



# TOUGH LOVE BACK IN VOGUE

A NEW TREND IN PARENTING TAKES US BACK TO TRADITION



MICHAL EISIKOWITZ

“I was once standing at a busy Jerusalem intersection waiting for the crosswalk to turn green,” relates Rebbetzin Malka Kaganoff, educational director of She’arim seminary in Yerushalayim and a frequent speaker on parenting topics. “Next to me was a mother of three young boys. The mother said, ‘Yanky, you may not cross the street!’ Yanky saw there were no cars coming and scampered across the street. Mother tried son #2: ‘Shloimy, you may not cross the street!’ Shloimy promptly bolted across the road. The mother then turned to her youngest: ‘Good boy, Sruli! You’re listening to Mommy!’

“What was so alarming, witnessing this incident,” says Rebbetzin Kaganoff, “was that the mother was totally unaware that she had *no control over her kids*. And in a year or two, Sruli will probably become just like the others.”

“Our parenting standards have sunk so low that we don’t even question behaviors that would have been considered outrageous 30 years ago,” concurs Simi Yellen, a popular Los Angeles–based parenting instructor who has given teleconference classes and private consultations for over a decade. “We’ve lost our accurate lens for what is normal, and now we have to raise back the bar.”

A growing number of parenting experts feel the same way, and are determined to restore Torah-based respect to Jewish homes.

“There are only two *psukim* that dictate the parent-child relationship in the

Torah,” says Simi. “One is ‘Respect your father and mother.’ The other is ‘Your father and mother you must fear.’ If respect and a healthy *yirah* are the foundation, only *then* can you build up to the sky.”

Though she is all for warmth, love, and positivity, Simi — and others — fiercely believe this: Warmth alone doth not an enduring relationship make.

#### MISSING: THE PARENTAL HIERARCHY

Once upon a time, it is claimed, parents had authority. Back in the shtetl, a yes was a yes, a no was a no, and a *potch* if it wasn’t. But at some point, Jewish parenting — paralleling a profound global shift from autocracy to democracy — went in a radically different direction.

Today’s parenting buzzwords are “empathy,” “positivity,” and “validation.” Essential elements — which become enormously problematic when doled out in huge, overflowing portions.

For example, says Simi Yellen, empathy is important. “But if expressed in the wrong context, it leads down a slippery slope to something called coddling.”

Take Miri, a lovely fifth-grader who

predictably bursts into a fit when car-pooling Mommy parks “too far” from the school entrance. When Miri lodges her complaint, a typical 21<sup>st</sup>-century, empathy-trained Mom might respond: “Oh, Miri, you’re feeling upset that Mommy parked too far and you had to walk a little bit longer? I’m sorry, sweetie. I’ll try to avoid that in the future.”

“That is empathy gone amok,” states Simi. “Here’s the right script: When Mommy picks you up from school, Miri, the first thing you say is ‘Hi, Mommy.’ Then, if you have a complaint, you can nicely say, ‘Mommy, can you please try to park closer to the school?’

“At that point, Mommy has Miri repeat that which was modeled for her.”

The use of positivity and empathy at all costs, says Simi, has resulted in a failure to set boundaries and ingrain proper behaviors. The fruits of this method speak for themselves: a generation of children with few coping skills, minimal respect for authority, and little tolerance for others.

“Parenting is a bigger picture than just how you and child are relating to each other,” Simi says. “Parents today let all

kinds of things slide in the name of a warm and cushy relationship. Yes, you can raise a child who is the antithesis of a *mentsch* and have a warm and cushy relationship. But that’s not Yiddishkeit.”

Mrs. Temi Perlberg, principal of Mesillah (a renowned Lakewood school for boys ages eight to 13 with significant behavioral issues), and a parenting instructor herself, similarly believes that today’s child-centered parenting has gone too far. (Mrs. Perlberg was recently featured under the name “Chana Hershfeld” in a “LifeLines” story in *Mishpacha* magazine that generated a lot of reader interest.)

“We’ve begun treating children as miniature adults, but that’s not the Torah’s view,” she insists. “Hashem does not want us worshipping our children; He wants us to teach them how to worship *Him* through their parents.”

According to Mrs. Perlberg, parents allow themselves to be negotiated, manipulated, and run over — and then at some point they reach their breaking point, feeling demeaned and frustrated and controlled — and explode in anger.

“We’ve been so wired to hear our children out and treat them as equals that we end up feeling pushed around, and we eventually blow our top. If you first establish an atmosphere of respect and authority, the disturbing behaviors disappear and it becomes effortless to be a warm and loving mother.”

Rabbi Zecharya Greenwald, principal of Me’ohr seminary and a well-known parenting expert, agrees that parents need to be assertive and set clear boundaries — so long as they’re tempered with love.

“Parents are not allowed to be afraid,” he says. “When a parent says something, there’s no such thing as ‘no.’ ‘No’ is not an option.”

At the same time, Rabbi Greenwald concedes that we cannot ignore today’s changed climate. One prominent example

is the use of corporal punishment. “If you hit a child today, you can go to jail,” he says. “So if your child views you as a criminal when you hit him, then hitting becomes totally off-limits. Even if we theoretically believe that hitting is the greatest parenting technique ever.”

Contrary to what some may fear, however, demanding respect in *appropriate* ways will not lead a child “off the *derech*.” The opposite is true, stresses Mrs. Perlberg: Children crave discipline. When Mommy and Tatty are in charge, they feel safe.

**“We’ve lost our accurate lens for what is normal, and now we have to raise back the bar”**

— Mrs Simi Yellen

#### PARENTAL RESPECT 101

It’s nice to wax poetic about the importance of parental authority. But how does one actually accomplish this?

The first step, says Mrs. Perlberg, is to have a look at our blueprint: the Torah. The *Shulchan Aruch* delineates several halachos that seem to have fallen to the wayside: A child must stand up for his parent, a child may not interrupt a parent, a child may not contradict a parent, and a child may not touch a parent’s belongings or enter his room without permission, among others.

The *taam*, the flavor, behind these laws, is clear: A person is molded by his actions. The more one demonstrates re-

spect through physical manifestations, the more it will be internalized.

“Parents need to teach their children that contradicting, interrupting, and barging into their parents’ bedroom are *not* okay,” emphasizes Simi Yellen. “For many parents, the notion that children should not have free rein to the parents’ bedroom is a shocker. But once parents enforce the rule, it’s Gan Eden.

“Distance doesn’t mean coldness; it just creates a hierarchy,” she says. “Distance gives children what to look up to.”

Rebbetzin Malka Kaganoff recalls a speech that Rav Chaim Pinchas Scheinberg *ztz”l* gave in her Baltimore days.

“He was an American-style *rav*, speaking to American parents,” remembers Rebbetzin Kaganoff. “But still, the Rav exhorted us: ‘Make your children stand up for you. Don’t be *moichel*.’ He understood that when a parent insists on this halachah, it does wonders for the relationship.”

Aside from the explicitly defined halachos, there is also an array of chutzpah-tinged behaviors that, says Mrs. Perlberg, may never be tolerated: rolling eyes, stamping feet, hitting, spitting, referring to adults (even other than parents) by first names, telling parents what to do, sitting in parents’ seats, slamming doors, negotiating, manipulating, ignoring, biting, throwing things, or intimidating.

But what happens when a child *is* defiant? What happens when the little *tzadikél* does, indeed, say no, or hit, or pinch? Then, says Simi Yellen, it’s time for a “teaching moment,” a very methodical response protocol.

“The one nonnegotiable prerequisite for a ‘teaching moment’ is calmness,” explains Simi. “Parent calmly teaches the child (a) what he did wrong and (b) how he could do it better.”

For example, Mommy tells Yair to take a shower. Yair yells back “*No!* I’m in the middle of a puzzle now!”

Mommy puts down the wooden mixing

# Project Derech

While vocal advocates for parental respect and authority have recently made a comeback, already in 1991 there was an idealistic Toronto couple who took up the cause with astounding dedication.

When Mrs. Shani Aberback's daughters came home from school with stories of students demonstrating acute disrespect for teachers and each other, their mother was appalled. Having recently come across a sefer detailing the laws of *kibud horim u'morim*, she couldn't figure out why these halachos were so obscure — even *frum* parenting books didn't mention them!

"Here is Hashem's formula for intergenerational relations," Mrs. Aberback realized. "Rising for parents, teachers, and elders; serving and escorting them; how to disagree respectfully; this was the way *frum* children were raised for thousands of years!"

With the blessings and encouragement of numerous *gedolim*, and in collaboration with Torah Umesorah, the Aberbacks created an illustrated workbook portraying the halachos of *kavod* and *yirah*, as well as a series of parent newsletters to be distributed through the schools, explaining the "halachah-of-the-week" that the child had learned in an interactive format.

As feedback poured in, more materials were developed: student workbooks for grades one and up, teacher lesson plans, preschool materials, and even *mesivta*-level materials — in varying versions for every type of *frum* community, and in a number of languages.

"The program spread like wildfire, right through the US and even to Europe, South Africa, Australia, and Hong Kong," says Malkie (Aberback) Shapiro, who now works together with her

mother on Project Derech. "My parents worked tirelessly for over 20 years to keep up with the demand."

To date, over 500 schools worldwide have implemented Derech. Engendering a veritable revolution of respect, its effects have been remarkable, and the stories flow endlessly.

"One government school inspector," reports Malkie, "who heard a Yeshiva of North Jersey student say, 'Is it possible the date on the board is wrong?' went back to tell the principal that in all his years, he had never heard children speaking so respectfully."

One substitute teacher who works in many schools reported that she immediately knows when a school has used Derech.

"My mother has received calls from store owners and secular residents who noticed a profound change in their '*frumme* neighbors,' and upon expressing their wonderment, found out about the program," continues Malkie.

"Yeshiva Shaarei Torah had a balloon launch with Derech notes inside, and a gentile lady called up to say she's delighted that schools today are still teaching respect."

The *Kiddush Hashem* is enormous, but the Aberbacks — who devoted decades of their lives to the program — refuse to take credit.

"It's not us," they say. "It's the power of the halachos."

adults acting like children. When you project authority, they will respond."

She notes that at the beginning, this kind of facedown can last for 45 minutes, or even longer. But if Mommy doesn't budge, steadfastly insisting that nothing is happening until the behavior is corrected and apologized for, it won't happen again.

Another excellent tool for engendering respect, says Rebbetzin Kaganoff, is when parents stand up for each other's *kavod*.

"When Abba comes into the room, Ima should say, 'Kids, Abba is here!' If Moishy talks nastily to Ima, Abba must sternly say 'We don't speak that way to Ima,' and then model more appropriate phrasing."

## INSTALLING GOOD HABITS

Respect goes beyond the parent-child relationship. Also high on Simi Yellen's agenda is teaching children to be grateful, to be tolerant of siblings, and to cope with bad moods and tough situations.

"Habits ingrained in childhood follow into adulthood," she warns. "A child who perpetually responds to disappointment by yelling, stomping, or slamming doors may become a difficult parent or spouse. A child who gets away with endlessly teasing his siblings may end up speaking unkindly to his wife. We have to realize that we are molding human beings, giving them the life skills they need to flourish."

Constant sibling bickering — a hot issue for parents — is actually an ideal opportunity to up a child's level of tolerance.

Simi describes a client of hers whose daughter couldn't sit for five minutes at the Shabbos table without complaining about a sibling: "Tell her to stop making faces!" "Tell her to stop touching me!" And so on.

She advised the mother that instead of simply trying to get sibling #2 to curtail the annoying behavior, she should present sibling #1 with three options:

- "You can strengthen your tolerance muscle." Mommy should teach sibling #1 that there is a *middah* called tolerance for others. This means that we work on ourselves to cope with people or situations that we're not thrilled with.

spoon, wipes her hands with a towel, and walks over to Yair. "Did you just say no to Mommy?" she asks, in a perfectly even-keeled voice.

"Yeah, I'm busy," Yair grunts.

"Do you think it's okay to say no to a mommy?" Mommy asks.

"Whatever," mumbles Yair.

"Ahh, you seem unclear. So I'll tell you," Mommy says slowly and firmly. "It's not okay to say 'no' to a mommy. What you could say is 'Mommy, is it possible for me to go into the shower in a couple minutes? I would love to finish my puzzle first.' Now, you try it."

Mommy then waits silently until Yair copies the modeled response and apologizes for speaking disrespectfully to a mommy.

"The idea is to stay in the moment, uncomfortable as it may be," says Simi. "You are not moving until the child has understood the wrong and made amends. When you drop whatever you are doing in order to confront a negative behavior, you can't imagine what a strong message this sends to a child. 'Wow, my crazy-busy, always-running Mommy is just standing there, waiting for me to stop laughing. This must be serious.'"

Sometimes, a younger child will run away from the confrontation. In those situations, Simi recommends simply picking up the thread upon the next meeting.

For example, when little Meir sneaks back into the kitchen for supper post-infraction, Mommy says: "Meir, a few minutes ago, when I told you it was Shaya's turn to play with the airplane, you called Mommy a stupidhead. What you should have said was, 'Mommy, could I please have five more minutes? My passengers are just about to land.'"

Meir would then model the appropriate response, and apologize for calling Mommy a bad name.

Mrs. Perlberg feels that when correcting a behavior and demanding an apology, parents need to use an unwavering, firm voice. Most importantly, they need to be confident in their authority as parents.

"You need to *feel* like the adult. You need to *feel* like you're in charge," she says. "Children can easily discern who are adults and who are

- “You can leave the room.”
- “You can ask sibling #2 *nice*ly to stop what she is doing.”

Mommy should then wait until sibling #1 actually follows through one of these options before returning to the kitchen to serve the soup.

By doing this, says Simi, Mommy conveys an invaluable lesson: There are bound to be unpleasant things in life, and Mommy won't always be able to make them go away. You need to learn how to cope. “We cannot become micromanaging parents who dot every I and cross every T for their children,” she says.

Another phenomenon that Simi battles is the rampant attitude of entitlement, particularly when it takes the form of unreasonable complaints.

For example, Yosef returns home from an action-packed Lag B'Omer trip to the park. He spent the day playing ball with his *rebbe* and friends, having special ice pops, and finally, enjoying a top-it-all-off barbecue.

“How was your day?” asks Mommy when Yosef rumbles in.

“Oh, it was so lame,” he says. “The teams were split up so badly, and I didn't even get my favorite flavor ice pop.”

At this point, should Mommy empathize? Absolutely not, avers Simi. Empathy has a place only when the complaint is reasonable. In this context, what we're seeing is plain old ingratitude. Mommy should respond in a calm teaching voice like this:

“Yosef, I am quite surprised by your

complaining. People worked very hard to plan a special day for you in the park, on a regular school day. If one or two things didn't go exactly how you would have liked, that's just not what we focus on. I want you to think of three nice things to say about your day.”

When mothers empathize over trivialities (“Oh, you only had popcorn today, and not potato chips?” “Oh, you didn't have an orange eraser like Chani?”), says Simi, they create narcissistic egotists with no *ayin tovah*.

Another common parental misconception is that when a child is tired or hungry, anything goes.

“Being tired and hungry is not a *heter* to do *aveiros*,” Simi says. “Should a mother do her utmost to make sure her children are not tired or hungry? Absolutely. But she must also train her children that even when we're cranky, we behave with respect. Woe to the husband who is married to a wife who cannot contain herself when she is tired and hungry!”

#### BEING STRONG FOR OUR CHILDREN

With all this talk about asserting authority, one wonders if some parents could abuse this approach, becoming unthinking tyrants or using it to release pent-up anger.

“If there's unhealthy psychology,” says Rebbetzin Malka Kaganoff, “anything can happen — with any approach. But most often, the parents who most need to internalize these principles are the softer, sweeter

types. Ironically, the same traits that make for a nice, *eidele* woman often make for an overrun parent and pushover.

“It says ‘*Oz v'badar levushah*.’ A woman has to have a certain amount of backbone, she has to be able to set rules, if she wants to raise children who are *mentschen*.”

Along similar lines, Rav Mattisyahu Salomon *shlita*, in his parenting sefer *With Hearts Full of Love*, underscores the Torah requirement for teaching our children to fulfill *kibud av v'eim*.

“If we don't demand respect from our children, they will not listen to what we have to tell them.... They will not respect authority, and we will not be able to fulfill our critical role as custodians of the *mesorah*.”

However, cautions Rebbetzin Kaganoff, when we demand this respect, we must convey that it is not for personal gratification or because we're such great people, but rather because we happen to be in the position of “Mommy” or “Tatty.”

“Project the message: ‘Hashem said that you must honor your parents, and we are helping you fulfill that mitzvah.’”

When all is said and done, parenting authority Mrs. Eydl Reznik of Tzfas maintains, mothers and fathers must realize that raising Hashem's children is serious business.

“I ask people: You are *shomer Shabbos*, but do you know how to parent?”

“Knowing how to parent well is not a nice plus — it is a *sine qua non* for being a Torah Jew.” ■