



RESET

#1

Yael Walfish, LCSW

When it comes to parenting, no one comes in fully prepared. We do our best. We might even take parenting classes, but sometimes we just get stuck.

This was the case with Mr. and Mrs. N., loving parents who came to see me because no matter how much they tried to help, things only seemed to get worse. They had already consulted with other therapists but found that things still weren't moving in the right direction.

They were exhausted. They felt they couldn't bear their own child anymore, and it was affecting their *shalom bayis*.

Their 12-year-old daughter, Rachel, was constantly having meltdowns over minor issues, and those meltdowns would take over the entire atmosphere of the home. She refused to engage in normal self-care behaviors such as showering, brushing her hair

and keeping her room neat. She wasn't interested in participating in family activities. Whenever she felt stressed, she would soothe herself by overindulging in food and technology. If her parents bought nosh, it would be gone in a day. Rachel would sneak it to her room and polish it off.

Although the COVID pandemic was behind them, Rachel continued to miss a lot of school, mostly because of issues related to food. She and her parents would get into negotiations and arguments about what food she should eat for breakfast and which foods she should bring to school. The bargaining would last so long that Rachel would end up finishing breakfast so late that she would miss her bus. Then they'd have to drive her, or she'd simply stay at home.

It was very important to Mr. and Mrs. N. that Rachel eat three good meals a day, plus snacks. They never wanted her to feel hungry, as this was an important

part of the culture they grew up in. But things had gotten out of hand. Rachel was overweight and using food as comfort. Her parents had begun to despair that she'd ever be healthy. They were even thinking of testing her for an obesity gene, ready to throw up their hands and blame the problem on bad genetics.

They got so discouraged they simply gave up on imposing any limits — not on food, not on phone and not on computer time. And every altercation simply escalated.

Step One: RESET to Believe in the Child!

I find it is so often the case that as parents, we need to build up ourselves before we can build up children. My first task was to get Mr. and Mrs. N. past their belief that change was impossible, that Rachel simply *couldn't* become healthy. How could Rachel believe in herself if her parents had lost hope?

"We have to reset on the idea of *impossible* and believe in *possible*," I told them. "We have to believe in Rachel! We must believe that she can respond to limits and create her own limits for herself."

But Mrs. N. pushed back. She started to talk about the obesity gene, saying, "Rachel just never feels full! She can't change things because it's genetic." This was the cycle of "can't" she had burrowed into.

Mr. N. was able to take accept a new vision of things. "Let's try this approach," he urged his wife. "We never tried this before..." He was determined to be more involved. Mrs. N. expressed her skepticism, but she was willing to go along with her husband.

Mr. and Mrs. N. began to accept that it was okay, even necessary, to establish clear boundaries for their daughter. Our focus was to work to stop setting off Rachel's meltdowns. They would need to put a stop to the lecturing, reprimanding, threatening and the long discussions about her meltdowns and food.

"Rachel needs clear expectations," I told the parents. Together we decided that instead of fighting with Rachel in the mornings about her breakfast choices and the food she would bring to school, her parents would let her know she absolutely must be on the bus by 8:00 — food or no food.

I reminded them, "Now that you are both clear together, let's keep your intervention to a minimum, giving no energy to negativity. Let *her* handle the consequences."

"But she'll go to school hungry!" Mrs. N. protested.

I replied, "Remember the goal? You will be giving her clear expectations to help her stay on track in the morning. She's going to figure this out! She'll learn that she has to get ready on time, and we're going to be able to reinforce her for being on time and taking responsibility!"

Mr. N. put in, "Going to school hungry one morning won't kill her."

I added, "It will show her that you will no longer engage in these back-and-forth discussions about what to eat for breakfast and a snack."

Of course, change is a matter of two steps forward, one step back until progress starts to show. After a few weeks, Rachel was generally ready on time, but one morning she wanted toast and eggs. She started to have a meltdown because of the timing: It was 7:57, three minutes before her bus was due to come — certainly not enough time to prepare and eat it. She went to school with no breakfast.

That day, Mr. and Mrs. N. and I had a session. Mrs. N. expressed how dejected she was that Rachel had gone to school without breakfast.

Mr. N. interjected: "I think it was success. She had a meltdown, but Rachel was able to get to school, and we were in the clear!"

With time, the mornings became smoother. Rachel did have challenging moments, but she was consistent about leaving on time, and most mornings went much more smoothly.

We then moved on to discuss Rachel's neglectful hygiene. I asked them about the rules and expectations in their home. Father and mother looked at each other. Rachel's mother blurted out, "She is supposed to shower every other day, but then there are so many negotiations..."

I told Mr. and Mrs. N. that a daily expectation often works better. Rachel needed to hear that she was expected to shower *every* day, not every other day, since otherwise it would turn into a game or a

We worked to put emphasis on the positive things they could share rather than putting energy into negative interactions.

negotiation. Since Rachel liked board games, her father offered to play a game with her after her shower, which offered a built-in positive routine and a way to strengthen their bond. Her mother offered to read books with her, another thing she enjoyed. We worked to put emphasis on the positive things they could share rather than putting energy into negative interactions.

“Don’t argue with her,” I told them. “State firmly what the rule is, then step back. And then build every step in the right direction.”

There were lots of ups and downs. But little by little, Mr. and Mrs. N. became clearer and clearer about their limits, and Rachel responded. When she had a morning explosion about her hair or clothing, mother and father would continue with their day with minimal involvement. Rachel seemed to get back on track with less time and more ease.

We worked to establish expectations and clarity, building on every step. For example, her father told me that Rachel loved spending one-on-one time helping in the kitchen, but it didn’t happen often. We planned to build this into success. While asking a child, “Would you like to help?” rarely gets a positive response, a specific request has a greater chance of success. Rachel’s father would now suggest, “Rachel, I need you to help me cut up vegetables for dinner.” When she helped, her father was able to start recognizing her positively: “Rachel, I see how you cut those veggies so small. It looks so appetizing! I appreciate your help.” That made her feel she was part of a team.

I suggested that the N.s close their kitchen at a certain time, for themselves as well, so that Rachel could no longer decide at 10:00 p.m. that she was still starving and needed them to prepare something for her. They decided to close the kitchen at 8:00 p.m. That was really hard for them, especially for Mrs. N., but since they were seeing success, they committed to it.

Step Two: Get the Child on Board

While most of my initial contact was with Rachel’s parents, I did meet with her a few times. She was tall for her age, chubby and had curly brown hair and freckles. I wasn’t sure if she’d meet me with tolerance

or hostility, but she did smile and was willing to engage.

I began by asking, “Rachel, if you had a magic wand, what would you wish for? How could things be better for you at home and at school?”

Rachel thought for a few minutes. “I wish that food wouldn’t be such an issue for me,” she said. “I know my eating is out of control sometimes. And I would want to spend less time on my phone because I know it takes over my whole life.”

I was amazed with her response, insight, and openness with me. I immediately reinforced and energized her. “Rachel, the goals you are setting are so wise,” I responded. “They show how self-aware you are!”

“To me it sounds like you want to enjoy your food, but you don’t want it to be a constant challenge. As for technology, I see that you’re looking for the right balance, which is important! Once we have goals we can begin to get there. I believe we are on our way!”

My next move was to let her know that we — myself and her parents — were there for her. All of us were anxious to give support. “Do you realize that we are all in this together?” I asked Rachel. “All adults and children are looking for balance, and none of us are experts.” I told her how important it is to find a way to be with people face to face instead of sitting home alone with her phone. I told her, “All children and adults need and want to spend time with friends and family in person. It’s an essential vitamin in our emotional diet.” Yet she was missing it, and it was creating depression and leading her to fill the void with food.

Step Three: Expect Setbacks

“Remember, there is no such thing as perfect. We can’t expect perfection from Rachel or from ourselves — ever!”, I told the N. family. “My home isn’t perfect either. We just need to keep working on minimizing the negativity, emphasizing the positive and setting firm, clear limits.”

This helped Mr. and Mrs. N. relax when they saw lapses in behavior, such as Rachel locking herself in her room to eat candy bars when the family rule was now not to eat after 8:00 p.m. They learned to accept

themselves if, despite the new rules about morning food, Rachel still missed her bus and had to be driven to school. This happened less and less.

Little by little, we were able to build success together. Each success created more success for Rachel and her parents.

There were lots of setbacks in between, like once when the family was on their way to a family get-together, and Rachel refused to go. But Mom and Dad worked on not getting stuck in those moments. When they started to feel overwhelmed and disappointed, I encouraged them to use their loving feelings to refuel their vision and clarity and to be unstoppable in building Rachel.

As we finished our work together, the mornings became relatively smooth, and Mom and Rachel developed a stronger relationship. Rachel's phone had to be shut off at specified times, and she started spending more time with friends. Rachel found other ways to regulate her emotions and was using food less often to calm down. The kitchen closed at 8:00 p.m. Rachel's parents had found an emotionally fulfilling pathway to health and healing, emphasizing limits and positivity, and we helped Rachel build emotional expression and self-awareness.

We flipped the script and reset together. Everybody came out ahead!

Takeaways for parents:

- 1.** Don't allow yourself to be drawn into long negotiations with your child. These long discussions about what we don't want inadvertently energize that very behavior.
- 2.** Get clear about your limits and expectations. Communicate them clearly, and when you go off track learn to reset back to your expectations.
- 3.** Build moments of strength. Be relentless about verbalizing success and really seeing it.
- 4.** Don't give up on your child! Every child has inner strength that can be built with the right encouragement. When your child identifies with his strength and spark, he or she will thrive! ●

**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.



במס

Bnos Melech Seminary

When your dream turns into reality!

You love Eretz Yisroel and would enjoy studying and exploring with good company. Can it go beyond your imagination? **BMS. When your dream turns in to reality!** Your chance to register now and enjoy an opportunity of once in a lifetime.



Impactful Shiurim, professional and accredited courses combined with a variety of outdoor activities



A year of personal growth and academic achievements in a supportive environment.



Beautifully equipped dormitories.



Suitable for girls over 16.



THE BMS CONCEPT. 10 YEARS OF SUCCESS.

New group starting immediately after סוכות. Call now to reserve!

Contact us at admin@bmseminary.org | bnosmelechseminary.org | ☎ 052-6665424