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DISCIPLINE AND HEALING

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Many of my articles emphasize the dangers of excessive criticism and harsh discipline of children and of inflexible educational structures. This has led some to assume that I am against discipline and structure. In fact, the opposite is true. Because I appreciate the crucial role of discipline and structure in *chinuch*, therefore I emphasize the importance of doing it right!

Structure and discipline are clearly important elements of standard *chinuch*. As emphasized by the acclaimed Israeli *mechanech*, Rabbi Yechiel Yaakovson, in his important book¹: “No *chinuch* system can operate without a sense of authority. In the home or the classroom ... acceptance of authority is an essential requirement for any kind of system. Without it, the dynamic between parents and children and between teachers and students would collapse entirely. *Chinuch* of any kind would be impossible” [p. 65].

At the same time, the attitude of the parents and teachers administering the necessary discipline or limit setting is crucial. As the psychiatrist and author Gabor Maté put it regarding an attention starved child:

The parent has to be able to say a kind but firm no whenever he is unable to meet the child's incessant demands for attention. “I am just not up to doing that now,” he may tell the child... The statement is about the parent and does not express a judgment either about the child or about the particular activity in question. The operative word here is *kindness*. The problem is often not the parent's legitimate refusal per se but the punishing irritability with which the message is delivered [p. 174]. Keep in mind that “rapport and limit setting go hand in hand,” Stanley Greenspan² advises. “As you increase limit setting, you need to increase empathy [p. 207].”³

Or as Maté put it regarding unconditional love and acceptance:⁴

¹ *Spare the Child* (2019), See especially Part 2, Section 1.

² A leading American developmental psychiatrist.

³ Maté, G. (1999). *Scattered: How ADD originates and what you can do about it*.

⁴ Maté, G. (2022). *The myth of normal: Trauma illness and healing in a toxic culture*.

[T]he parents' primary task, beyond providing for the child's survival requirements, to emanate a simple message to the child in word, deed and (most of all) energetic presence, that he or she is precisely the person they love, welcome, and want. The child doesn't have to do anything, or be any different, to win that love – in fact, **cannot** do anything, because this abiding embrace cannot be earned, nor can it be revoked. It doesn't depend on the child's behavior or personality; it is just there ...

Do we then ignore dangerous or unacceptable behavior? No, that wouldn't be the loving things to do either, since children's needs also include guidance and orientation, which include setting boundaries. Rather, we do our best to monitor and curtail undesirable actions **from an unconditionally loving place**: a way of being wherein children understand that nothing they might do can threaten the relationship, even if it elicits momentary anger or requires correction. Operating from this attitude may even allow us to see the child's "misbehavior" in a broader, more forgiving frame – perhaps it expresses a need frustrated, communication unheard, an emotion unprocessed. We understand and respond to the needs and emotions a child is "acting out," rather than simply punishing the behavior and banishing the feeling [p. 127].

The importance of a proper attitude accompanying punishment is emphasized by *chazal*: Rabbi Yitzchok Kirzner cites the Rambam, (*Sanhedrin* 16:9) that the official of the *beis din* who administers *malkos* is required to be weak and wise - יתר בדעה וחסר בכח. 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).⁵ "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."⁶

Rav Matisyahu Salomon also emphasizes this point:

The Torah tells us, "And you will know in your heart that just as a man disciplines his son so does *Hashem* discipline you."⁷ What does this mean? It certainly doesn't mean the way some fathers discipline their children, with anger, negativity, [and] vengefulness. We would be in deep trouble if that's what it meant. No, the *Ribono Shel Olam* disciplines us as a loving father disciplines his child.⁸

Repairing damaged relationships

⁵ בספר מכתב מאליהו (רבי אליהו דסלר, ח"ג עמ' 247) ... במעשי הרעים האדם יוצר מחיצה בינו לבין בוראו, ועל ידי זה מונע מעצמו אור חסדו יתברך. העונש בא לעורר וללמד אותו, לזכור ולטהרו מהחטא. מטרת כל עונשי שמים היא תיקון המעוות, כמאמר הכתוב: כאשר ייסר איש את בנו ... אך גם אב ומורה טוב מראה את עצמו לפעמים ככועס ומתנקם, לתועלת בנו ותלמידו. ... [וראה רבי מתתיהו סלומון בספר מתנת חיים, מועדים עמ' פ' ורבי חיים פרידלנדר בספר שפתי חיים, מועדים א' עמ' צט'.]

⁶ *Making Sense of Suffering*, ArtScroll 2002, p. 64, fn.

⁷ דברים ח:ה

⁸ *With Hearts Full of Love*, ArtScroll, 2009, pp. 39-40.

Unfortunately, some children were disciplined “with anger, negativity, and vengefulness.” When dealing with students or children who have been disciplined in an unreasonable, inconsistent, harsh, or abusive manner our ability to impose discipline in a constructive manner becomes severely limited. Because of their trauma they experience even mild constructive criticism or mild displeasure as harsh criticism and they are hypersensitive to anything that can be seen as judgmental or rejection.⁹ Although ideal *chinuch* emphasizes both אהבה and יראה with these students the emphasis needs to be primarily on אהבה:

Rav Issac Sher wrote an essay explaining why the Alter from Slabodka changed his musser approach from that of Rav Yisroel Salanter. Rav Yisroel emphasized *yiras haonesh* [fear of Hashem’s retribution]. The Alter felt that in Rav Yisroel’s times people had stronger *emunah* so they could handle a constant focus on *yiras haonesh*. In his times this was no longer the case, so he changed the emphasis to *ahavas Hashem* and *gadlos haadam* [love of Hashem and the greatness of man].¹⁰

Having strong *emunah* means the person truly believes that everything Hashem does is for the best¹¹ and that Hashem’s punishments are meant to restore what was damaged and not an act of revenge. For someone with such *emunah*, focusing on fear of retribution would be productive.

Many children experienced discipline imposed more to address the needs of the discipliner than those of the disciplined. and are less likely to believe that the discipline is truly intended for their benefit even if that is currently the case. For someone with such lack of *emunah*, focusing on fear of retribution would be counterproductive.

The importance of the motivation of the *mechanech* or parent is also emphasized by Rav Matisyahu Solomon:

Unlike in our relationship with the Ribono Shel Olam [where there is a value to doing a mitzvah for an extrinsic motivation], our efforts in *chinuch* have no value without the proper motives and intentions... *shelo lishmah* has no value in *chinuch* [i.e., when the parent is motivated by his own needs]. In fact, it is destructive....¹²

⁹ See *Complex PTSD: From Surviving to Thriving* by Pete Walker. An excellent book explaining the connection between childhood trauma and a person’s current difficulties with daily functioning. Written in plain English without being over-simplistic.

¹⁰ ספר לקט שיחות מוסר מאת רבי אייזיק שר (ח"ג, עמ' רצג-רצד): הגאון רבי ישראל סלנטר האריך לבאר ... את דבר החובה להתבונן תמיד ביראת העונש ... אולם האדמו"ר [הסבא מסלבודקא] זצ"ל, היתה דרכו בהנהגתו עם הרבים ... להשפיע עליהם להתחזק תמיד במעלת האהבה לד' יתברך, מתוך הכרות עמוקות בחסדיו הנפלאים והכרת גדלות האדם, רום ערכו וגדול חביבותו לפני הקב"ה. ומפני מה נטה אדמו"ר זצ"ל מדרכו של הגרי"ס...? משום שלא כדורות הראשונים דורות האחרונים. הראשונים ... היו חזקים ואיתנים באמונתם ... וכיון שכן, היו יכולים להתחזק תמיד ביראת העונש... אבל האחרונים ... שנתגדלו בעולם של הפקר ... והיה עמוד האמונה צריך חיזוק גדול, לפיכך ראה אדמו"ר זצ"ל חובה להתמקד בדבריו על עניני האמונה והאהבה ... אשר על ידה תקנה האמונה שבייתה בלבם. וכיון שמשך את לבות הצעירים לאהבת ד' יתברך, שוב היה בכוחו להרגיל אותם להבין ולהרגיש במוח ובלב את עניני היראה.
¹¹ כל דעביד רחמנא לטב עביד (ברכות ס:).

¹² *With Hearts Full of Love*, ArtScroll, 2009, pp. 45-47.

A struggling child ... needs to be convinced that his parents' desire for him to improve is motivated by pure consideration of what's best for **him**, not by their shame of how he is viewed in the public eye.¹³

Inadequate self-discipline

Even children who weren't harshly and unreasonably criticized, rather they "only" suffered emotional neglect, their ability to develop self-discipline will be severely restricted. In her aptly titled book *Running on Empty*¹⁴ Dr. Webb discusses what some **didn't** get in childhood. What was not there that should have been: guidance, attunement; in some cases, love. Emotional neglect is an "invisible factor" from childhood which weighs upon people in adulthood, sapping their joy, making them feel disconnected or unfulfilled, or causing them to struggle with self-discipline. This factor from childhood is so subtle that it goes virtually unnoticed by everyone while it does its silent damage to people's lives.

Developing self-discipline

While we need to be very careful not to retraumatize these children with expectations beyond their current capacities, nonetheless, we can't totally neglect the need for a child to develop structure and self-discipline. Rav Matisyahu Salomon makes this point in discussing the concept of "yoke" – as in עול מלכות שמים. The mental image many people have of this concept is that of a yoke of slavery – a burden. In fact, Rav Matisyahu Salomon explains, based on a Zohar, a yoke is a tool¹⁵ – a way to more efficiently accomplish a task that we want to accomplish (similar to the rigid backpack used by hikers, allowing them to carry all their equipment with minimal discomfort).

The "yoke" of self-control has great benefits for those who embrace it. In experiments beginning in the late 1960s, the psychologist Walter Mischel tormented preschoolers with the agonizing choice of one marshmallow now or two marshmallows 15 minutes from now. When he followed up decades later, he found that the 4-year-olds who waited for two marshmallows turned into adults who were better adjusted, were less likely

¹³ *With Cords of Love*, Ezriel Tauber, p. 134

¹⁴ *Running on Empty: Overcome Your Childhood Emotional Neglect* by Dr. Jonice Webb with Dr. Christine Musello (2013).

¹⁵ מתנת חיים (רבי מתתיהו סלומון, ימים נוראים, עמ' עה') - נפש החיים (שער ד' פרק ד') ע"פ הזוה"ק.

to abuse drugs, had higher self-esteem, had better relationships, were better at handling stress, obtained higher degrees and earned more money.¹⁶

How can we help these students to get more comfortable with structure, reasonable expectations, and self-discipline, so that they will be able to succeed when they leave the protective milieu of a therapeutic environment and enter the “real world?”

It seems to me that it is probably more effective to discuss this issue with these children by emphasizing the value and necessity to develop self-discipline rather than to speak of **יראה**.

We should first help them understand why self-discipline and structure is so challenging for them. It is amazing that even when children experience overt and severe abuse, they don't connect their current difficulties to that abuse. When they try to improve by waking up on time, showing up on time for jobs and job interviews, overcoming addictions and the like, and they fail, they don't see the connection to the trauma they experienced.¹⁷ Rather, they assume that they are inherently defective, lazy, irresponsible, become overwhelmed with shame and eventually give up.

It can be helpful to help them understand that their resistance to discipline may have been necessary when they were young and helpless as the only way they could assert some control over their lives. Perhaps that defense is no longer as necessary.

It is often necessary to restrain their overly optimistic assumptions that they can get up on time, show up to an appointment etc. This is because they think it is only a matter of will-power while they (and many others) grossly underestimate the challenges that are the legacy of the trauma. When they realize how paralyzing shame, fear of criticism, feeling undeserving of success etc. can be, they are more capable of agreeing to try to take smaller steps on the road to progress. Equally important is to develop the ability to take pride of each step since that's the fuel for further progress.¹⁸ Initially, they are more likely to disparage their progress as insignificant.

Another goal is to help them differentiate between externally imposed discipline (to which they have a strong aversion because of their history) and self-discipline. If they can

¹⁶ These studies are summarized by Walter Mischel (2014) in his book “*The Marshmallow Test: Understanding Self-control and How to Master It.*”

¹⁷ See “*Complex PTSD.*”

¹⁸ **ראה מכתב מאליהו ח"ה עמ' 262:** עבודת ה' בלי נתינת ערך נכון לתורה ומצוות שאנחנו עושים מיועדת לכשלון.

accept that tolerating (reasonable) structure and self-discipline is a worthy goal for themselves while appreciating that it is understandable why it is currently so difficult for them, then over time it may slowly develop. If they don't have any appreciation for its value, however, it's unlikely to ever develop. This will leave them lacking a basic life skill.