



## A PLEA TO FATHERS

**I**t was one phone call too many. I had wanted to write about this in the past, but for one reason or another, it didn't happen. But there's always the straw that breaks the camel's back, so now the camel is going to get things out in the open. I hope this serves the beneficial purpose I intend it to.

"Hi. You don't know me, but I'd like to talk to you about our son," said the voice on the other end of the line.

Not a good start. When people call to "talk about their son," it's never because the son is overly good and they don't know how to handle it. The mother didn't offer to tell me her name and I didn't ask.

"Our son is eleven years old. He's not very motivated in *cheder* and is uncooperative at home. And I don't like the kids he's hanging around with. He goes outside as soon as he comes home and I don't know where he goes or what he's doing, but I don't think it's so good."

Unfortunately, I already knew what she was going to say before she said it — and unfortunately, I also knew what would come next.

"Does he have access to the Internet?" I asked her.

"Uh ... sometimes. I mean, we don't let him use it at home, but I'm pretty sure he uses it at one of his friends' homes."

"Is the financial situation at home tight?"

"Very tight," she answered. "How did you know?"

"Let me ask you one more question," I said. "Is his relationship with his father somewhat strained?"

"Well, to tell you the truth, it's not very good. My husband is very impatient with him and yells at him a lot. At this point, the less time they spend together, the better. But how did you know?"

"It was never a wonderful relationship, was it?" I knew the answer

to this one too.

"Umm, it was never really great, but now it's worse than ever."

We spoke for a little while about various ideas, but frankly, I don't think it was much help to her. An entire overhaul of this father's life and attitudes would have been necessary, but that would have required his involvement plus a willingness to change, to get outside help, and a slew of other remedies. It could happen and has happened, but it's not an overnight process.

The question she had repeated several times during the conversation — "How do you know?" — rang in my ears. How do I know? I'll tell you how I know.

Much has been written in an attempt to identify the cause or causes of a boy losing interest, becoming unmotivated, and going off the *derekh*. While there is obviously no one factor — and I repeat, *there is no one factor* — there is one

phenomenon that recurs time and again, too often to be considered a mere coincidence. In my experience in *chinuch*, it is far more prevalent than any other factor — and that factor is that in most cases, there is a problem in the boy's relationship with his father.

It could be that the father does not show his affection enough, or it could be that he does not spend enough time with his son. It could be that the boy sees his father as being unreasonable in his religious demands, and it could be that the father is verbally or physically abusive. It could be that the boy feels he's "deprived" because his father won't spend money on him, and it could be that he's upset because his father doesn't respect his opinion.

It could be any of dozens of reasons, but the particular reason doesn't really matter. The bottom line is that the relationship between the boy and his father is one that any rational outside observer would label "lacking" or "unhealthy." In such cases the boy almost inevitably interprets his father's actions as an indication that "my father doesn't love me," and from this stems most of the trouble.

You may disagree with me. You may feel I'm way off. However, due to the urgency and importance of this subject, I am placing my view out there regardless of any criticism it may engender.

I would like to address myself directly to you, dear father. You must show your son that you love him and care about him. Constantly. It's as simple as that. It is not a guarantee that everything will work out perfectly, but it is a must. Your son craves your affection and is hungry for it. A harsh or angry tone coming from you breaks him. Coldness and aloofness alienate him. Warmth, affection, attention and love build him. So have a heart and give your son what he needs.

There are many different ways to show it. An occasional arm around the shoulder or a friendly tap is one. And yes, even a kiss. There are, of course, boys who do not appreciate physical demonstrations of affection, particularly

if they're not conditioned to it because it's never been there in the past, but there are plenty of other ways to make your son aware that you care about him and love him. You could take him out for a meal or you could go for a drive. You could play a little ball with him if that's what he's

See? I know you.

So I'd like to apologize for imposing upon you, but remember, it's not really me. *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* gave you your children, and He also gave you the responsibility for them. More importantly, it doesn't have to take that

## The boy almost inevitably interprets his father's actions as an indication that "my father doesn't love me," and from this stems most of the trouble.

into, or you could play chess with him. A gift is certainly good, and of course there's nothing quite like coming over to him and stuffing a twenty-dollar bill into his pocket out of the clear blue.

Even — and perhaps especially — a spontaneous shmooze once in a while, like you'd have with your friend after shul, is a good idea. I purposely did not mention learning with him or anything else involving *ruchniyus*, because in many cases the learning and *Yiddishkeit* issues are mishandled, often leading to tension and estrangement. Of course, if you are able to learn with your son in a fun and loving way, count your blessings and do it as often as possible.

I anticipate a response from some fathers, which I'd like to head off at the pass. I'd like to tell you, dear father, that I know you. You're busy 24/7 and you barely have a minute to breathe. Your financial situation is tough, to say the least, and you often feel the walls of life closing in around you. You're always tired, and you almost never have time to eat a decent meal. You'd like to learn more and exercise more, but have time for neither. At the end of the day you are absolutely pooped.

And now you're being told by some rabbi whose column your wife reads that you have to put more time and energy, neither of which you have, into your son.

much energy. While you're plopped on the couch, you could grab your son and give him a friendly "knip" as he walks past. You could ask him if he wants some Pepsi when you pour one for yourself. If you go for a walk, how difficult is it to have him walking alongside you?

Nope. There are no excuses. You are resourceful enough to find ways to communicate your love and affection to your son. If you realize the importance of the matter, you'll find a way to do it. Please, please set aside male pride and ego and ask for help if your relationship with your son is not what it should be.

I sincerely hope this column serves the beneficial purpose I intend it to. If one father puts his arm around his son as a result of reading this, it will have been worthwhile — even if, to take a famous line from Harav Yisrael Salanter, "that father is me." Hey, you know what? *Im yirtzeh Hashem*, it will be.

Right now. 

---

*Rabbi Dovid Kaplan is a rabbi in Yeshivas Ohr Somayach and mashgiach ruchani in Yeshivas Beis Yisroel in Yerushalayim. He is a well-known lecturer at yeshivos, seminaries, and other venues both in Israel and overseas, and he is the author of The Ohr Somayach Gemara Companion, The Kiruv Files, Polishing Diamonds I & II (Hamodia Publishing), and Impact I, II, and III.*