

On August 7<sup>th</sup>, there was an inspiring and informative talk about chinuch for the community sponsored by Lebeinu and hosted at Bnos Yisroel. The shiur was given by Rabbi Gershon Schaffel, Harav Hamadrach for Lebeinu and was titled, "Chinuch Today: A new approach for a new generation." Hundreds of men and women attended the shiur and included some of Baltimore's leading rabbonim, mechanchim, mechanchos, as well as parents at different stages of their parenting journey.

The night began with Mendel Rosen welcoming the crowd and then introducing Rabbi Shraga Neuberger Shlit"a. Rabbi Neuberger focused his remarks on the use of the term "new" when discussing chinuch. Chinuch is deeply rooted in mesorah so how could a new approach be suggested? He answered with a fascinating account of the Alter of Slabodka, Harav Nosson Tzvi Finkel zt"l. Around 1900, the practice in Slabodka was for the older bachurim to sit on the "mizrach vant" to give them more respect and prestige. Twenty years later, when Harav Ruderman was a talmid that was no longer the practice. When queried about the change, Harav Ruderman explained that the Alter was constantly reviewing his approach to chinuch. Although a particular practice was useful and beneficial for one group of students, it does not necessarily remain useful or helpful for another group of students. Thus, it is essential for rabbonim and mechanchim to constantly assess whether their methods are effective or whether they must be adjusted for the next generation of students.

Reb Mendel then introduced Rabbi Schaffel who echoed Rabbi Neuberger's explanation of the need to constantly review chinuch methods. He quoted the Slonimer Rebbe zt"l, author of the Nesivos Shalom, who wrote "Chanoch l'dor al pi darko" – the *generation* must be educated according to their circumstance.

The bulk of Rabbi Schaffel's talk focused on the pasuk in Mishlei that presents the essential principles of chinuch. In any curriculum, one must first identify the goal. Once the goal is identified, we can map out the steps necessary to achieve that goal. So what is the goal of chinuch? The pasuk in Mishlei (22:6) teaches, "gam ki yazkin lo yasur mimenah" – even when one is older they will not abandon their path. This phrase teaches that the goal of chinuch is not what we can make the child do in this moment. The goal of chinuch is focused on when they are older and no longer under our control. Will they remain loyal to Torah and mitzvos when they are independent and making decisions for themselves?

Rabbi Schaffel noted that often we become very nearsighted when it comes to chinuch. We emphasize their compliance and fulfillment of the mitzvah now, sometimes at that expense of the farsighted goal that they should remain committed and want to do the mitzvah even when they are older. When we use force and pressure, we will prevail and force them into compliance, but the question we must ask is whether in the long term, this approach will lead to more compliance or more resistance.

Once we have a clear goal in mind, continued Rabbi Schaffel, we must decide on an appropriate and effective chinuch approach. What is the best and most effective approach for a successful chinuch? This question is also answered by the pasuk. It states: Chanoch l'naar *al pi darko*. The pasuk teaches that most important element of successful chinuch is *al pi darko*, to make sure that we address this particular child.

In families and classrooms there is the risk that the parents or mechanchim will adopt a single chinuch approach and apply it to every child or student. If it worked in the past or is working for other children, it should also be effective for this child. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Every child must be seen as different and unique. Parents and mechanchim must be able to see the unique strengths and character of each child and help children develop them. Especially when they are young and do not see their unique qualities, it is our job and responsibility to reflect back to them what makes them special and unique.

Sometimes we observe a child behaving improperly and in the process of correcting the misbehavior we attempt to change their character. This is a grave error. The Vilna Gaon wrote, in his commentary to Mishlei, that it is impossible for a person to break his character. Every person is born with character traits that cannot be changed. The goal is to show a child how to harness their character towards behavior that is positive, but it is impossible to successfully change one's character.

As an example, the Vilna Gaon quotes the gemara in (Shabbos 156a) that one who was born under the constellation of Maadim will extract blood. However, that trait can be harnessed towards different outcomes. If he is a tzadik, he will be a mohel, if he is average, he will become a shochet and if he is a rasha, he will be a murderer. Such a person can't change his character, his bechirah revolves around how he will use his character.

When we see behavior that requires correction, the goal is not to break the child and amputate his character. The goal is to identify the character that fuels the behavior and find a way to utilize it in a more productive positive manner.

The term chanoch that opens the pasuk is also instructive. We often think of chinuch as the process of installing information into our child's brain. Young children do not know the aleph bais so we teach them to recognize the letters and nekudos. However, this is not the meaning or process of chinuch. Quoting the Piacezna Rebbe Hy"d, the author of the Chovas Hatalmidim, Rabbi Schaffel explained that the essence of chinuch is extraction. It is axiomatic that each child has a unique purpose, goal and destiny. Hashem does not create duplicates. As parents and mechanchim, we must help each child identify and learn how to use that uniqueness to contribute towards what he was designed to do. The information that we teach are tools to help children realize and

achieve their destiny but the ultimate goal of chinuch is to extract and learn to utilize their potential.

Another important principle to be mindful of is the limit to our responsibilities as far as the chinuch of our children. Our job is not to assure a particular outcome. Rav Shlomo Wolbe, in his work *Planting and Building in Chinuch*, emphasizes our children's need for organic growth. If one wants to grow vegetables, it is not sufficient to obtain the seed. To maximize the growth, one must make sure that it is placed in the correct type of dirt, and receives the optimal sunlight and water. Once the gardener has assured the optimal conditions, there is nothing more he can do to make sure that the vegetable grows. Sometimes it will grow as desired, but other times it will not. If the vegetable does not grow as anticipated, it is not because the gardener did something wrong. He made sure that all the necessary conditions were present. But sometimes, it simply doesn't grow as planned or desired.

Similarly, our job as parents and mechanchim is to create conditions conducive to growth, but with the awareness that the final product and our dream for our child, may not be realized. We may make all the correct decisions, but Hashem has other plans that impact the outcome of our efforts.

The last word explained by Harav Schaffel was na'ar. Often when we think about the pasuk, we assume that it refers to a young child. However, if that were the case, Shlomo Hamelech would use the term katan. What is the significance of choosing the word na'ar?

The answer to this is found in Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch's commentary on the Torah. He writes:

So, too, Hashem has implanted in every human being the aspiration for independence, so that eventually he would become persistent and steadfast in doing good.

This independence expresses itself first as ne'urim: The young person attempts to throw off all restraints, to shake off and cast off the burden. But once he realizes that the ultimate objective of the law is freedom, not restriction, he is filled with youthful enthusiasm, and he resolves to devote himself to every noble idea.

By using the word na'ar, Shlomo Hamelech reminds us that our approach to chinuch must be geared and directed to our children for their adolescence and teenage years when they individuate and define who they are. Since the process of shaking things up and rattling the system is a stage that they will go through, we must arm them and give

them positive experiences to ensure that as many of our values, morals, and practices stick with them as they become independent adults who decide how they wish to live their lives.

Once we know the long-term goal of chinuch (gam ki yazkin etc.) , our methodology (al pi darko) , what chinuch involves (chanoch) and who we are addressing (na'ar), there are two last points that Harav Schaffel emphasized. The first point is that "Kids do well if they can." By itself, this does not seem novel, but it must be understood in contrast to a similar phrase which is, "Kids do well if they want to." If we approach our children and students with the perspective that "Kids do well if they want to," when we see a child misbehaving or not performing academically, it must be due to the lack of desire to do better. When we adopt such a perspective, we respond by stimulating their desire to behave or achieve better academically. We offer incentives or threaten punishments to stimulate their desire.

In contrast, the phrase, "Kids do well if they can" assumes that children WANT to behave and succeed academically. If they are not doing so, it is not due to a lack of desire - ratzon, it is the result of a lagging skill. The current expectation is beyond what they can currently perform. Rather than looking for ways to stimulate their desire, we problem-solve, collaboratively, to identify and teach the necessary academic or emotional regulation skills so that they can meet our expectations.

The phrase, "Kids do well if they can," is rooted in our daily declaration "neshamah she'nasata bi tehorah hee." Every person, regardless of who they are and what they do, possesses a Divine neshamah that drives them to achieve deveikus and achieve their potential. Our job is to always keep that in mind, especially when our children are struggling behaviorally or academically.

Rabbi Schaffel likened it to how we respond when our baby cries. We see their behavior and we immediately respond with compassion. Our babies are angelic, so if they are crying, something must be bothering them. Our initial assumption is that our child is good, and we must figure out what is causing their distress to relieve it. We must adopt the same perspective for our older children. Each one possesses a neshamah tehorah and if, for some reason, it is not fully expressing itself there must be an impediment in the way. When we identify that impediment and remove it by teaching the lagging skill, our angel reappears, and they can then meet our expectations.

The second point that Rabbi Schaffel emphasized was the importance of conveying unconditional love to our children. Unconditional love does not mean that we cannot establish boundaries and that children should have free reign to do whatever they want. That approach is destructive for a developing child. Unconditional love means that there is nothing a child must do to earn our love and conversely, there is nothing

they can do that would diminish our love for them. Our love is not earned by good performance and is not lost when they do not behave as we want. Our children and students must know that we love them simply because they are our child or our student. Period, end of discussion.

Unconditional love is one of the key ingredients necessary for proper development. As the saying goes, “When you criticize your children, they don’t stop loving you, they stop loving themselves.” Our words, tone of voice, facial expressions and body language are ways by which we communicate and shape their perception of themselves. Our voice becomes the voice they hear inside of their heads. If our communication with them has a negative tone or is consistently critical, they will internalize that message and see themselves as bad and incapable. Conveying unconditional love, even when their behavior requires correction, nourishes their perception of themselves and allows them to grow and mature.

Additionally, their relationship with Hashem is, by and large, framed by their relationship with us. When children feel that they must earn our love and are not secure that they are loved unconditionally, they will project that feeling onto their relationship with Hashem. They will assume that Hashem’s love is conditional and must be earned, and if they sin, Hashem will not love them. Many children are certain that Hashem does not love them because they feel unlovable. Conveying unconditional love to our children, gives them the necessary framework to understand that Hashem also loves them unconditionally. This understanding of their relationship with Hashem is the foundation upon which their relationship with Yiddishkeit will rest. It is our sacred duty to provide our children with the awareness that Hashem loves them unconditionally.

Rabbi Schaffel concluded his remarks by addressing children who are in crisis. Children in crisis are not simply struggling with their religious observance, they struggle with life. They may not be in school, may not be capable of holding down a job, may struggle in their relationships, or may struggle with addictions. When kids reach this level of dysfunction, we must adjust our chinuch approach to match their needs. Their religious struggles and lack of observance, explained Rabbi Schaffel, are symptoms of their underlying condition which is their existential pain. There could be many sources for their existential pain, physical abuse, emotional abuse, emotional neglect, bullying, learning disabilities, or sexual abuse. At this stage, we focus on building our relationship with them. Investing in our relationship with them and doubling and tripling the dose of unconditional love stabilizes them so that they can heal from their pain.

Rabbi Schaffel explained that this is where Lebeinu steps in. Lebeinu provides hadrachah and halachic guidance to help stabilize the situation to create the conditions

for the child in crisis to heal. Our approach is very personalized to match each child's needs but also considers what the parents can do and does not overlook the siblings of the struggling child since their needs are also important. Lebeinu started to serve as a resource for those families that need additional guidance when a child is in crisis. There are support groups that meet regularly and opportunities to meet with Rabbi Schaffel one-on-one for specific guidance that best suits your family. Another essential focus of Lebeinu is to serve as a resource for all parents to fulfill the long-term goal of chinuch which is to inspire them to remain loyal to Torah and mitzvos when they are older.