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CORPORAL PUNISHMENT: HAVE THE TIMES CHANGED?

Some people have questioned the contemporary positive and more gentle approach in *chinuch* advocated by most *gedolim* and *mechanchim* from the *gemara* in *Kesuvos* 50a which recommends using a harsh approach when learning with children over the age of 12, including corporal punishment and withholding food (see *Rashi*). In response, I would like to bring up the following issues:

The intentions behind the discipline

Perhaps in earlier times parents (and teachers) were more likely to discipline out of a feeling of responsibility toward the child and less out of anger and feelings of ownership. This would make a tremendous difference in regard to the impact on the child.

Rabbi Yitzchok Kirzner (*Making Sense of Suffering*, ArtScroll 2002, p. 64, fn) cites the Rambam, (*Sanhedrin* 16:9) that the official of the *beis din* who administers *malkos* is required to be weak and wise - . We understand why he needs to be weak (out of compassion for the recipient of the lashes) but what kind of wisdom is necessary for this job? Rav Kirzner answers that wisdom is required to understand the Torah's attitude toward punishment (e.g., that it isn't revenge; rather it's for the benefit of the transgressor). "Apparently that difference in attitude is conveyed in the lashes themselves - a certain energy flows from the whip to the recipient's back. He can discern the difference between lashes of love and correction and those of destruction and rejection."

In the *sefer Binas Hamiddos: Pirkei Hadracha* (Yerushlayim, 5767, pp. 82-83) Rav Moshe Shapiro relates that Rebbitzin Dessler told him that her father, Rav N. Z. of Kelem, hit her twice and she feels that she gained a great deal from it. She also emphasizes that she had full confidence that he was hitting her only for her benefit and not out of anger [how many people today would say this about their parents?]. Yet when asked if he recommends for other parents to follow this example, Rav Shapiro says that

today hitting is not the proper approach. Only truly great people were able to allow themselves this type of discipline.¹

(It is worth noting that there has never been a *halachic* opinion permitting hitting a child in anger, so in real current life the issue of the permissibility of corporal punishment is usually not relevant. In *Even Sheleima*, the Vilna Gaon, explaining the *posuk*, “*Chosech shivto sonei beno [Mishlei 13:24]*” states that a parent who strikes his child must do so with no trace of anger!).²

The changing times

Many *gedolim* have commented on the changing times (or the individual natures of different children) requiring a change in approach - from one of the *Rishonim* (*Ritva*, *Moed Koton* 17a) discussing until what age one can hit a child, through the *Pardes Yosef* (approximately 80 years ago) on the *posuk*, “*kol hamachala asher samti beMitzrayim*” (*Beshalach*, perek 15) until current and recent *gedolim* such as Rav Wolbe who has made many strong statements against the use of corporal punishment (e.g., in his *sefer Planting and Building in Chinuch* -).

Rav Chaim M^oVolozhin is quoted as saying that people (not just children) are no longer able to hear harsh words and therefore anyone who is not capable of rebuking someone softly and without anger is *potur* from the obligation of *tochucha*.³

The *Pardes Yosef* compares the changes in the emotional vulnerabilities of people to the changes in the physical makeup of people where medicines that helped people in earlier times are harmful to contemporary patients. Likewise, in the emotional sense, says the *Pardes Yosef*, people in the past were able to tolerate and benefit from harsh rebuke but people of the later generations are unable to. Rav Pam in the *Atara LeMelech* compares the people of earlier generations to metal vessels. If a metal vessel gets dirty, you pour boiling water on it (analogous to harsh rebuke) and it comes out shining clean. Today, we are more similar to earthenware vessels ó if you pour boiling water on it, you’ll end up with a muddy puddle!⁴

While Rav Dessler condones hitting as an educational tool (*Michtav MeEliyahu*, Vol. 3. p. 360), perhaps he would see things differently today. This assumption is indeed made in the *sefer Oz Nedabru Anshei Chinuch*.⁵

1 "בִּינַת הַמְּדוּת" (82 ' " , ")
 2 "מִנְחַת נֵתָן" (" " , ")
 3 סֵפֶר חֵינּוּךְ מַלְכוּתֵי (' ' (") " " " רַבֵּי חַיִּים מְוֹלוֹז'יִן,
 4 The original citations for the *Pardes Yosef* and *Atara LeMelech* are provided in the second half of the article.
 5 "אֵז נִדְבְּרוּ" (11 ' " ")
 :[360 ' " "] " :

Rav Shlomo Wolbe addresses the question if contemporary children are different than the children of previous generations in regard to their reactions to harsh discipline. In a letter of *haskamah* to the *sefer Nefesh Hayeshiva* he praises the author for being sensitive to the emotional vulnerabilities of contemporary children. "Were previous generations [emotionally] healthier?" asks Rav Wolbe. "We don't really know" he answers, but we do know that in our times we have to be very sensitive to these vulnerabilities.⁶

What has changed?

If we are to assume that the nature of people has changed, so that harsher educational approaches which were effective in the past no longer are, to what do we attribute these changes? One can only speculate. One factor that has struck me as possibly involved in this change is the increased emotional pressures that many children experience today. This may seem like a strange explanation to many, since the accepted wisdom is that today's children are "spoiled" or "they have it too easy." While this is certainly true in regard to creature comforts - which is true of the parents as well (as discussed below) or in other important dimensions kids have it tougher than before. Parents may have less time to devote to their children and the hectic pace of modern life may make it difficult for parents to have the necessary patience when they do spend time with them.⁷

But perhaps more than anything else, the major change is that parents no longer accept the fact that the average child is going to be average. Actually, they do accept it, as long as it's not **their** child. If a contemporary parent were to be told at PTA that their child was average they would most likely be devastated. This causes parents to put excessive pressure on their children and makes children feel that they are not accepted for who they are. Perhaps it's the relative affluence that many in our society enjoy today that allows them to focus their attention and their resources to "extracting" the maximum from their children at an ever younger age. Even if they do live up to their parents' expectations and make their parents proud, they may end up with an underdeveloped sense of self, since they are living for their parents.

A patient once challenged my assertion that problems in self-esteem are most often the result of deficiencies in the parent-child relationship. "It can't be" he protested, "I was

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my parents' favorite child and yet I always had problems with my self esteem, so it must be genetic." I pointed out that the reason he was his parents' favorite was not in response to his needs but rather because he best fulfilled their needs – he was living their lives rather than developing his own. Not only didn't he have positive self-esteem, he didn't even have a developed sense of self!

Does it really make sense to say that children have it too easy when they have too many toys but not enough acceptance or even worse, when they have to always focus on their parents' unmet needs rather than on their own developmental needs?! You don't spoil children just by making their life more comfortable than yours was. Will they really be better off walking miles to school in the sweltering heat (while you drive in your luxury air conditioned sedan)? You don't spoil children when you give them too much of what they don't need (e.g., elaborate toys that none of their friends have and they never expressed a need for) while you don't give them what they desperately do need (time, patience, love, warmth, and acceptance). They then learn to fill the hole in their heart with glamorous things. They will become addicted to the pleasures that this brings as a substitute for the happiness that they are lacking. In this sense they are indeed spoiled – but certainly not because they had it too good!

*The Chayei Adam (67:3) states that in order to fulfill the mitzvah of kibud av v'eim in all its dimensions one needs to think of his parents as being special people, even if the rest of the world considers them to be plain and simple people.⁸ I heard Rav Matisyahu Salomon shlit"a ask: Is a child required to be delusional in order to fulfill this obligation? He explained that the Chayei Adam doesn't mean that the child has to think that his parents are objectively special. Rather, **in his eyes** they should be special. It seems to me that this is only likely to happen if the parents first treated their child as a special person, not because he was objectively special, but simply because he was their son. To paraphrase a quote I once saw, "You may be only one person in the world, but you should be the world to your parents." This in itself would make the son feel that his parents are special to him because they are the only ones who see him in this manner.*

The need for alternative strategies

Often teachers and parents resort to hitting because they are lacking the tools to deal with children's misbehavior in any other way. I often speak to parents and teachers who are convinced that without harsh discipline children would be totally out of control. One "exercise" I have used is to ask them to recall the best teacher they ever had. Then I ask them how often did that teacher punish or raise his/her voice etc. This is usually sufficient to establish the fact that it is possible to have an orderly class without harsh discipline.

Rav Noson Chaim Einfeld from the Kollel Chazon Ish writes in his amazing *Kuntros Chanoch Lenaar* that he had been asked by teachers, in response to the first edition of his *Kuntros*, "so how **do** you react to misbehavior?" In response, he relates the following true

⁸ חיי אדם

**The following is an exchange of letters in one of the *frum* publications
regarding the possibility of change in methods of *chinuch***

2007

To The Editor :

In your recent issue, you published a letter from Benzion Sorotzkin, Psy.D. In parenthesis we read: %
Rav told me that Rav Wolbe told him that the *Mishnah* stating that it is better to be the tail of a lion than a
head of a fox (Avos, 4:15) no longer applies because it would break the spirit of most people.+

What broke my spirit was a suggestion (not quoted direct from source) that the timeless words of a
Mishnah can actually become obsolete. Is this not a highly dangerous statement? Does it not make
every *Chazal* vulnerable and open to casual dismissal in a similar way. We have already heard self-
elected educationalists claim that the rule (*Sotah*, 47a) of rejecting with a left hand whilst we do *kiruv* with
the right is also a concept of the past, i.e. today there is no such thing as rejection.

Is this not, to say the least, an exceedingly risky approach? Where do we draw the line? What is going
to be deleted next?

I do hope that, speaking on the behalf of *Daas Torah*, you will correct this misleading comment at the first
opportunity.

P
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To the Editor:

I appreciate Rabbi P's comments as it gives me the opportunity to clarify what I wrote.
Although I quoted Rav Wolbe's comments as it was told to me, he certainly didn't mean that the
Mishna's statement is no longer true. Indeed it is still true that it would be better for a person to
be among those greater than himself so that he could learn from them. However, due to their
weakened emotional state (part of the *yeridas hadoros*) many of today's students are unable to
take advantage of this advice because it may cause more harm than good.

As for Rabbi P's concern of every *Chazal* [becoming] vulnerable and open to casual dismissal
- I don't believe that quoting the words of a *godol* can be seen as a casual dismissal. Rabbi P
is certainly entitled to question the accuracy of the quote but a casual dismissal of *divrei chazal*
it isn't. It should be obvious that only *gedolim* can decide when or if established educational

practices should be adjusted because of changing circumstances (e.g., see *Michtav MeEliyahu*, Vol. 3 pp. 362-364). This is the only necessary protection from *casual dismissal* of *divrei chazal*.

While the words of the *Mishna* are certainly timeless, the idea that educational methods that worked in the past may no longer be as effectual has been stated by many *gedolim* and not just by *self-elected educationalists*. For example the *Pardes Yosef* (*Beshalach*, 15:26) compares the changes in the emotional vulnerabilities of people to the changes in the physical makeup of people. Just as medicines that helped people in earlier times [including those mentioned in the *Gemarah*] are harmful to contemporary patients, likewise, in the emotional sense, harsh rebuke was effective in the past but today it can often be counterproductive.

פרדס יוסף (:) ... -

Rav Pam also discusses how the type of *mussar* that is most helpful in promoting *teshuvah* has changed because of the *yeridas hadoros*. He compares the contemporary *Yid's* reaction to harsh criticism to an earthenware vessel that will melt if you pour boiling water over it in order to cleanse it.

עטרה למלך (' ') ...

A similar comment:

רבי חיים מוולוז'ין (") ...

Rav Shach also related how when he first came to Ponovich he would strongly rebuke *talmidim* who were lax in their *davening* attendance. Twenty years later he felt he could no longer use this approach and he switched instead to a softer approach.

אורחות הבית (' ') [] , ...

There are many other such comments by *gedolim* of recent generations.

As for Rabbi P's comments on *self-elected educationalists* [who] claim that the rule (*Sotah*, 47a) of rejecting with a left hand whilst we do *kiruv* with the right is also a concept of the past - I bring to his attention the words of Rav Michal Yehuda Lefkowitz that in our times - because the generation is weak - there is a lack of effectiveness to the *rejecting left hand* and one needs to mainly strengthen the *kiruv* of the right hand.

דרכי החיים (' ' , ") , , " " " " ,

This, of course, doesn't mean that the concept of the *rejecting left hand* is completely done away with; rather it's that the balance has shifted significantly to the *kiruv* right hand. As long as

we follow the guidance of our *gedolim* we will know where to draw the line and it needn't be an exceedingly risky approach.

As for Rabbi P's concluding remarks - I do hope that, speaking on the behalf of *Daas Torah*, you will correct this misleading comment at the first opportunity or I would respectfully suggest that if someone truly wants to ascertain *Daas Torah* on this issue, he shouldn't decide on his own what their conclusion will be.

Benzion Sorotzkin