

## Incentives and Rewards

### Introduction

In a previous article ("The Simcha Principle", as well as in The Master Mechanech book) we saw in many sources that the main act of chinuch is that which brings ruchnius-connected joy to a student. We must now consider what has in the past years become a great debate among educators: incentives and rewards. Are they helpful or harmful? There are many adherents to both sides of the argument. As in any other area of our lives, in order to get the correct perspective we must turn to the Torah and Chazal.

### The Torah view on Incentives and Rewards

The Gemara in Taanis (24a) tells the story of the *melamed* whose deeds were so great that his prayers brought rain during a drought. Among those deeds was:

ואית לי פירא דכוורי וכל מאן דפשע משחדינא ליה מינייהו ומסדינן ליה ומפייסין ליה עד דאתי וקרי

*And I have a fishpond, and any child who neglects his studies, I bribe him with the fish and prepare it for him and appease him until he comes and reads.*

The Rambam in his introduction to the tenth chapter of Maseches Sanhedrin goes into detail about the progression of incentives one gives a student so that he should learn. The very young student, he says, should be offered treats. When he gets older and the treats are no longer enough of an incentive, one offers him nice shoes or clothes. When he is older still and that no longer suffices, the teacher offers him money. Finally there can come a point where the student is not even interested in the money, and what incentivizes him is the honor he may receive if he becomes a Rosh Yeshiva or Dayan.

The Rambam shows us not only that incentives are appropriate and effective, but that they also apply beyond just young children.<sup>1</sup> It is thus clear, that the Torah view of giving incentives and rewards is a positive one, and that it is a powerful tool in chinuch.

The question is, doesn't this contradict the Mishna in Pirkei Avos (פ"א מ"ג) which says:

אל תהיו כעבדים המשמשין את הרב על מנת לקבל פרס, אלא הוו כעבדים המשמשין את הרב שלא על מנת לקבל פרס...

*Do not be like servants who serve the master in order to receive a reward, rather be like servants who serve the master without the expectation of receiving a reward...*

The answer is simple: we all know that serving Hashem *lishmah* is vastly more praiseworthy than serving Him *shelo lishmah*. But serving Him *lishmah* is a high level which takes a lot of work to achieve even for most adults. Therefore the Gemara (Sanhedrin 105b) tells us that:

אמר רב יהודה אמר רב: לעולם יעסוק אדם בתורה ובמצוה, אפילו שלא לשמה, שמתוך שלא לשמה - בא לשמה

*A person should always engage in (studying) Torah and (performing) a mitzvah, even shelo lishmah, because through (engaging in them) shelo lishmah comes lishmah.*

If this is true for adults, how much more so is it true for children! While discussing incentives in chinuch, Rav Mattisyahu Solomon says:

*But what if a person is not yet on the level of learning Torah lishmah? ...The answer is that he should begin learning shelo lishmah. He should create an artificial simchah for his learning, a simchah that derives from an external source but nonetheless connects to the Torah he is learning. The result is that, in one way or another, he is learning the Torah with simchah, and when you learn Torah with simchah, it opens up for you, and you discover the genuine and profound simchah of the Torah itself. You arrive at the simchah of learning lishmah.*

*And it is the same with all the mitzvos in the Torah. As long as you do the mitzvah with simchah, even if it is an artificial, externally applied simchah, you will eventually connect with the inner essence of the mitzvah and from then on you will no longer need external motivations. The love of the mitzvah itself will be your greatest motivation.<sup>2</sup>*

Many teachers only enter the realm of chinuch after having spent years on their Avodas Hashem. This is especially the case for many *rebbeim*, who perhaps spent years in the halls of Torah, close to *Roshei Yeshivos* and *Talmidei Chachomim*, and who may have indeed merited reaching high levels of *lishmah*. It's important for us to realize, however, that children are not on that level and **need shelo lishmah** in order for them to learn to appreciate Torah and Yiddishkeit.<sup>3</sup> Experience shows that when we push children to learn and perform mitzvos *lishmah*

before they're ready, instead of inspiring them, we actually cause them to lose motivation and interest.

## Combining Shelo Lishmah with Lishmah

Rav Yechiel Yaakovson gives us a powerful insight in the effective use of incentives and rewards:<sup>4</sup>

*A rabbi in a boys' elementary school asked a student why he had stopped participating in the Tehillim group. The boy answered bluntly: "Because it's not worth it!"*

*"Why not?" asked the rebbi.*

*"Because in our group, they just give one 'junkie' rebbi card, and once a month they give us ices or a chocolate bar. In other places, they give an expensive rebbi card and also ices every week, even though we say more Tehillim than them!"*

*"And if you wouldn't get anything," asked the Rebbe, "it wouldn't be worth it to say Tehillim? The mitzvah itself isn't worth it?"*

*The boy fidgeted. "Of course it's a mitzvah, but..."*

*"But what?"*

*"But it's hard to say so much..."*

*After this conversation, the rebbi asked his class, "If you're trying to convince a friend to join the Tehillim group, what would you say?"*

*Of the twenty-one boys in the class, only one boy named the mitzvah as the first reason. Most of the others didn't mention it at all, and the few that did put it at the end of the list, after the "main" reasons. For most students, the main reasons were: "We get cards and treats;" and "Nothing interesting is going on then anyway."*

*This rebbi's wife was a teacher as well. She decided to conduct the same survey with her students. She got shockingly different results. When the girls were asked for the main reason why it's worth coming to Tehillim, the first reason that almost all of them gave was that "saying Tehillim makes us better." In addition, they spoke of the great mitzvah, and how it helps all kinds of people with all kinds of problems. Five girls out of eighteen made no mention of the prize at all.*

*The rebbi was shocked at the contrast, and resolved to get to the bottom of it. Investigating further, he concluded that the difference lay in the different approaches that the leaders of the two groups took. The leader of the boys' group would make a very big deal about the prize. He would go on about how worthwhile it made it for the boys to come and how otherwise there's nothing to do Shabbos afternoon. He would distribute the prize with a lot of pomp and ceremony.*

*The leader of the girls' group had an entirely different approach. Every week, she would talk to the girls about how great and special they were for saying Tehillim. She would stress how happy it makes Hashem. She would tell stories about girls whose families were helped because of the Tehillim they said. And as the girls prepared to leave, she would tell them, "I want you all to go home with your heads held high. You should each feel that you are a little better than when you came in. The Tehillim you just said does so much for you, for your family, for Klal Yisrael, and it makes Hashem so proud. Aren't we lucky!" Then she would hand the bag of treats to one of the older girls to give out, adding with a little laugh "Here's a little something to make sure the yetzer hora won't stop us from coming!"*

Incentives are effective. They help a child overcome a reluctance to do something, help them apply themselves even better to a task, and create positive associations. But the real power in an incentive is when it is used as a "backdoor", so to speak, to make the student receptive and allow them to internalize what we tell them about the true value of their actions. Sure, we should offer incentives. At the same time, however, we should constantly emphasize to our students how amazing and important what they are doing truly is. Slowly but surely, the child will become less dependent on the *shelo lishmah* and will eventually want to learn or do the mitzvah for its own sake.

<sup>1</sup> See also Igros Moshe (יורה דעה ג', סי' פד), where Rav Moshe Feinstein encouraged incentives for bochurim in yeshiva intensively learning Gemara.

<sup>2</sup> "With Hearts Full of Love" p. 123.

<sup>3</sup> Various mefarshim say that it is impossible for anyone to reach lishmah without first having shelo lishmah. See Ruach Chaim on Pirkei Avos 2/4 & 3/1, Nefesh Hachaim Ch. 3 after Shaar Gimmel, Anaf Yosef

in Ein Yaakov on Sanhedrin 105b, and Michtav Mi'Eliyahu part 1 p. 24 and part 3 p. 115 & 145.

<sup>4</sup> Spare The Child p. 148-149. Rabbi Yaakovson is the mashgiach of Yeshiva Ketana and Mesivta of Zichron Yaakov and author of the chinuch sefer "אל תחסאו בילד", translated into English under the title "Spare The Child". He is considered one of the foremost chinuch experts in Eretz Yisrael.