



“Abba, I Have Something To Tell You...”



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“How was your day, Avi?” you ask, as your 14 year-old sits down for dinner. It’s pleasantly quiet in the house this evening, with time to spend with your son, as your other children are still at their extra-curricular activities. “It was okay,” says Avi with a pensive look on his face. It’s the first time that you are spending quality time together in a while, and you were hoping for more interaction than a typical one-word teenage response. Stirring the conversation, you ask whether something is on his mind. Avi freezes and stutters a bit while he struggles to get the words out: “Actually, Abba...can I tell you something? Just promise me you won’t overreact...” You weren’t expecting this and don’t know exactly how to respond. “Sure, what’s going on?” “Well... some boys in school are giving me a hard time. It’s getting pretty bad, and today they said that if I show up tomorrow, they’ll beat

me up.” You pause in dismay.

In a parent-child relationship, it is common to experience a disclosure. A first disclosure, in this sense, refers to an individual’s sharing a piece of information for the first time. Examples of first disclosures include revealing a social challenge, engaging in harmful behaviors, or having experienced a trauma. Responding appropriately and sensitively to disclosures can steer a child’s willingness to seek and receive help or share in the future. It is a crucial, defining moment for how a parent will be able to effectively provide support.

Vayikra Rabba (25:3) teaches that upon entering a new land, planting should be a first priority. The theme of planting—sowing seeds for future benefit—easily applies to our children. It is critical to “plant seeds” early on, in order to yield fruits of the relationship later on.

An important aspect of developing meaningful relationships with our children is for them to feel comfortable approaching us with information. A united goal between parents should be to create a home that our children want to be in. Simple body language, for example, smiling when our children enter the room, creates the impression that we are open to building this relationship with them. Equally important, is being open to listening to both positive and negative events that happen in our children’s lives, even behaviors of

which we may disapprove. It is an ongoing process to continuously reinforce the idea that we represent a safe space where our children feel comfortable to share. Avi's disclosure was not confined to this single conversation with his father. It was based on a relationship that his father cultivated beforehand that helped Avi feel comfortable enough to share such a sensitive experience with him.

Shlomo HaMelech teaches (Kohelet 9:17) that soft words are better received. Similarly, the Talmud (Shabbat 34a) instructs that one should address household members in a calm fashion. There are some key guidelines to keep in mind when confronted with a disclosure from one's child. The first is to BREATHE! Don't respond with surprise, which can be interpreted as disbelief. Stay focused and calm, just as you would if a child were to get injured at the park. Provide a sense of calm, rather than increasing any panic that the child might already be feeling. Reassuring your child by saying "I'm so glad you told me" will convey the message that s/he made the right decision by telling you. It also shows that you believe them and are there to support them. It's important to refrain from prying for details, especially if the child isn't willing or forthcoming. The disclosure can be intimidating enough for the child; s/he will not benefit from additional confusion by trying to come up with satisfying answers. Listen attentively, leaning in while your child is talking, and relay an empathetic but serious facial expression. Showing your child that you will take action on his/her behalf can be a comforting step forward. This may include

involving appropriate individuals, professionals, or organizations who can be helpful.

You take a deep breath and move your chair closer. "Avi, thank you so much for talking to me about this. It sounds really challenging, and Ima and I are here for you. Let's take a walk and talk about what we can do to help." Avi smiles as he meets your eye contact, a look of relief coming over his face, and says "I'll go get my jacket."

Children's disclosures are an inevitable part of parenthood. There will be minor issues not requiring extensive processing or guidance, and there will be times that, as parents, we'll feel overwhelmed by the disclosure of larger issues. With proper preparedness and care, every parent has the ability to be the supportive, safe address for their children to turn to in times of need. ■

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