



# Seeking Moderation

## When the Label Sticks

We learn from the Torah that effective criticism emphasizes the misdeeds without attaching labels and passing judgment on the person. When Ya'akov Avinu criticized the actions of Shimon and Levi, for example, he was careful to direct his *tochacha* only to their anger.<sup>1</sup> He did not insult them. He directed his criticism toward their actions.

Labeling children can often result in the children internalizing the message, but with quite disastrous consequences.

Several summers ago a young man came to see me. He was very well dressed and driving an expensive car. He sat down and I asked him a casual question, “How are things going at home?” His answer was anything but casual. “You know, Rabbi, I don’t get along with my parents. It’s my father. He’s so different than I am. He is driven, and I am chilled out. He’s up at five in the morning; he works all day and learns Torah at night. Besides that, he’s involved in a hundred *tzedakah* projects.”

“And, you are...???” I asked.

“Me? I’m a lazy, good-for-nothing bum.”

That was his self-image. Obviously, he had not arrived at it himself—it was a label that someone, perhaps his father, had inadvertently given to him. And, sadly, it stuck. What had happened?

## The Key: Moderation

It is interesting to note that character tendencies, especially in their extreme manifestations, often skip a generation – and for good reason. Please allow me to illustrate:

Take the example of a woman who is meticulously neat at home.

She spends inordinate amounts of time tidying and making her home immaculate. Her daughter grows up and says to herself, “Mom has no life. All she does is walk around making beds all day. When I get older and have my own home, I’m not going to do that. I’m going to spend time with my kids. I’m going to have a cup of coffee in the morning. I’ll relax, and if the house isn’t beautiful, we’ll get it cleaned up in time for Shabbat.” So she grows up and has a messy house.

Now, her daughter, growing up in a messy house and going to visit friends who have beautiful, clean homes, says, “I’m not doing this in my home. I’m going to have a clean house.”

## An Inadvertent Message

The young man whose father was so driven was a perfect example of this pattern. This young man’s father grew up poor, and he made up his mind that he was going to work hard until he achieved his financial goals. His son, on the other hand, grew up in relative wealth. Why did he need to wake up early in the morning? His father, however, was understandably upset and frustrated by his son’s lack of focus. The words he spoke to his son were an outpouring of that frustration, “Wake up already, you lazy, good-for-nothing bum.”

The young man heard it for years while his father was trying to wake him in the morning. Unfortunately, he internalized it to such an extent that he used it when introducing himself to me. His father meant well. He was trying to get a message across; he was trying to teach his son *zerizut*, “get up and do something with your life.” This is a laudable goal, but the message that got delivered was anything but a positive one.

<sup>1</sup> Bereishit 49:7, see Rashi and other commentaries.

**Rabbi Yakov Horowitz**, Founding Dean of Yeshiva Darchei Noam of Monsey, is an educator, author and child safety advocate