RABBI
SHIMON GRUEN

# Torah Lessons for the home

## PARSHAS VA'EIRA

## YOU ARE IN CONTROL

Jealousy is a remarkable feature of mankind. Avos lists it as the first of "the three which remove man from this world". Jealousy is incredibly damaging to us, yet something we all struggle with.

In the Aseres Hadibros, Jealousy is prohibited. The Ibn Ezra wonders how the Torah can prohibit something so basic to human nature. He explains that while one man may be inclined to covet another's wife, a peasant would never covet a princess, it is simply out of his reach. Similarly, when the Torah forbids something we should view it as out of our reach.

There is a difficult Rashi in this week's parsha. The *possuk* says *"Va'eira el Avrohom, el Yitzchok, v'el Yaakov"* Rashi interestingly adds: *"Va'eira el he'avos* – I appeared to the *Avos*." All the meforshim wonder at this seemingly superfluous comment.

The Tiferes Shlomo explains that one is not jealous of the achievements of great men, it feels out of his reach. One only hopes to achieve greatness that is attainable to him. This is why we pray (in the *Tefillah Kodem Hatefillah* from Reb Elimelech of Lizhensk), "*Shenireh kol echad maalas chaveireinu"* – that we should see our friends' achievements in *Gan Eden*, and we should rejoice for them. We do not need to pray to see the greatness of the great ones, but when it comes to our friends we may feel challenged. This is what Rashi is emphasizing: "I revealed Myself to Avrohom, Yitzchok and Yaakov" who were "the Avos" and way above the level where you, Moshe, would even be jealous of their achievement, but I'm revealing Myself to you too.

Chazal teach us that *"klum adam miskaneh bibeno* – a person isn't jealous of his son." Parents are happy for their child's wealth and success. Parents enjoy seeing their children's *nachas*. Still there are situations where it seems that parents *are* intimidated by their child's success. Baruch Hashem, it's not often.

Unfortunately, though, there can be jealousy even between a husband and wife. One may be more popular or successful than the other. One can be more stimulated, fulfilled or simply enjoys life more than the other. Such jealousy is very sad.

Sometimes a person doesn't realize that this is the reason a specific behavior bothers him. The source of the irritation some people feel with their spouses may be an unnoticed jealousy.

"I don't know why, but I get nervous when I see her talking on the phone so animatedly." What's getting you nervous? Perhaps the fact that she has someone to talk to and you don't?

"I get upset when you come home late." Why? Is it all that late? Or does it bother you that so many people enjoy his company and he has so many *simchos* to go to while you don't?

Recently, I was able to make someone aware of this and just the awareness was very helpful to him. It's possible that when we complain about the fact that our spouse spends so little time with us, it's rooted in jealousy regarding the things they're doing in that time. Of course it's not always this way at all, and certainly not a reason for someone to care less about how their actions do impact and affect their spouse, but it's worth thinking about.

What if your spouse is jealous of you? Be careful. Try to limit their exposure to that which is hard for them. Maybe don't be so open about your qualities and successes *even* with your spouse, unless you know it'll be taken well. As close as people are, it can still be hard for them to rejoice fully in the other's success if they're not feeling so gifted.

# Question:

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

I listened to one of your lectures where you mentioned that which is well known, that no matter what, husband and wife should never argue in front of their children.

My question is like this: How do you deal with boiling feelings? For example, let's say my wife yelled at me or at the children for something insignificant. She will even realize later on her own that she was wrong. But how do I control myself from falling into the trap of fighting with her in public when I feel like I'm about to explode? I know she's a woman, and by nature, very nervous.

Maybe it's my fault because I let this go on for so long without stopping her nervous behavior. But, please be *mechazeik* me. What do I do now? How do I control myself?

# Answer:

I want to address the last point first. You feel that perhaps this is somewhat your fault because you let it go on for so long. Maybe you could have done something sooner. Maybe you could have dealt with her behavior better. Maybe there are things you should tell her now. It could be that you're allowing something that shouldn't be. Perhaps you're challenging it in a way that makes it worse. These are all valid points and doubts that you're mentioning, each needs to be clarified. But the main and more important part of the question is, what can *I* do about controlling *myself*. It's a question about your own self-control. It cannot be about controlling someone else, because that's

impossible. Your biggest influence on any situation is your reaction to it.

Self-control is very difficult. Still, as difficult as it is, that's how important it is. Just hearing what I have to say about this won't give you an easy way out of this. There is no easy path to self-control, especially when you're boiling inside. People work on this for years, whether through *sifrei mussar,* therapy or anger management courses.

Self-control is critical with your spouse *and* your children. Whether it's controlling yourself from yelling *at* them or *in front of* them. But people often say, "Well, I can't. It's too hard to control myself." If you can't, you can't. But that doesn't make it less important, or less necessary, nor does it make what you're doing right.

A person doesn't always have to inconvenience themselves or allow themselves to be controlled by another's behavior, and self-control isn't about always tolerating someone's behaviors. But sometimes it's easier than dealing with the resulting difficulties and stress. And when right, even if it's hard for you, you may choose to do it for your spouse's or children's benefit.

Saying 'I can't,' means you'll need to be prepared to deal with the repercussions. Imagine if someone would say, "I can't feed my children." Certain things are basic and crucial. Having a healthy relationship with your spouse and children is basic and crucial. Self-control can also help you maintain relationships that are difficult or intolerable.

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Let's try to discuss some tips that can be helpful, depending on how much you'll invest in them.

It can be helpful to prepare yourself for such scenarios - especially those that repeat themselves - by playing them out in your mind in advance. It's not easy and not always helpful, but sometimes people get lost in the moment because they weren't prepared and didn't plan how to react. Think to yourself on the way home, *"I have a feeling my wife is going to be nervous. I'm not going to like it, but this is how I'll try to react: I'll remain calm. I'll bite my lips."* Being aware and preparing yourself can be very helpful.

And if it worked, consider it a major achievement. Remember that this is something you're trying to conquer and feel good about it. Even if you don't appreciate her nervousness, how she's treating you or the children, appreciate how *you* dealt with it.

There's a story about a man who came to his rebbe for advice in dealing with his anger issues. The rebbe whispered to the gabbai, *"Do whatever you can to make this man angry*." The man overheard this, and while the gabbai followed the rebbe's instructions and insulted him in many different ways, he still didn't get angry. The rebbe asked him, "I thought you have anger issues?"

"I do, Rebbe. But I heard the Rebbe tell the gabbai to do this, so I know it's not really him and I'm not insulted."

The rebbe told him that all situations can be seen like this: Whether it's your *yetzer hora* or *middos* that are causing you to get angry, see it as 'someone else' with an agenda to make you mad. In this way, you can strengthen yourself and 'show them' that they won't get you.

You can try the same. Don't see your wife as 'the enemy trying to provoke you,' but as an outside force that will tempt you to become angered, and something you can overcome. You may not like how she's treating you or the children, but you'll like it even less if you lose yourself and mistreat your wife in front of them. Even if it's hard to do it for yourself, do it for your wife. And if that's too hard, do it for your children. Your mind may be telling you to protect your children from being abused by your wife, but it should be even more important to you to provide them with a stable home environment where their parents are not fighting each other.

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When you do approach your wife behind closed doors, you still have to deal with it sensitively and carefully. People sometimes think that because they waited for the right time, they can explode. That's a mistake. Having controlled yourself in the past, doesn't give you any rights in the future. Even if it's less damaging than yelling in front of the children, it's still hurtful. This doesn't mean you shouldn't say anything. That can also be a mistake. But when the time is right, make sure the approach is right as well.

Attacking her won't make her inclined to work on this. You can say that you understand that the children can be difficult. You can offer to be available and helpful more often. Maybe discuss different reactions or approaches that she can find helpful. Perhaps you can even preempt such situations by discussing beforehand – sensitively and certainly not in front of the children – preventative measures or proper reactions. But again, not addressing it at all may be enabling unhealthy behavior.

Controlling your anger is not easy. But when you can achieve that, you'll be doing everyone a favor.

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We sometimes get stuck on the goal of minimizing her nervousness and controlling your reaction to it. But maybe there's another angle to address. If your wife has certain triggers, you should take them seriously. Therapy, medication, more household help, these can all help the external problem. But listen to her. Understand her stressful situation. Validate her feelings. Let her know that you're there for her. Only then can she hear what you're saying and try to work on it. Such an approach can sometimes, even if not always, help you avoid the problem.

It's not only about controlling your anger, although that's extremely important. You can't control the variables: stress levels, a person's nature, children's behavior, etc., but you can take the other person seriously. You can address it with sensitivity and plan a better response, or possibly even avoid such situations. And you can feel good about and understand the benefit of controlling yourself.

I can't end off without acknowledging that there are situations of abuse that one does need to stop immediately, and as good a husband as you want to be, you have an obligation to your children to have them be protected from anything intolerable.

This is not the place to discuss the details of what qualifies or how to react. But if you feel you're dealing with something that does require strong intervention on your part, and you're afraid that dealing with it the "nice way" is at the expense of your children's well-being, please don't decide that on your own and do reach out to discuss with a professional who can guide you appropriately.

**Wishing you much Hatzlacha,**

**Rabbi Shimon Gruen**

## TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME

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