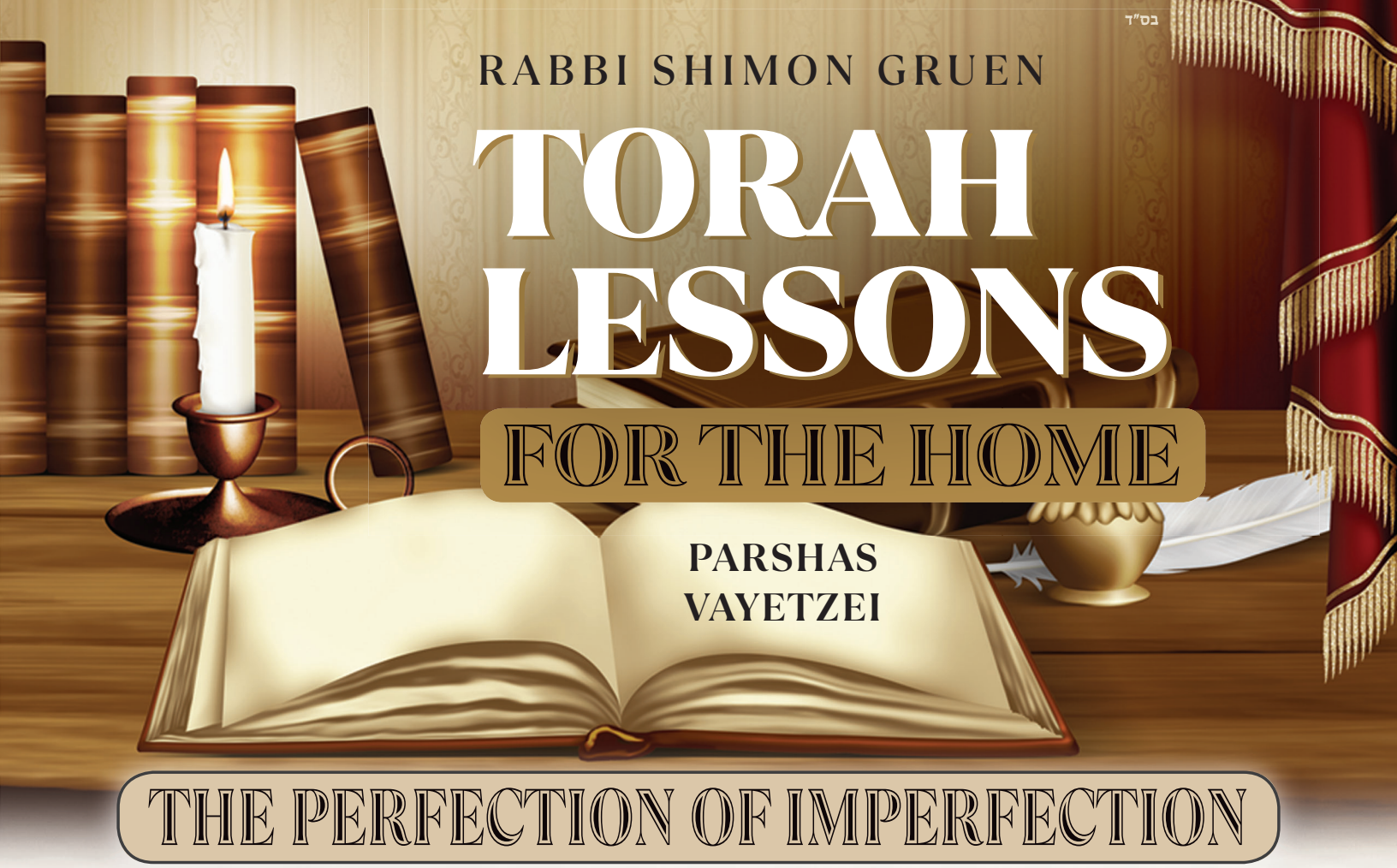
RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

TORAH LESSONS

FOR THE HOME

PARSHAS VAYETZEI



THE PERFECTION OF IMPERFECTION

In this week's *parshah* we learn that Rachel Imeinu was an *akarah* – she didn't have children. Reb Pinchos'l Koritzer says something quite radical here, that only someone of his caliber can convey. He explains that the reason Rachel wasn't at first *zocheh* to children was because there was too much love between her and Yaakov Avinu, and sometimes, when a husband and wife live in total harmony, the blessing of children is withheld. Of course this doesn't mean that a couple should constantly quarrel, *chas v'shalom*. However, if they never become even a little upset or angry at each other, this can prevent them from having children. Reb Pinchos'l cautions that when they do argue, it should only be over something worthwhile and important, like a *mitzvah*, and that this may help them build their family. He weaves this into the words of the *pesukim:* "*Vayehav Yaakov es Rachel, v'Rachel akarah … vayichar af Yaakov b'Rachel, vateled Rachel* – And Yaakov loved Rachel, and she was barren … and Yaakov became angry with Rachel, and Rachel gave birth."

As noted, this is a bit of a radical lesson which shouldn't be misinterpreted or misused, but on a practical level, it's important to understand that it's normal for a couple to disagree at times. While it's certainly *not* normal to be constantly fighting with each other, and anyone in such a situation should certainly not delude himself that it's okay because "all couples fight sometimes," on the flip side some people become alarmed at the smallest sign of dissent and take it as a sign that their marriage is falling apart. It's not.

Conversely, a perfectly serene marriage is not always a sign that the couple have a true and abiding love for one another. Some people have such a low self-image that they nullify themselves entirely in relationships and will always give way to their spouse and never disagree. Such a marriage is not a happy one for either the husband or the wife, aside from the fact that a person who's afraid to voice his opinion will often become resentful, and the bitter feelings are likely to explode eventually. Another version of "too much love" might be a couple trying to be identical, adjusting their interests, preferences, and tastes to match each other's. It's okay to be two separate people, to like different things, and yes – to disagree once in a while. As long as it's done nicely and with sensitivity, it can actually help a relationship to progress, with each spouse acknowledging the other in a deeper way whenever they clash. The occasional conflict can actually enhance a relationship after the couple makes up and works things out in a respectful manner.

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QUESTION

DEAR RABBI GRUEN

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

Firstly, I want to thank you for your weekly *shiurim*. I listen to them every week and they have changed my perspective on life. I've learned to always ask, "What can *I* do," a message you reiterate time and again.

My question is as follows: We live next-door to my mother-in-law. My wife has a few married sisters in town. B'H we get along very well with my mother-in-law and the rest of the family. My mother-in-law has her favorite daughter (not my wife) and I understand feelings can't be changed, but my problem is that she sometimes shows it quite blatantly. This is hurtful (though it bothers me more than my wife). The problem is, my wife and I agree that if we were to speak to her about it, it might help in the short run, but it wouldn't work for long. For example, she goes to visit that daughter every Shabbos and doesn't come to us. If we were to mention it, she would visit us the following week, as if to say, "See, I *do* visit you," and that would probably be it.

We have tried hinting to her about it, but nothing changed. Also, the whole family found out that we tried hinting, and it made things quite uncomfortable.

My question is, what can I do to stop myself from getting so upset about it, because honestly, it really bothers me.

Many thanks.

ANSWER

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN RESPONDS

As an introduction, I think it's important to validate the issue you describe. Chazal tell us that *"Le'olam lo yeshaneh adam ben bain habanim* – one should never treat one child differently from the others." The reason Chazal teach this is because it *can* happen and it's not uncommon for a parent to be tempted (albeit often unintentionally) to favor a particular child – and so we need to be cautioned against it. In fact, we see that even our Avos had different feelings towards each of their children, and we learn this lesson from their lives. On the other hand, Chazal don't tell us how to *feel* towards our children, only to ensure that our preferential feelings are not obvious from our actions.

Some people think this teaching only applies to young children. They give everyone the same treat and the same prize – but once their children are grown up and married, they're far less careful, assuming that the differential treatment isn't as noticeable. The truth is that it is, but parents often can't see it, or they justify treating their children differently and protest that it isn't favoritism. This is something I often hear from parents. They explain that there are good reasons why one child needs more attention, for example, than another, and protest that their other children are perceiving their actions wrongly and shouldn't feel hurt. There may be some truth to this,

but it's important to keep in mind that both parties are subjective here. If several children are perceiving favoritism, it's worth looking into. Maybe there's something to what they're saying. And even if you're sure that your child is wrong, it's still important to take their feelings seriously and try to address them.

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Wanting a mother or mother-in-law to be more loving is pretty common, as are similar scenarios: "My wife finds much more time for her sister than she does for me. What can I do about it?" "My teenager listens to her friends much more than she listens to me. Why?" Sometimes the best thing to do is to copy success. What is your wife's sister doing so well that makes your wife prefer to spend time with her? What are the friends doing that makes your daughter listen to them?

Sometimes, the answer is that these other people are making your spouse or child feel good about themselves, by giving compliments and so forth. So maybe try that. Try imitating the behavior that is getting someone else the results you want.

In your particular case, what is your sister-in-law doing that you and your wife aren't? Is she giving her mother attention in a way you don't? Maybe she's always asking for her opinion and your mother-in-law goes over on Shabbos to see how her advice worked out. That could be food for thought. Of course, it's not always possible to copy what another person is doing, and even if you do try to mimic the behavior, it may not bring the same results. There may be a certain chemistry you simply don't share. Sometimes, exerting yourself to make another person like you is just a waste of time and energy. But in general, emulating the obvious things and attitudes that you *are* capable of and aren't wrong to invest in, can do a lot to change the dynamics of a relationship.

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More frequently, however, there's a different dynamic at work where the child who feels discriminated against doesn't want to emulate the favored siblingI love the story I once heard about a couple who got married after many years of waiting for a *shidduch*. By then, they both settled for something quite different from their own backgrounds, and this is what brought a traditional Yerushalmi boy to marry a girl from Bnei Brak. One of the compromises she made was that she would follow her husband's family *minhag* not to wear a *sheitel*. Within a few months after their wedding, this became too hard for her. She couldn't handle being seen dressed in a way that was so different from how she grew up, and so different from her own family. She stopped going to family *simchos*, then she started leaving her house less, and over time she fell into a full depression. It started with her eating less, socializing less, staying in bed more, until slowly she became completely non-functional. Her husband went to ask for advice and was told that if she really couldn't handle it, and they considered it to be a *minhag* rather than a clear *halachah*, then taking her condition into account, he should allow her to put on a *sheitel*. Things slowly improved, but a few weeks later, the man went back to the Rav who had advised him and told him how uncomfortable he was. He now felt out of place in *his* family when his wife showed up with a *sheitel*, and he was feeling guilty about building a home that wasn't based on his family's traditions. The Rav told him that he had just one option: He could "fall into a depression" and "become" non-functional, and it wouldn't take long for his wife to realize that she would have to give way. The man replied, "*Uber Rebbe, ich halt nish bei dem* – Rebbe, I'm not holding there. The Rav told him, "That's why your wife was able to get you to change and you can't get her to change. You're not going to the same lengths she is – this is obviously much more important and personal to her than it is to you!"

Sometimes in relationships, there's a good reason why things work out better between some parties than with others. You might see a sibling putting in effort you're not willing to make, or doing things you don't believe are right. Either way, the results are going to be different.

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The question you asked was what you can do to feel less upset at the situation. As Yidden, we must always try to judge others favorably. Your mother-in-law may not realize what she's doing. She may have good intentions. She may not realize how much it affects you. And there's another possibility: Maybe she isn't treating her children as unequally as you believe.

Although in your situation it seems that the difference in the way your mother-in-law treats her children is rather obvious and technical, many times the differences are more subtle. Especially when a parent loves one child more (such as with Yitzchak Avinu and Rivka Imeinu), it can make the same behavior come across differently. Favoritism should

NOT be made obvious,but it does make it harder for parents to balance their treatment of their children, something you may have experienced yourself as a parent. Your mother-in-law may be trying much harder than you realize.

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Everyone likes to be treated well, and while that is the ideal, the question is how dependent you are on being treated nicely. In general, the more confident and secure a person is, the less they are unsettled by the way other people treat them. If you're having a lot of trouble with how someone is treating you, maybe you should work on not being so dependent on other people's behavior.

Both you and your wife agree about the feeling you're getting from your mother-in-law. It's great that you're on the same page, and you can build on this by shifting your dependence on your mother-in-law to a healthy and balanced dependence on your wife (just as she can). When you both focus on making each other feel good, you should become less dependent on having your mother-in-law making you feel good. And spouses should make the effort to make each other feel good, regardless of mothers-in-law. They shouldn't have to seek it from others. Instead of being your mother's favorite, be your husband's or wife's favorite.

I'd also like to stress the importance of connecting with your spouse in positive rather than negative ways. On several occasions, I've observed couples "connecting" over their mutual negative feelings toward a third party, or their shared difficulties with a particular child. They may appear to have a lot in common (and they do), but this doesn't automatically translate into genuine connection, and it certainly doesn't build a happy and fulfilling relationship between them.

Even being involved in something healthy together is not necessarily going to lead to true connection. Couples can do things together and even be doing the same thing at the same time, but if they aren't investing feeling and attention for one other, it's not going to get the same results.

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One last point. All too often, we're jealous of something another person has, but it may not be "worth" the jealousy. Maybe a sibling has a better relationship with the parent because they're not getting what they need from their spouse. Maybe the "better" relationship with the parent is actually causing problems with the spouse. Maybe the frequent visits that look so ideal are actually a great burden on the favored child. Maybe the visits are accompanied by a constant flow of opinions and critique.

At the end of the day, it's so much more worthwhile for you to invest in your primary relationship with your wife than it is to worry about a more distant relationship that you have far less control over. And when your relationship with your wife is strong and healthy, you won't worry so much about more distant relationships anyway.

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

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