



RESET #7

Part 1 Going for the Gold

Yael Walfish, LCSW

Imagine a big, busy family with seven children ranging in age from a baby to a 10-year-old. This is a family that loves the *mitzvah* of *hachnasas orchim*, opening their home to anyone in need of a bed or a meal.

But now husband and wife were finding it hard to invite guests to their home. Their second child, 8-year-old Goldie, was so disruptive that she was draining all their energy, and she discouraged her parents from letting outsiders in. Goldie was always in motion and always wanted *more*.

When Goldie's demands began, and she started asking for new fads in toys, clothes and candy, her mother was actually impressed that she was so aware of social trends. Goldie seemed artistic and fashion-conscious in a way beyond her years.

But school was a disaster. Speech and occupational therapy hadn't helped. Goldie's information processing skills were weak, and she seemed to crave

touch, especially anything sticky. She would bring in fidget spinners and slime and other sensory gadgets and trendy toys. Her *morah* was tolerant and would let her keep these items at her desk and leave the classroom for a break if she needed to, but she was growing increasingly frustrated.

The *morah* would constantly move Goldie's seat in the classroom in an effort to keep her quiet. One day, when Goldie refused to move, she lost patience. "Move your seat or go to the principal!" she said.

Goldie decided it would be more fun to go to the principal and flounced out of the room. As she left, the *morah* muttered through gritted teeth, "And don't come back!"

Goldie was later sent home with a recommendation from the school that she get therapy. Her parents, at a loss, had now come to my office. "We decided to try therapy first," they said. "We were thinking maybe she needs medication, but she doesn't even have any

official diagnosis.”

“Goldie sounds like a really fiery girl,” I said. “She’s really high-powered, and that’s hard for her teacher. But powerful kids are world changers! I love these kids, but they have to adjust their energy to the world, and it tends to spill over and get them into trouble. It sounds like things are challenging at home as well. What we need to do is stop giving energy to her negative behavior and build success for Goldie by helping her see herself as responsible, respectful, and rule-abiding.”

I explained the Nurtured Heart Approach to her parents: We refuse to give energy to negative behavior and lavish energy on good behavior. Mr. and Mrs. H. listened, perhaps a bit skeptically, but they were ready to try anything.

As they left the first session, I felt hopeful. Goldie sounded like my type of kid: feisty and fun. But she tended to react badly to escalation, and the fact that her teacher got angry and gave her an option to leave the classroom was not effective. Goldie simply selected the option she preferred!

WEEK TWO

Goldie’s parents came for their session still a bit skeptical, but motivated to work. They told me that focus was a big issue for Goldie: She had a hard time paying attention.

I explained, “Children have an incredible way of turning into the image we have of them. If we believe Goldie has no focus, and her teacher becomes frustrated, intensifying the situation, all of us may be aggravating the problem. Let’s reinforce the moments when she is focused. Let’s try to find them. What does Goldie enjoy doing?”

“She likes art,” Mrs. H. volunteered. “She likes gymnastics. She loves practicing cartwheels.”

“Is she focused when she does her cartwheels?” I asked. “Let’s build on that.”

They smiled and laughed. Yes, Goldie could focus on cartwheels. We could comment on her concentration as

she executed them.

I told them we need to create a vision for Goldie and all their children, a vision of being responsible, kind and able to focus. “We’re on our way to giving Goldie proof of her strength,” I said. “Meanwhile, let’s keep in mind that at some point, we will try to loop her teacher in. Usually, methods like this teacher’s just backfire in the classroom. We need to help her be more successful in the classroom.”

WEEK THREE

I was thrilled to see that Mr. and Mrs. H. had been implementing NHA methods and were seeing progress at home.

“We’ve really been trying,” Mrs. H. said. “We’ve been telling Goldie and our other kids how helpful and responsible they are when we see something we can give positive energy to.”

“I saw Goldie setting the table the other day,” Mr. H. said. “She loves to make it beautiful. So, this time I said, ‘Goldie, I noticed you set the whole table. You took care of all the details, and you stayed on task until it was done. That was so helpful!’ She was smiling from ear to ear! After that, our Shabbos meal was amazing.”

But while things were improving at home, school was still a problem. Goldie’s academics and social skills were weak, and Mrs. H. was clearly worried. “She doesn’t have any friends reaching out for play dates, and her behavior in class is still a problem,” she said. “I keep wondering if we should try medication.”

But her husband reset his wife’s thinking: “I feel like she’s starting to respond,” he said. “I feel it in my gut. I myself used to be a terror in school! Her teacher sometimes yells and threatens Goldie, but she probably just doesn’t know what else to do and would prefer a better approach. I get it: Goldie is challenging! But in school, things just escalate from there and get worse.”

“Let’s reset to making building Goldie our priority,” I said. “We have to keep to our vision. When it comes to developing her social skills, we can teach them and use

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NHA to reinforce them.”

The Mr. and Mrs. H. wanted some examples. I told them that they could praise Goldie any time they see her doing something positive, saying things like, “I see you’re being flexible by playing the game your sister wants to play!” They can help Goldie plan activities and role play interacting with other children, reinforcing her every time she is accommodating and gracious.

WEEK FOUR

Mr. and Mrs. H. came in beaming! “Goldie really seems to be responding,” her mother said. “I heard her speaking to her grandmother on the phone and using some of the NHA lingo, and she even ‘recognized’ her sister for some good behavior. We can see her mimicking us. Even our other kids are catching on. The other day our 4-year-old was crying about something, when she suddenly stopped and announced, ‘I reset myself!’ It was adorable!”

We began speaking about how to set limits for Goldie. Children need rules and structure because without them, chaos takes over. Rules exist mostly for children’s own safety and well-being. For example, we want our children to be safe riding their bikes, so we make a rule that they must wear a helmet. We make rules about looking both ways before crossing a street. But a rule does not have to lead to fights or escalations.

Parents need to set clear rules and expectations for their children and reset them when they get off track — but without negativity. I shared a story I heard about Rabbi Abraham J. Twersky, *zt”l*, who has said that while children need limits, “We can do it in a way that doesn’t hurt them.”

Rabbi Twersky related that when he was a boy of perhaps 7 or 8 he was an avid chess player. The family had a guest over on Rosh Hashanah.

“Let’s play a game!” the guest proposed to little

Avraham.

“I think I’m not allowed to play chess on Yom Tov,” Avraham said.

“What do you mean? It’s not a problem,” the guest said.

Well, the guest was a grownup, so Avraham believed him, and they played a game together.

That evening, Motzoei Yom Tov, Avraham’s father called him into his office. He said, “I heard you played chess today. You know, we do *not* play chess on Rosh Hashanah.” He gave his son a stern look.

After a pause, during which Avraham sat contritely on his chair, his father smiled. “Did you win the game?” he asked. When Avraham said yes, he smiled, visibly proud.

I explained: “We can set a limit and reset a child without being punitive or hurting a child. We simply show our child: “Oops, you got off track! No problem. We’ll get right back on.”

As Goldie’s parents left, I could feel their reset. We have a new mission: to begin to set limits, provide clarity and help Goldie begin to see herself as a person who follows the rules. I recommended that they reach out to Goldie’s teacher to share that they are using a new approach at home, to help her understand how it works and to ask her to clarify which rules she would like Mr. and Mrs. H. to help her reinforce. The school will be our next frontier!

To be continued...

*All identifying info has been changed to protect confidentiality.

Yael Walfish, LCSW, is a therapist based in Passaic, New Jersey. She works with parents of children who are explosive, oppositional and anxious. She and her husband also train and support educators in an approach called NHA that transforms intense behavior and helps children thrive.

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