

## Teaching Good Middos Part 2

How can teachers teach good middos?

There are two parts to imparting good middos to children: habit and teaching about middos from the Torah.

### Habit in Learning Good Middos

The Vilna Gaon writes:

*One has to reprove the children often with gentle words, with words of mussar that settle in the heart, and mainly with chinuch and habituation. And (proper) speech and middos require much habituation, and habit is dominance over all things.<sup>1</sup>*

And in a footnote there:<sup>2</sup>

*And this is the reason why – due to our many sins – many are not careful about uttering false oaths, lies, falsehoods, mockery, curses, and lashon hora, and this is because they were used to this from their youth. And the people who are used from their youth to not let an oath or a curse pass their lips will not stumble in this, even when they have a great need for it.<sup>3</sup>*

There is a famous saying: “הרגל נעשה טבע” – habit becomes nature. When we educate and habituate our children from a young age in correct behaviors, they continue those behaviors throughout their lives. I once heard someone tell over how when he was in elementary school, they had a middos program which incentivized the students to open the door for their parents. He said that for the rest of his life, he was always opening the door for his parents.

Another example: if for eight years in elementary school, students will know that when a teacher or other adult comes into the classroom they must stand up, they will always continue having respect for those older and wiser than themselves. And the same is true for any aspect of derech eretz and middos.

Of course, the “Simcha Principle” holds true here as well. As the Vilna Gaon says, “with gentle words”. Habituating children to good middos through punishment will only backfire in the long term. (See “The Simcha Principle” article.)

However, as children grow older, they may start questioning their habits, and so we must also explain the importance of middos to them and teach them about middos from the Torah.

### Teaching about Middos

Rabbi Chaim Friedlander writes:

*The paths to education for good middos are divided into several tracks. One is by drawing lessons from Torah study and the words of Chazal to show their middos and derech eretz.<sup>4</sup>*

Rabbi Aharon Rosenfeld zt”l, the Pinsk-Karlin Rebbe says:

*One must endeavor in everything he learns with the students to instill Yiras Shomayim into their hearts, whether in Gemara or Chumash with Rashi. With every point it is possible to instill Yiras Shomayim and fear of sin. This is so in every statement of the Gemara, and obviously in the commentary of Rashi on the Torah.<sup>5</sup>*

The same is true for teaching middos. Our regular curriculum is full of opportunities to point out lessons in middos. The teacher should take advantage of each and every one of them. Doing so will help the students understand that this is an important topic to the teacher and will help them internalize the lessons.

Rabbi Friedlander continues:

*Another way, when applicable, is to react in every instance of lack of derech eretz and to explain why it isn’t good. Conversely, to praise and highlight good and refined behavior (a child was mevater during a quarrel, lent an object, didn’t complain, etc.), as kinas sofrim will also increase the chochma of derech eretz.<sup>6</sup>*

As we discuss in The Master Mechanech as well as in the article on chutzpah, children often behave with chutzpah because they haven’t been taught otherwise. When a student or class behaves with a lack of respect or good middos, rather than getting angry, the teacher should use the incident as a “teachable moment”. They should explain calmly why the behavior was wrong, and what the student could have done differently. Of course, this needs to be done in such a way that it won’t cause public embarrassment to any individual student.

### Combining Habit and Learning

For the past several years, we have been blessed with many professional middos curricula and programs which are available to teachers and schools. The impact they have made, however, seems to be questionable. One of the main reasons for this is the same as what we wrote in The Master Mechanech regarding Tefilla curricula:

*"A principal once shared his frustration with me that he had acquired a beautiful new tefillah curriculum for his school, full of explanations, stories and meshalim, but that in some of the classes, the students still didn't enjoy davening. When he looked into the reason, he found that those teachers simply read the pages of the curriculum (or had one of the students read it), and as soon as the reading was over, biur hatefillah was over, and they went to the 'main' part of the lesson. The next day, they continued with the next pages of the tefillah curriculum, never to revisit the previous ones.*

*No matter how great a tefillah curriculum is, it won't do much if it's a one-and-done deal, and if it's not given over with an emphasis of its importance!"*

The same is true for middos programs. We, as teachers, have to teach those curricula with passion and feeling. The Alshich writes:

*...if the words which come from the mouth of the Torah teacher or the rebuker will be from the depth of his heart, then from the heart they will journey to the hearts of the listeners like sharpened arrows, and there they will rest, inspiring adherence and action with all efforts of strength. However if the speaker utters his words not from the depth of his heart, rather only speaking from mouth to mouth, then even when they reach the ears of the listeners, they will stand outside and bear no fruit.<sup>7</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> "וצריך להוכיח את הבנים הרבה בדברים רבים, בדברי מוסר המתישבים על הלב, והעיקר בחנוך והרגל. והדבור והמדות צריך הרגל רב וההרגל על כל דבר שלטון" - אבן שלמה פרק ו' אות ה'

<sup>2</sup> By the compiler of the sefer, Rav Shmuel Meltzan, who was a darshan in Slutsk.

<sup>3</sup> "וזאת היא הסיבה אשר בעו"ה רבים לא נזהרו מלהוציא מפהם שבועות שוא ושקר ודברי כזב וליצנות וקללות ולה"ר, וזהו באשר הורגלו כן מנעוריהם, והאנשים אשר הורגלו מנעוריהם שלא להוציא מפהם שבועה וקללה אפי' כאשר יהיה להם צורך גדול בדבר לא יכשלו בזה"

<sup>4</sup> "דרכי החינוך למידות טובות נפרדות למסלולים אחדים. האחד ע"י הפקת לקחים מלימוד התורה ודברי רז"ל להראות את מידותיהם ודרך ארץ שלהם" - מסילות חיים בחינוך עמ' 110

<sup>5</sup> "יש להשתדל בכל מה שלומדים עם התלמידים להחדיר אז יראת שמים ללבבותם, אם בגמרא ואם בחומש רש"י, בכל נקודה ונקודה יש ואפשר

If our words are delivered flatly and treated as just another part of the curriculum to get through, they won't have any effect. On the other hand, students can tell when something is important to their teacher. And when it's important to their teacher, it has an enormous impact on them as well.

We must then follow up on the implementation of the middos that are being taught and incentivize them. This will make sure that these middos became an ingrained habit to our students, and that they understand how important they are.

## The Personal Example

Finally, Rabbi Friedlander writes:

*And above all, the personal example of the teacher, in his integrity, fairness, truthfulness and loyalty, in orderliness, cleanliness and in his good middos.<sup>8</sup>*

As we've discussed previously, every word we say and every action we do leaves an impression on our students. Our ongoing, everyday behavior and interaction with our students and each other will be one of the main factors of good middos in our students.

May we be zoche to teach our students good middos effectively and see them grow up to be Baalei Middos Tovos!

להחדיר יראת שמים ויראת חטא. כן הוא הדבר בכל מאמר מהגמרא ופשיטא בפירוש רש"י עה"ת" - ניב המורה 134

<sup>6</sup> "דרך נוספת לעת מצוא, להגיב בכל מקרה של חוסר דרך ארץ ולהסביר מדוע אין זה טוב. ולהיפך, התנהגות טובה ועדינה (ילד ויתר בעת ריב, השאיל חפץ, לא התלונן וכד') לשבח ולהעלות על נס, שקנאת סופרים תרבה גם חכמת דרך ארץ."

<sup>7</sup> "כי כל דבר ודבר כפי מוצאו אשר ממנו יצא כן יהיה הלוכו ומנוחתו אשר שם ינוח, והוא כי אם יהיו הדברים היוצאים מפי המלמד תורה או מוכיח במישור מקרב לבו, כן מהלב נסעו ועד לב שומעיהם ילכו כחצי גבור שונים ושם יניחו לשמור ולעשות בכל מאמצי כח, אך אם אשר יוצאים לא יהיה מקרב לבו כי אם פה אל פה ידבר, גם בלכתם לאזני שומעיהם בחוץ יעמודו ופרי בל יעשון" -

<sup>8</sup> "ועל כולם, הדוגמא האישית של המחנך, בישרות שלו, בהגינות, באמת ובנאמנות שלו, בסדר, בניקיון ובמידותיו הטובות."