



Helping Your Challenging Teen

A woman called to discuss her concerns regarding her 17-year-old son. She described his downward slide throughout his high school years, the “bad friends,” the constant bickering with his parents over dozens of issues large or small, the tension and friction with his siblings, being asked to leave the four *yeshivas* that he had attended during those three years...

Now he had hit rock bottom.

He sleeps until noon, “hangs around the house” until suppertime, then, with a curt farewell, leaves the house. He returns in the early hours of the morning, goes to sleep, and begins the day in the same fashion as the previous ones. Any attempt by his parents to determine where or with whom he is spending his time is met with a disrespectful or downright rude retort.

“Rabbi Horowitz,” she cried, “What should I do?!”

I began by asking the woman how many times she had asked her son, that day, any of the following questions:

“Why aren’t you going to *yeshiva*?”

“Why are you wasting your time?”

“When are you finally going to do something with your life?”

She hesitantly answered “About 10 or 15 times.”

15 x 6 (days) equals 90 comments per week. 90 x 6 weeks totals 540 hurtful attacks on her son’s self-confidence. I explained to the woman that although her son’s disrespectful behavior is inexcusable, she ought to keep in mind that he is in as much agony as she is, perhaps more so. He feels that no *yeshiva* actually wants him, and that he has nowhere

to go. Each time she reminded him of this painful fact, she was inadvertently causing him needless anguish, and adding to the chasm that exists between them. His antisocial behavior just might be his clumsy response to his perception (real or imagined) that our society has rejected him.

Some Pointers for Parents

- *Ein chavush matir atzmo mibeit asurim* (a prisoner cannot extract himself from his bondage without the assistance of others). Consider finding a mentor for your child – an educator or layperson – to whom your child can confide. Few teenagers, even in the best of situations, can do this with their parents.
- Establish an ongoing dialogue with him. That includes, but should not be limited to, serious discussions about present *yeshiva* and/or work possibilities, aspirations for the future, etc.
- Never discuss serious issues during an argument.
- Never, ever, engage in vicious, personal attacks on your son’s friends when their names come up during an argument. Firstly, despite your instructions to the contrary, every word you utter will unquestionably be repeated to that friend. You will have earned yourself a sworn enemy at a time when you need every ally you can get. Additionally, bear in mind that at this stage in your son’s life, he is more closely aligned with his friends than he is with you. By attacking his friends, you are positioning them – and him – on the opposing side of a very formidable fence.

- Do not beat up on yourselves as parents (where did we go wrong?). This will accomplish nothing productive. The brutal reality is that these situations arise in every type of home and at every income level. More importantly, doing this in front of your son will only add to his feeling of inadequacy.
- After some time has passed, and you have established a working relationship, collaboratively work with him on a set of house rules for him regarding his leaving and returning home at night. You might be pleasantly surprised by his response.
- Explain to him that you are willing to make some accommodations to meet the needs of his current lifestyle. However, ask him to understand that you have other children, parents, etc., and that he should be considerate of that reality as well. If you are unhappy with the music he listens to, for example, ask him to close the door to his room, and insist that he wear headphones while the music is playing.
- Finally, try to play the long game. The vast majority of these teens outgrow this temporary stage in their lives. Your son may not become everything you had originally hoped for him, but he will, with the help of G-d, grow to be a wonderful adult – a source of *nachat* to himself, to you and to *Klal Yisrael*.

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