

When we LISTEN to each other
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by Rabbi Eve Posen

Marshmallows are my secret weapon. The only surefire way to get both of my kids to do something they aren't particularly fond of doing is with the promise of a marshmallow. I know it goes against a lot of sound parenting advice to use food as a motivator, but I'm pretty sure there's an exception for marshmallows. You can look it up.

The problem is Shiri and Matan are at two very different stages. Only Shiri can really grasp what it means to get different types of rewards for different actions. But they both understand marshmallows. There's something about the way the cloudlike sweetness melts in their mouths that can get them to do just about anything we ask. And for parents, marshmallows are great too. They don't get gooey until they're super hot, and the ones from Trader Joe's are kosher and vegan. I give marshmallows all the credit for saving our tushes several times on a recent long trip. Kids getting too rowdy at shul? Pass a marshmallow. It may not be long-lasting peace, but we take what we can get.

I know what you're thinking. You want a marshmallow now, don't you? Or maybe you're thinking about a famous experiment about delayed gratification, the marshmallow test. If you're not familiar with the marshmallow test, it was a series of studies done in the 60s and 70s at Stanford in which a marshmallow or other treat would be placed in front of a child. The child could choose to eat the marshmallow right then, or if the child could delay gratification and wait 15 minutes, the child would be given two marshmallows.

Here's what they found with this original test. Demonstrating the willpower not to eat the sugary treat seemed to be a predictor of the kid's scholastic ability, specifically their future SAT scores. In other words, this test seemed to show a correlation between the ability of a child to delay gratification and how well he would succeed later in life.

First of all, if I were to run this test on my children, I'm pretty sure they would fail. But how can you blame them when our entire world is instant gratification? As society and technology evolve together, we have more and more opportunities to get anything we want as fast as we want it. Craving a favorite food and don't want to leave the house or office? You're not limited to restaurants that offer delivery anymore. Use DoorDash or Uber Eats and get practically anything delivered.

Want to watch a TV show, but forget to DVR it? No problem, you can stream it online. What the heck, just binge the entire series on Netflix. And forget about stressing over taking perfect photos on your camera or waiting for a roll of film to be developed.

We've gotten so used to the instant life that even fast things seem slow. I'm sure I'm not the only one who experiences the excruciating pain of awaiting an important email response by checking my phone every 30 seconds to see if it came through.

It seems like technology itself will never catch up to the level of our expectations for it. Our world is becoming one where we have limited patience to wait and see what happens next. With the ease of email, text messaging, and Twitter, we share our thoughts instantaneously, and we seek feedback immediately. But with this quick-to-share, quick-to-respond mentality, we seem to forget the whole point of communication in the first place. We forget to actually read what others are writing. That means our search for instant gratification can lead us to miss really important human cues, sometimes cries for help or connection.

When the Israelites are in the process of accepting the commandments of Torah and Jewish life from God, they respond to Moses by saying, “*Kol asher diber haShem, na’aseh v’nishmah.*” All that God has said, we will do and we will listen. The mandate of Judaism isn’t merely to “do this, don’t do that.” Our mandate is to do good in our world and listen to those around us as well as to God. The mitzvot we observe have an active component that we accomplish by doing, and a reactive component that we accomplish by listening, by actually opening our ears to calls for help.

Where do the marshmallows come in? Well, if you’re thinking it sounds ridiculous to claim that eating a marshmallow or waiting in order to eat two marshmallows can have an impact on your SAT score, you’re not alone. Researchers from NYU and UC Irvine thought so too, and they decided to redo the experiment, but with ten times the number of participants and taking into account factors like the social and economic background of these kids. You know what they found? **Delayed gratification wasn’t the determiner of success. Success was the determiner of delayed gratification.**

When they accounted for things like household income, the kids who came from families who were better off or better educated were, on average, the ones who performed better. For example, among the kids whose mothers had a college degree, those who waited for the second marshmallow did no better in the long run than those who ate the first marshmallow right away. By the same token, among kids whose mothers did not have college degrees, those who waited also did no better than those who ate right away.

How do we give our children and ourselves the best chance at success? It’s not by teaching them to delay gratification. It’s by teaching them to consider consequences and ask “Why”. Think about what happens if you eat this dessert. Will it mean no dessert later? Will it mean a greater risk of cavities? If you’ve considered the options and still want to eat the marshmallow, for goodness sakes, eat the marshmallow.

And when it comes to communication, if there’s something on your mind that you think needs to be said, sleep on it first. Talk it over with someone else. Roll it around in your mind, and if you still think it’s worth saying, then say it. Where we run into trouble is when we speak first, and then consider the consequences after it’s too late.

Na'aseh v'nishma - do, *and* listen. Yes, have an opinion and get things done, but also have compassion and get to know people. Who says that your opinion is more valid than someone else's? It's easy to be passionate about a topic, and when we're passionate and have something to say, we want to push it out into the world in a fury of keyboard strokes. We want to be the first one to comment.

As we enter this new year, I have a challenge for all of us. Why not be the first one to listen? Instead of rushing to comment, how about if we rush to understand? How about if we rush to consider? Instead of talking louder and louder in order to be heard, what if we spoke less and less in order for someone else to be heard? In this new year, what if we could ask how someone is doing, and not be on to the next thought in our heads before they have a chance to say, "Great, thanks" or "Actually, not so well, and I could really use a friend right about now."

To me, the updated marshmallow test is much less about who's right when it comes to delayed gratification, and much more about having enough information to create an accurate study in the first place. It's not a test of the children. It's a test of us. Can we see that some people are struggling to put food on the table? Can we see how much where we come from is affecting where we have the ability to go?

In this new year, let's slow down the assumptions and the immediate feedback. Instead, let's rush to accept and acknowledge. Let us stumble over each other being the first to listen.

Shanah tova.