

A Story of Perseverance

And How to Impart the Message to Our Students

By Rabbi Shmuel Chait



I'm sitting on a plane to pay a shiva visit to my mother after the recent passing of her mother, my grandmother. I'm 30,000 feet up in the air looking out the window, and as I watch the toy-size buildings, my mind wanders to a big-picture topic.

I start thinking back to the life of my grandmother, a survivor in the greatest sense of the word; she survived the Holocaust. She saw and experienced the worst of horrors. She used to say that when she got to Auschwitz, with all its infamy, she "kissed the ground" out of joy, because Majdanek, where she had

come from, was much worse. After the war, she met my grandfather and got married, with no family or friends by the wedding, as they were all gone, their final resting place unknown. She started rebuilding her life in Sweden, with no therapist or antidepressants. After many years, during which they began to rebuild their shattered lives, they decided that for the Torah education of the children, they need to go to America. They boarded one ship, with everything they owned on another.

Thankfully they made it to NYC, but all their possessions on the other ship ended up on the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean. When my grandfather heard that everything was lost, he fainted, overwhelmed that he "lost it all." My grandmother's reaction was, "We know what it means to lose everything, we have already experienced that. Now we only lost property which can be replaced." She continued to rebuild her life from scratch once more. She never complained or wanted to know why -she just did what needed to be done. Neither her daily debilitating migraines nor her horrors of the past ever stopped her from doing her very best. All who knew her comment on how happy and normal she was, and to us, the only scars of her past were the greenish numbers on her arm.



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Let me contrast this brief overview of a true fighter of a woman with a story that happened to me some years ago. A

student of mine was failing in both academics and behavior. After a conversation with him, he commented, "Rebbe it's not my fault. I have PTSD. You see I have this trouble at home..." This student certainly had challenges in his life, but his comment troubled me for another reason. Too often, students react to difficult situations by shutting down and passing on the blame, whether it's blaming their parents, their teachers, their circumstances, etc. They say things like, "My life is hard so nothing can be expected from me."

While it's true that students' challenges can be significant, it's the lack of trying to persevere that continues to trouble me.



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Contrast this story with the story of my grandmother – whose attitude was going to battle life’s challenges better? Which attitude do we want from our own children? I am nervous about the great ramifications that will result from these diametrically opposed life views. I question myself as the pilot announces that we have reached our flying altitude – what am I doing to help my students develop perseverance? How will they stand up to life’s turbulence without getting knocked down?

I truly believe that developing resilience is something that all schools and families must partner together to achieve.

Here are some of the things that we do in class and questions I ask myself often.

1. **What do I praise?** By praising the *process* of learning instead of the *outcome*, we show children the value of effort, encouraging them to endure despite challenges. I will often comment, “I notice that (student’s name) is working incredibly hard despite the fact he is extremely tired. That is hard to do and takes perseverance. Chazal tell us *lefum tzara agra* – Hashem rewards based on how difficult things are for us. He must be smiling today.”
2. Do my students **see me persevering?** When I have challenges (like when I’m not feeling well), I will let the boys know. Let them see me pushing through my challenge and they may learn to do the same themselves. Similarly, how do they see me handle mistakes – as a failure or as part of the human growth experience? I tell the young men, “I’m not feeling well today, and when that happens to me, I would love to stay in bed and not face the world. But B”H, I have the privilege of teaching Torah to you and it’s something I don’t want to miss. Today may not be my best day of teaching but I’m still going to give it my best.”
3. Do my students have **flexibility?** We want children to be able to handle all of life’s unpredictable curveballs and readjust as needed instead of giving up. If life is completely predictable for them, when do they build such skills? I occasionally change routines to challenge students to work on their flexibility and to continue putting forth their best effort despite something unpredictable happening.
4. **Why bother?** It’s hard to get through rough times without a reason to do so. By constantly talking about one’s purpose in this world and our personal goals, we remind them that the *effort* is worth all the trouble. May we never face difficulties anywhere close to the challenges that I mentioned above, and may Hashem equip us to handle all of life’s challenges that we do face.

