aside and gave him a big compliment. I then turned to him with a big smile and said, "This is going to be the best year you ever had, isn't it?" He smiled back and nodded in agreement.

When you believe in a child, let him know it, and later catch him doing things right, this is the most positive consequence you can find for dealing with children.

A rebbe I know takes pictures of his students at the beginning of the year and hangs them on the wall. Next to each picture, he hangs a saying from Chazal (the Sages) that he feels is appropriate for that particular boy's strengths and weaknesses.

For one boy, he hung the words, "Aizehu gibbor? Hakovesh es yitzro - Who is a hero? He who conquers his evil inclination." (This boy was known for frequently getting into fights.) Whenever the

boy got into a fight, the rebbe would point to the wall and say to him, "That's you. This is who you really are."

Needless to say, the message got across.

Only one ingredient is needed for this to work. It's called focusing on the positive. Recognize the good points and strengths of your children (and spouse as well). There is not a Jew in existence who is not a wellspring of talents and G-dly character traits. Every Jew is a chelek Eloka mima'al - he has in him a piece of Hashem, so to speak. Not always is it noticeable, but it is always there, and if we look for it, we will find it.

Especially now, we want Hashem to judge us favorably. Chazal tell us how we can accomplish this: "Kol hadan es chaveiro lekaf zechus, Hamakom yadineihu lekaf zechus - he who judges his fellow favorably will be judged favorably by the One Above."

Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz, ztz"l, asks how it is possible for Hashem to judge favorably if He knows exactly what happened. He answers that the judging favorably meant here is when one focuses on the good traits and noble intentions of a person. This will evoke a parallel response above: Hashem will also focus on that person's good traits and noble intentions and so come to a favorable judgment.

There is no doubt in my mind that parents who look favorably upon their children and believe in them are included in the promise that those who judge lekaf zechus will be judged lekaf zechus.

Klal Yisrael is in dire need of salvation. We are in dire need of a favorable judgment. May we all merit to be judged favorably and may this be the year we have been waiting for so long, the year that we will witness the coming of the mashiach, bimeheira beyameinu (quickly in our days), amen.

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