

TZEDAKA CAMPAIGNS AND PRIZES

My son has spent the better part of this summer canvassing our neighbourhood for tzedakah money to benefit a worthy and wonderful cause. It sounds noble, but he openly admits that his entire interest in this pursuit is due to the promised prize for raising a certain amount of money.

BH, we are a family of askanim and we have tried hard to inspire our children to work hard to raise money for other Yidden, but I am worried that introducing him to tzedaka in this manner, where the 'schar' is not just a token but the entire goal will have adverse effects on how he perceives his responsibilities. I see nothing wrong with the organizations expressing their appreciation with a small gift at the end of the campaign, but I worry that a campaign centered around the most extravagant prizes is not a good thing for him.

Your problem has become a dilemma for all of us in *Klal Yisrael*, and for every aspect of *chinuch* – whether it is in the school or in the home; whether it is to learn *Mishnayos* or to come on time to *daven*, even to cleaning one's room. It has, as well, extended to the point where one must be rewarded for doing errands for the family.

We started the ball rolling by offering prizes. While I think that prizes as an incentive are a very good 'added attraction', (we gave prizes in Bais Yaakov), they should be used only in moderation. We must not let them become an expected form of reward. Prizes should be nothing more than a form of validation and a way of saying 'thank you'. We must know how and when to put on the brakes. But, in this generation, the giving of prizes has become a snowball rolling down a huge mountain which cannot be contained; and we have allowed it to become an avalanche.

My youngest son, who is now in his mid-thirties, recalls that, as youngsters in Yeshiva Ketanah, he and his classmates collected for *tzedoko*. Their incentive was to cover a certain amount of mileage by the use of a walk-a-thon or a bike-a-thon, to read a certain amount of books on a list given by the Yeshiva in a read-a-thon, or to learn a certain amount of *pesukim* or *blatt* depending on age and ability. Sponsors would pledge an amount for each mile travelled, or books read, or *blatt* learned. These were the only incentives and rewards which made them feel good.

When I asked his son, my 9 year old grandson, who attends the same Yeshiva, if he collects for *tzedoka* and why he does it, his answer was that he collects for the prizes he will receive depending how much he brings in - the more he collects, the bigger the prize.

In the generation of my youth, the necessary incentive was the cause and the need. My children's generation needed a personal accomplishment of sorts to help the cause, and, now, my grandchildren need prizes. *Tzedoko* organizations compete with each other as to which one gives the biggest prize in order to get the children to collect for their cause. We are our own worst enemies. What are we going to give a few years down the line? There is no end to it.

Another one of my grandsons, a camp head counselor, was telling me how he constantly has to plan and organize original and exciting activities for his camp, that are, to use the vernacular, "humungous". One must always outdo the other camps in order to be the best camp around or even to stay in business. The campers constantly measure how awe-inspiring their camp is in comparison to the other camps by the type of trips they take and how different, spectacular and enormous their special activities are. In my generation, going to camp was 'the trip', color war was the "humungous" activity, and the *ruach* during the *Shabbos* meal with its singing and dancing, was the highlight of the week.

I foolishly asked a head counselor why all the camps cannot get together and put a stop to these extravagant trips etc. or at least tone them down so that our children's value system remains normal, in the *Torah* sense. In the long run, they only add to the cost of camp and make camp out of reach for many of us. His reply was, "Are you kidding?"

We are dealing with the '*kumt mir*' generation, everything my eyes see my heart wants. And there is an awful lot to see. We give in to our children for many reasons. *Hashem* blessed our generation with abundance, the likes of which previous generations have ever experienced, and we are able to give. We, therefore, say, why not? We are also afraid that if we don't please our children, they will think that we are not good parents or we don't love them so much. It may be that we give so much because the next door neighbor does. Or maybe we think that that is the way to show them our love.

I fully agree with your contention when you say "but I worry that a campaign centered around the most extravagant prizes is not a good thing for him" and I am afraid that it will only get worse.

In answer to your question, I would say that we cannot 'fight city hall' so let's do the best we can and train our children with the best *hashkofos* that are available to us. In some cases, maybe we can train them to give their prize to the poor and less fortunate or at least share it by lending it to friends. Talk to them about it before they enter the contest and assure yourself and them of the main goal of the contest. (Maybe I am being naïve). *Daven* that "*mitoch shelo lishmo ba lishmo*". Since they are not doing the *mitzvah* for altruistic reasons alone, hopefully our children will continue into adulthood helping *Klal Yisrael lishmo*.