

KNOWING WHEN NOT TO REACT

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

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Good Shabbos!*

Dedicated This Year Le'eluy Nishmas Chaya Bracha Bas R. Yissocher Dov - In memory of Mrs. Adele Frand

What It Means To Be An Educator: Knowing When Not To React

Rav Motel Katz, zt"l, who was the Head of the Telshe Yeshiva in Cleveland for many years, had a very difficult life. He lost most of his family in Europe. He came to America and had to rebuild not only a Yeshiva, but his own family as well.

The following poignant vignette describes the man and his life. Someone once walked into Rav Motel's study in the middle of the day and found him crying. The visitor inquired as to why he was crying. Rav Motel explained that he had 10 children in Europe who were all killed during the Holocaust and now he was beginning to forget their names. He began to cry when he could not remember the names of his own martyred children. This gives us a picture of the very difficult personal life that he led.

Rabbi Abba Spero from Cleveland told me an incident involving Rav Motel Katz. When I told him that I could not believe that the incident occurred, he responded that he had documentary proof of the incident. He sent me a copy of the incident described by Rav Motel himself in his own collected writings. I received permission from the son of Rav Motel, Rav Yakov Velvel Katz to publicly relate this incident, which I will in a moment.

The basic idea that Rav Motel wished to illustrate by documenting this incident is an idea to which everyone subscribes. The idea is that there is no ONE way to raise a child or to educate a student. Chinuch [education] is a very individualized and dynamic type of activity. It is ever changing. There are really no hard and fast rules. That which works for one child will not necessarily work for another child. That which works in one situation will not necessarily work in another situation. Parents and educators must always understand the demands of the situation.

"Sometimes," Rav Motel writes, "'Educating' requires 'not Educating'". Sometimes a parent or teacher must NOT react. Even though the situation really demands that something be said - sometimes it is counter-productive to react.

This idea is really from the Talmud: "Just as it is a Mitzvah to say something (rebuke) which will be heard and accepted, so too it is a Mitzvah to not say something which will not be heard and accepted" [Yevamos 65b].

Rav Motel explained that this principle is illustrated in Parshas Shlach. The pasuk [verse] says, "Shlach LECHA" - send out FOR YOURSELF [Bamidbar 13:2]. Rashi explains that Moshe was instructed to send out the spies "for your own sake". In effect G-d was telling Moshe, "I know that no good will come of this. Spies are not necessary; they will ruin things; they really should never be sent out... But if you want to send - then you go ahead and send them to satisfy your needs."

Rav Motel asks, if it was so clear that this was not the way to proceed and that the mission had all the markings of a disaster, then why didn't G-d say straight out "Do not send the Spies!"? Forget the people's clamoring and yelling that they DO want spies; if it was clear to G-d that it was a bad idea then He should have forbid them from sending out spies! He could have told the people, "Sorry. I am G-d. I know better!"

The answer, says Rav Motel, is that the people were not on the spiritual level where they were ready to hear that. It would not have helped. Moshe could have given the people that message from G-d but they were not spiritually sophisticated enough to appreciate the message. They would have countered, "What do you mean that we are not sending spies? Everyone knows that the way to conquer a country is by sending spies and gathering intelligence!"

Under such circumstances, there was no other choice but to let them have their way. Objections would fall on deaf ears.

Anyone who has a child who is older than a toddler and certainly anyone who has adolescents or older children will understand this concept. Often, we as parents know what is good and what is right, but we know that our children will not listen to us. Sometimes, as difficult as this is for a parent, we must simply keep quiet. We can hint or suggest or perhaps provide incentives. But in the final analysis, our children have to make the decision themselves. It sometimes just does not help to say anything.

This was the situation with the Spies. The 'right' thing to do would have been to tell the Children of Israel 'No Spies'! But that approach would not have worked.

The incident that Rav Motel related occurred at the Telshe Yeshiva in Cleveland [presumably sometime in the 1950s]. The incident, which was an applied example of the above lesson, was as follows:

"I was asked by the students of the Yeshiva to permit them to daven Ma'ariv [conduct evening

prayers] early. They requested that the established schedule of the Yeshiva be changed for the evening. Why did they wish to change the Yeshiva's prayer schedule? So that they could listen on the radio to the Championship Prize Fight in New York to hear who wins."

Imagine if students came to the Rosh Yeshiva [Dean] today to ask that the Yeshiva prayer times be changed because of the NBA Playoffs!!

Rav Motel explained: "I knew full well that it was inappropriate to change the time of Ma'ariv and the Yeshiva's schedule for a Heavyweight Prize Fight between people who are trained to hurt and injure one another."

But what did this great product of Lithuanian Yeshivas -- this product of Telshe in Europe -- decide to do? What did Rav Motel respond to the request to daven Ma'ariv early so they could listen to the fight on the radio?

"I could not stop them and prohibit them from doing this. I knew that this was not the time to say no. Famous and respected people come from all over the country to be present at a Heavyweight Championship Fight, to get ringside seats. A thousand people come from all parts of the country! This prizefight was viewed by the masses as an event of major proportions! It is difficult to forbid it. I could not say no because they would not know where I was coming from and they would not understand my reasoning."

The majority of students in the Telshe yeshiva in the 1940s and 1950s came from public schools. They came to Telshe from small isolated communities. High level Torah study was just beginning to take root in America. They had not achieved the spiritual level whereby they could understand the idea that watching two people hitting each other in a boxing ring is a foolish pastime. To get up in the Yeshiva and castigate such activity as stupidity and nonsense would fall on deaf ears.

Rav Motel could not consider what his teachers in Europe would think about changing the time of Ma'ariv to accommodate such an event, because he knew that HIS students were not at the level of his teacher's students. His students at that time were not ready to fully appreciate priorities based on Torah values.

That is Chinuch: Knowing when to say and when not to say -- knowing one's children and one's students and knowing the time and the mentality prevalent in the era in which one is teaching. That is Chinuch!

In the great Yeshiva of Telshe, 'Chinuch' in that situation was to schedule Ma'ariv early so that the students could listen to a prizefight on the radio.

I would not have believed this story if I had not seen it written by Rav Motel himself. This is a great tribute to the pedagogic wisdom of Rav Motel Katz, zt"l. It is a tremendous insight into the meaning of being an educator or a father or a Rebbe or a Rosh Yeshiva. Sometimes it is necessary to say "Yes". But sometimes it is just necessary to not say anything at all!

This is what we pray for when we recite the prayer (in Shmoneh Esrei, the Amidah) for wisdom and understanding. We are asking G-d to grant us the wisdom to do what is right in the education of our children, our students and our community.

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This week's write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tapes on the weekly Torah portion (# 287). The corresponding halachic portion for this tape is: Women and Tzitzis. The complete list of halachic portions for this parsha from the Commuter Chavrusah Series are:

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