CAREFUL CONSIDERATION OF CHINUCH CONCESSIONS

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Devarim

Careful Consideration of Chinuch Concessions

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The idea was good in my eyes. (1:23)

Parashas Devarim begins with Moshe rabbeinu reviewing the main events that occurred in the 39 years since the Jewish People left Har Sinai. In recalling their request to send meraglim (spies) to reconnoiter Eretz Yisrael before proceeding to the Land, Moshe castigates them for the disorderly manner with which they made their request, but he concedes that "the idea was good in my eyes."

The Talmud (Sotah 34b) deduces from Moshe's statement — "The idea was good in my eyes" — that he felt that it was a good idea to send meraglim, but Hashem did not. Hashem was aware that sending spies would end in disaster, and He did not want them to go.

This is difficult to understand. If Hashem knew that the meraglim would end up poisoning the minds of the nation against Eretz Yisrael, why did He agree that they could go? Hashem should have told Moshe, "Tell them that I am God, I call the shots, and I said 'NO!'"?

Rabbi M ottel Katz, the late Rosh Yeshivah of Telz in Cleveland, Ohio, deduces an important lesson in chinuch from this incident.

There are times that children want to do something that their parents deem inappropriate. Our parental instincts tell us to lay down the law and prohibit them from doing what they want to do. We reason to ourselves that we are required to be mechanech (educate) our children, and sometimes this means that we have to say, "No."

But is it always right to say no?

We learn from the meraglim, says Rabbi Katz, that there are times that we have to concede, even if we know that what our children want to do is wrong!

Hashem realized that the people simply were not ready to accept His denial of their request. Had Moshe returned from Hashem with a negative response, they would have thought to themselves, "How are we supposed to go and fight against a country without sending spies? Everyone knows that you do not fight without intelligence i nformation."

Had Klal Yisrael been on a high-enough spiritual level to accept Hashem's refusal, He would have said no. But Hashem realized they were not ready to accept His decision wholeheartedly, so He did not refuse their request.

Sometimes, notes Rabbi Katz, chinuch is all about conceding. We have to know when our children are able to accept a "no," and when they are just too set on doing what they intend to do to accept our refusal.

This concept is actually mentioned clearly in the Talmud (Yevamos 65b) as well: "Just as it is a mitzvah to say words that will be accepted, it is also a mitzvah not to say words that will not be accepted."

Rabbi Motel Katz adds a personal anecdote that is so incredible that, had I not seen it myself in his notes and confirmed the authenticy of the notes with his son, I would never have included it here. The incident that he describes, while not dated, must have occurred in the late 1940s or early 50s.

"One day, the boys came over to me in yeshivah and asked me to change the yeshivah schedule for one night," writes Rabbi Katz. "They wanted to daven Maariv earlier than we regularly did.

"When I asked them why they wanted to daven early, they explained that there was a heavyweight championship bout being fought in New York that night, and they wanted to listen to the match on the radio. If we would daven at the regular time, they would miss the fight."

"Of course the very request was inappropriate, not to mention the questionable propriety of yeshivah students listening to a fight between two humans trained to beat each other until one of them could no longer stand up."

"I realized that if I refused, the boys simply would not understand why I refused. Having grown up in America, they were accustomed to the finest, most respectable citizens flying in from all over the country to view these matches. They considered watching or listening to the radio broadcast of two adults pummeling each other a perfectly normal means of recreation."

"I decided," concludes Rabbi Katz, "that since these boys would not begin to understand why I was refusing their request, it would be better to allow them to daven early and listen to the match."

I am sure that this was probably one of many difficult dilemmas Rabbi Katz had to face. He had learned in Telz back in Europe. What would his Roshei Yeshivah have thought of such a request?

Rabbi Mordechai Gifter often related his memories of his arrival in Telz and finding that the only thing that existed there was Torah. How difficult it must have been for a person who had been privy to witness such exalted devotion to Torah to permit his students to end their studies early for a heavyweight championship match.

But this was a new world. The student body of Telz at the time was culled from various small communities throughout the United States; many of them had attended public el ementary schools in their youth. They could not be expected to fully appreciate the value of Torah.

Of course, there are many cases in which parents and mechanchim have to say no. But in this case, Rav Motel learned from the best Teacher. If Hashem permitted Klal Yisrael to do something that He knew was wrong when He realized they could not accept His refusal, then the Rosh Yeshivah of Telz had to find it in himself to do the same.

And so, dear parents, must we.

Transcribed by David Twersky Seattle, WA; Technical Assistance by Dovid Hoffman, Baltimore, MD

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