

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

# Torah Lessons for the Home

## THE OLDEST CHALLENGE

Each person faces three great challenges, the Maggid of Mezritch says. The first is almost as old as time — the challenge of Kayin v'Hevel, which corresponds to jealousy; the next is the challenge of Dor Hamabul, which corresponds to *ta'avah*; and the third is that of the Dor Haflagah, corresponding to *kavod*.

Kayin and Hevel both brought *korbanos* to Hashem; when Hevel's offering was accepted whereas Kayin's was not, "his face fell" and Hashem asked him why. Was the problem that his own *korban* was not accepted, or perhaps, as the Chiddushei Rim suggests, was the real issue that Hevel's *korban* was?

Everyone deals with jealousy in their life, and it's simply human nature to have trouble seeing other people's success without feeling troubled that they are seemingly doing better than we are. That doesn't mean that we excuse jealousy — we all need to work on eliminating it. For most of us, overcoming feelings of jealousy is a years-long, if not a life-long, struggle.

When we notice this very struggle in our children, we should keep things in perspective. Of course it remains our obligation to teach our children about the importance of cultivating good *middos* and overcoming bad ones. Nonetheless, we shouldn't expect them to be anywhere near the end of their *middos* work so early on in their lives. As with many areas of *chinuch*, remembering how hard it is for us to achieve our goals should give us the patience to help our children follow in our path.

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Parshas
**Bereishis**
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Question

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

Firstly, thank you so much for all your insightful *shiurim* on Torah Anytime which I benefit from greatly.

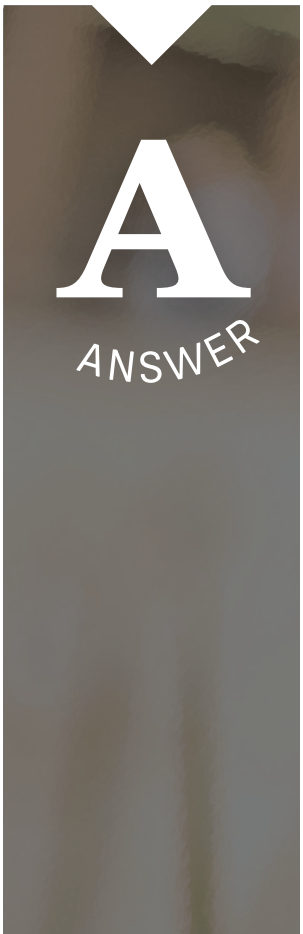
I am seeking guidance on how to deal with an issue my seven-year-old daughter has, which I am sure is not uncommon. She is the third child of four in the family and is by nature a soft, gentle, obedient girl. She is currently struggling with jealousy. She is constantly looking at what others have and comparing it to what she has.

Before a sibling's birthday, she expressed in advance that if I don't buy her the same present as her sister is going to get, it will be too hard for her. I explained that each child has their chance to have their birthday — she had hers a few months ago so we went through the lovely presents she received (and how there are other opportunities when she may receive presents, such as Afikoman), but nevertheless when her sister received her birthday present, she cried uncontrollably.

She is quite a deep thinker so we have tried discussing the topic with her, obviously at an age-appropriate level, but when it comes to situations such as these, she really finds it challenging.

Would you perhaps have some guidance in how to deal with this so we can hopefully begin to guide her at this young age on how to view things through a better lens which will *iy"H* help her throughout her life?

I look forward to your response.




You're absolutely right that this is not an uncommon problem. Jealousy between siblings is extremely common to the point that it's a normal issue that every parent faces, not just once but on many occasions. Even if you had been writing about an oldest child, there would be no reason to dismiss your question as the "normal anxieties of new parents" who have yet to see children growing out of issues. Jealousy is something that we can find almost everywhere we look, and it's understandable that it concerns you and that you want to help your daughter deal with it.

It's refreshing that you describe your daughter as a gentle child, and that you see her positive qualities even though you're looking for advice regarding the difficult aspects of her personality. It's a shame when someone's challenges overshadow more pleasant aspects of their nature.

That said, in this one area where she is expressing her jealous feelings, she is not so much being gentle as quite stubborn and inflexible, insisting that she absolutely will not be able to handle getting anything less than her sister, even though it's the sister's birthday and not hers. Hopefully, addressing this now, while she's still young, will help in preventing her from growing up into a child who is gentle and obedient as long as she gets her way, and stubborn and even manipulative when she doesn't.

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There are two aspects to the *chinuch* obligation here. One is certainly to teach your daughter how to overcome the *middah* of jealousy. That's the "teaching" part of *chinuch*.

The other, no less important, is to ensure that you don't (even inadvertently) make her struggle any harder. The Torah tells us that parents "should never differentiate" between their children in the way they treat them. We need to do our best to treat all our children equally and listen to their concerns and take them seriously when they tell us that they feel we're being unfair. To illustrate this, Chazal discuss the case of an orphan who is about to get married and asks for the same kind of wedding and dowry as her older sister had. They teach that her wishes should be respected, despite the difficulty of securing the funds.

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In your case, you did your best to explain why her sister getting a birthday gift was not grounds for her to get one too, and your position was entirely reasonable and correct. It sounds like you listened to her, took her feelings seriously, and still didn't back down. This is generally the right approach to take, even though she threw a tantrum.

Many children do tend to throw tantrums when they don't get their own way, even if we spend hours explaining our position. That doesn't mean that parents are doing anything wrong. It just means that children may try to challenge a decision and it's the parents' responsibility to be confident that they're doing the right thing and to convey this confidence to their children.

Giving in to tantrums is almost always wrong and counterproductive. By definition they are a method of testing limits and many parents fail to react correctly, resulting in such behaviors persisting. Ultimately, tantrums should be ignored if possible, because even negative attention can perpetuate the behavior; the child needs to get the message that such methods won't accomplish anything. If a parent backs down in the face of tears or rage, this conveys the very wrong message that this is what works to make a parent retract or give in.

Another important point is to not react to the tantrum by putting down the child, making it an attack on them, personally. Parents should never respond with comments such as, "Look how difficult you are being," or "What a baby!" etc. This may sound obvious, but sometimes we get frazzled by a child's tantrum and make an older version of the same mistake they're making — overreacting inappropriately and causing more damage by personalizing the issue and hurting the child.

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Does this mean that a child can never get their way, just because a parent didn't anticipate the problem and forestall the clash? Not necessarily. There are times when "giving in" is the right answer, as long as it's done the right way. There are times when parents need to learn how not to be stubborn with their judgement. How does one distinguish between those times and others?

A big part of the answer depends on whether the concession is being demanded or requested, or perhaps not even verbalized at all. If a child demands a gift or a treat, it's almost never appropriate for the parent to accede. Children need to learn that they may not demand anything of their parents, even if it's something that they fully deserve (such as a meal or clean laundry). Demanding something of a parent is both the opposite of being respectful to parents as well as a generally inappropriate manner of getting one's way. It should be firmly nipped in the bud if it ever happens.

If a child *asks* for something, however, there's room to consider the request within its context. So, if your seven-year-old says to you, "Mommy, can you buy me something small on my sister's birthday, too?" you could, after reminding her that when it was her birthday, no one else got a gift, tell her, "Well, I'll think about it, and perhaps I'll give something small to you and your brothers when it's your sister's birthday." That's the big difference between a request and a demand.

You don't have to agree to all requests, however, nor do you have to give the impression that the child must always be deserving or that you should have thought of a solution yourself. Regardless of what answer you give, it should be clear that you're allowed to turn down even the most polite request, if you feel that a refusal is warranted. It should be clear that you aren't afraid of saying no, or of a child's reaction.

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Then there are the unspoken requests. Sometimes, a child won't ask for something even if they want it very badly. As the parent, you want to know your children well enough to understand their needs, though of course we can only do our best and won't always

figure everything out. A child who, for whatever reason, doesn't verbalize their feelings is no less deserving than one who asks nicely. If you feel it's appropriate, you may certainly of your own accord give them something small on a sibling's birthday, and tell them, "This is for you, because I want you to know that I'm thinking of you too and I want you to be happy."

In addition, if a child demands or requests something that's out of the question (either because of how it was demanded or what was requested), you can make it clear that you won't be giving them what they want while you are choosing to give them something small instead. This is another good option as long as you don't convey the impression that you are doing it out of fear of their reaction if you don't.

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In the example you provide, you were fortunate that your daughter raised the issue of her sister's birthday in advance. Although she still threw a tantrum on the day, knowing that you weren't going to back down probably did something to tone down her reaction.

If she hadn't mentioned it in advance, however, it would have been wise for you to do so. While we can't anticipate all of our children's struggles, birthdays are quite predictable and it's always easier to deal with things calmly when the challenge isn't staring us in the face. In general, many issues parents deal with are relatively predictable, as many fall into patterns. When we put our minds to it, we can often anticipate challenges and stay one step ahead, dealing with them before emotions escalate and there's nobody to talk to.



Another thing you can do to defuse tension is praise your daughter for any progress she makes in overcoming her jealousy, however small. On the morning of her sister's birthday, for instance, you could tell her, "It's great that you're smiling and wishing your sister *mazal tov* even though she's getting a gift and you're not. It's so nice that you're not giving her a bad feeling, and I know how hard you're trying to be good!" Even if all she's doing is not yelling and screaming, you can still tell her that.

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Your daughter is just seven, so she's only just beginning to understand that being jealous, while natural, is something she needs to work to overcome. She's bound to slip and fall many times over the coming years, and while you should never condone tantrums and other overt displays of jealousy, you should never condemn her for being only too human.

*Chinuch* doesn't mean getting our children to the finish line; it means setting them down at the start line, showing them the end goal, and encouraging them along the way. An essential part of that encouragement is teaching by example, and when it comes to jealousy, we certainly have plenty of opportunities to show our children how we struggle and overcome, struggle and overcome, and again, and again...

We also need to teach our children about the importance of having an *ayin tovah* and wanting the best for others, as we show them that we want the best for them.

Ultimately, we only benefit from refining our own *middos*, and when we transmit to our children the happiness and satisfaction of living a Torah life in all its aspects, we have the best chances of seeing our children following in our path.

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