

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

TORAH LESSONS for the HOME

{ CHUKAS 5780 }

BLAMING AND LABELING

THE START OF THE TROUBLE

In this week's Parsha, we learn the story of how Moshe hit the rock – the sin which ultimately caused him to lose the privilege of entering Eretz Yisrael. How did it all begin? Moshe Rabbeinu gathered the Yidden and told them, "*Shimu na hamorim*, Listen to me, you rebels."

According to the Rambam, the sin of Moshe wasn't that he hit the rock; it was that he called the Yidden a disparaging name – "You rebels."

We understand that the Torah is telling us about this in order to teach us an important lesson.

WHEN WE DO IT, TOO

How often do we make a similar mistake? When our spouse does something wrong, we may recreate their

whole identity based on this single misdeed.

For example, your husband showed up really late one night. Instead of saying, "I am really angry that you came late!", you tell him, "You never show up on time! Why do you have to be so unreliable?!" The former isn't either the best way to express yourself, but it is certainly preferable to the latter. Rather than calling out his negative action, you are labeling him as "unreliable". Instead of solving the problem, you are creating a problem.

You might argue that he already is a problem, but causing a person to feel that he is innately flawed and beyond help is a terrible blow to his self-image and robs him of any inclination to ever change.

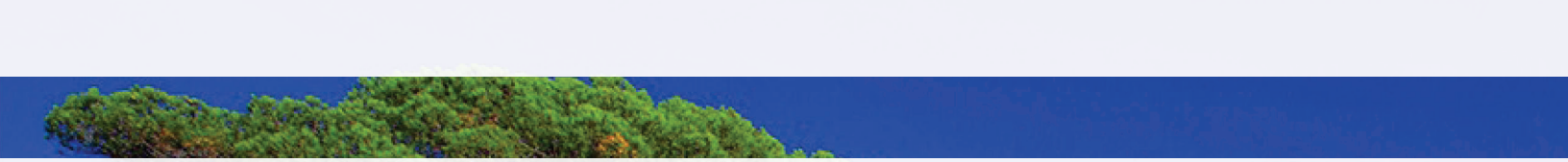
Besides for hurting his feelings, it might also hurt the relationship between the two

of you, and ruin any chances of him trying to improve in the future.

REFRAINING FROM LABELS

The Rambam in Hilchos Deios teaches us that even while we are in the process of rebuking someone for their wrongdoing, we need to be careful not to call them disparaging names. If you call them a liar or a sinner, even if you are just trying to make them aware of their actions, you are committing a sin yourself. Even when you are talking to a child, or to someone who will not get offended, labeling them or writing them off as a general problem will cause them to adopt this as their identity and might ruin their lives forever.

The gemara (Megillah 28a) tells of great Chachomim who attributed their longevity to



the care they took not to label people. In Hilchos Teshuva (3,14) the Rambam goes so far as to say that if one referred to a fellow Jew by a derogatory label, he has forfeited his portion in the World To Come!

SELF JUSTIFICATION

Every human being makes mistakes, yet we do not think of ourselves as evil. Instead of thinking, “What a terrible person I am!” we think, “I am essentially a good person, but unfortunately, I faltered.” How much more so should we be careful not to think of others as evil.

When we make a mistake, we usually justify our actions by saying, “It could happen to anyone.” But then when it *does* happen to “anyone”, we have a hard time forgiving them for it!

Painting a person black or white, depending on our last interaction with them, is so detrimental! Even if their actions were absolutely despicable, we all have the capacity to change and become better, if we are only given the chance.

WHEN DOUBT SETS IN

Every Yid is born good, wants to be good, and is attracted to good. Yet, being human, we might slip up and do the wrong thing. The ability to differentiate

between negative actions and our positive self-image is a vital part of self-development. This is what enables a person to be resilient and keep aiming to reach his full potential.

Many people are in a constant struggle with themselves. Am I a good person? Am I a devoted husband? Am I a loving father? Because we tend to slip up from time to time, we have trouble separating those mishaps from our positive self-image. What happens when someone we trust and respect, such as a parent or spouse, reinforces our insecurities by labeling us as bad? Our worst fears are confirmed, and this will have a crushing effect on us!

Before you lash out at someone and use generalities, like “You never...!”, “You always...!”, “You’re such a...!”, take a moment to consider that this person might currently be going through an identity crisis and this one statement might change his life forever. It is up to you whether it will be for better or for worse.

BRING POSITIVITY

Very often when we ask someone why they did something that angered their spouse or their parent, they will respond with, “I anyway can’t please him/her, so I’m not even trying.” So essentially, when we write someone off as

hopeless because we think this will inspire them to change, we are accomplishing the exact opposite. They will give up all hope of trying to make us happy and resign themselves to being the disappointment that you told them they are.

A couple of weeks ago, we discussed the Sotah, and how once she is exonerated, she is rewarded by Hashem. Did this woman, who secluded herself with a man who was not her husband, deserve a reward for being justifiably suspected of misdeeds? Very likely that she didn’t. But Hashem wanted to teach us that once her innocence was determined, it is time to move on and forget that she was ever suspected. She is now as good as new.

MIND THE DIAGNOSES

If we go for professional help to sort out our marriage struggles, we need to be very wary of diagnoses and labels. Some professionals are very quick to hand down declarations of various personality disorders and mental ailments, which sometimes do more harm than good.

A woman related that she once went for help with her husband, thinking that she will come out of there with a repaired relationship. Instead, she walked out with a sick husband. The therapist was

very quick to determine that her husband suffered from a particular mental illness, and now, whenever he does anything that bothers her, she can't take her mind off that fact that it surely must be because of that.

What's more, even when the husband or wife works mighty hard on themselves to improve, and succeed to be near perfect for years, once they slip up again – even if many years have passed – it will still be chalked up to their years-old “diagnosis” that should have never been assigned to them. These labels can often be very damaging.

We have to remember that when we tell our spouse a general negative statement, we are creating a self-fulfilling prophecy which will come back and haunt us for a long time. In order to help ourselves and to make sure that we are in the best relationship that we can be, it's important to be mindful of the words we utter and the expressions we use, lest they dash our spouse's hope of ever being able to make us happy. And isn't making each other happy what we all really want?

CHINUCH: LASTING REPERCUSSIONS

The Parsha of the Ben Sorer Umoreh is quite fascinating. Parents report a child to the Bais Din, saying

that he misbehaved, he is a glutton and an alcoholic, and the child is sentenced to death! Why? Because this behavior will inevitably cause him to murder someone when he grows up.

It's extremely difficult to understand. The Torah doesn't punish any person until he is proven guilty beyond a shadow of a doubt. Even when someone was accused of having committed a murder, he was not punished unless there were sufficient witnesses with corroborating accounts. And here a child is ordered to be killed for a sin he has not yet committed?

We later learn that such a scenario never actually occurred, and the only reason we learn about this Parsha is so that we can extrapolate a powerful lesson.

When parents label their child a sinner, or problematic, or hopeless, there is no doubt that he will grow up to be just that – to the metaphorical point where you might as well just kill him now, and not wait for him to kill a hapless victim first.

A grown man, who has married off many of his own children already, once told me that as a child he was called a disparaging name – let's say it was “faker”. To this day he cannot shake that label off

and is constantly doubting his own authenticity, because this moniker has ingrained itself so deeply into his psyche.

In the Haggadah we learn about the four different types of sons, and the questions they ask. The Torah only asks the questions; it doesn't say which type of son asks what. So, the Ba'al Haggadah should have said that whoever asks this question is a tzaddik, whoever asks that question is a rasha, etc. Why the label first?

Because when we dub our child a *chacham*, he will behave like one, and he will ask “Mah ha'eidos v'hachukim?”. If we label our child a *rasha*, *chas veshalom*, he will ask “Mah ha'avodah hazos lachem?”. When we identify our child as good or bad, they will live up to our expectations of them.

We need to view our children as miniature human beings. Flawed human beings, just like we are. When we base our assumptions of their essence on their inevitable mistakes, and especially if we verbalize those assumptions, we are killing them off. They are young and impressionable, and when we say that they are good or bad they will adopt this as their creed, they will assume this as their very identity, and they will have a very hard time breaking free of it when they grow up.



Q&A

PLEASE FEEL FREE TO SEND
ANY QUESTIONS, ON THIS
TOPIC OR ANY TOPIC TO
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QUESTION:

I have a student who has tried really hard throughout the school year to get along with her classmates. She has a bit of a tough personality and this has caused her to have multiple run-ins with her peers, but still she has expended a tremendous amount of effort to stay on track. I really believe that she deserves the End of Year Middos Award for her accomplishments, but I don't think her classmates will appreciate it, since they were not privy to all of the behind-the-scenes details.

ANSWER:

Only Hashem knows our deepest essence. With our human eyes, we have no way of discerning who really deserves honor and glory.

For example, we are obligated to stand up when a *talmid chacham* walks into the room, even if he has a photographic memory and his learning comes easily to him. We are not obligated to stand up for the electrician who is sitting next to us in *shiur*, even if he sacrificed quite a bit more to amass his Torah knowledge. Real *s'char* is given up in Shamayim. In this world, we treat people according to what it seems.

Trying to convince others about someone's greatness is pointless. People will choose what they want to believe. Especially when it comes to children, who see things in a one-dimensional sense, it's impossible to make them understand that the child who fought so much with them really deserves a medal for all the times that she *didn't* fight.

Giving her a public award might actually enrage her classmates and maybe even embarrass her. But you can't let her efforts go unnoticed either.

Instead, you can pull her aside and tell her that you noticed her hard work and want to give her a special award that is just between the two of you. Make her feel special in a private way.

Each child needs something different, but treating them accordingly will only confuse the other kids in the room. Find a way to give each child what they need without arousing the jealousy or the bewilderment from those around them.

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