RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

Parshas Lech Lecha

Proud Servant

Avraham Avinu was the epitome of humility. He said "I am dust and ashes" and he really believed it. It must have been very difficult for Avraham to go out and constantly publicize his 'radical' new ideas. And yet when it comes to Avodas Hashem we cannot allow our self-esteem to get in the way. The Ropshitzer Rav says that this might be another interpretation of "*Lech lecha meiartzecha*". Hashem told Avraham, "Take leave of your *eretz*, of your self-deprecating 'lowly earth' thoughts; don't think about where you're coming from." *Vayigbah libo b'darkei Hashem*. Start believing in yourself and in your powers and many great things will come about.

When it comes to serving Hashem, we must abandon our humility and gather all of our courage to step up to the plate.

Still, even Avraham Avinu, who had to be prodded to leave his comfort zone, had one area where he rose up like a lion and did not shy away from his duties. When it came to raising his son, he pulled out all the stops, even going so far as to send Yishmael and the *bnei Keturah* away from home. That must have been very difficult for a loving man like Avraham, yet he did all that for the *chinuch* of the future generations.

Parents sometimes feel unequipped to raise their children. It might be a lack of confidence in their abilities or too many conflicting messages from various sources. While it is sometimes acceptable, or even advisable, to ask someone else to talk to your child, it shouldn't stem from the feeling of "Who am I to say something like that to my son/daughter?"

You are your child's parent! It is you that he is looking up to for direction, guidance, and support. The Ohr HaChaim Hakadosh says that Yosef Hatzaddik was able to withstand his temptation to sin by picturing his father's image. He adds that to this day, thinking of one's father will save one from sin. You are that father or that mother, so don't underestimate your power.

It goes without saying that you need to parent wisely and in a healthy manner, but be aware that most of us have the tools we need to raise our children hidden inside of us.

While we definitely have the resources to parent properly, it's not always so easy, with that, let's address a chinuch question I received.

Question:

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

My husband has been gone for an extended period of time, and even before that he was home for only a short amount of time each day. Essentially, I have been raising my children on my own. Now he has returned, and I find my two-year-old son gravitating more towards him. While I am grateful that he has a relationship with his father – something he must have been desperately missing – I cannot deny that it pains me a little when he prefers his father to give him things or do things for him when I am standing right there. Can we do anything to teach him that both of us are equally important? Is this even important, or is it just my feelings getting in the way?

We would both very much appreciate it if you can address this in an upcoming shiur.

Answer:

Hi, and thanks for your letter. Your question hits on a couple of issues, but allow me to address your last sentiment first. You say that it's possibly "just your feelings", as if that would invalidate the whole question.

It's very common for people to regard their feelings as unimportant, immature, or a nuisance that can be swatted away like a pesky fly. We must realize that feelings are legitimate and very real. In fact, we are commanded to "love Hashem with all our heart", which shows us that feelings exist and can be utilized in our Avodas Hashem. So even if it *is* "just your feelings" that does not make your question any less sincere or true. Feelings are nothing to be ashamed about.

There's a Tshuva from the Radvaz I like to quote about the wrongness of the early philosophers, the stoics who totally negated a person's feelings. They negated the importance of mourning a loss. The Radvaz goes on to say that our Torah teaches us to mourn, there's a mitzvah of *aveilus,* which means that we need to take our feelings seriously. Of course we need to differentiate between feelings, which to pursue and which to overcome, but one should certainly not feel bad about being human and emotional.

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Obviously, if a feeling is preventing you from living your life properly, then you might want to consider seeking out a competent professional to help you deal with them. Still, it is not a good idea to put your life on hold while you do so. Some feelings take a lot of time to resolve, and others never do, although most can be managed. Sitting around and twiddling your thumbs while you wait for your emotions to be in that perfect place might cause you to miss some very important opportunities.

Moreover, dealing with your emotions should under no circumstances be an excuse to neglect your children. As a parent you have a responsibility to your children that cannot be shirked and you must do everything in your power to give them what they need. You should definitely deal with your emotions, but remember to continue about your life while you're at it.

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Having said that, I will now move on to your question about your family dynamics. It is not uncommon for people, even those in a very close relationship, to develop certain undesirable feelings towards each other. Jealousy is one of them. While it is not something we want or are proud of, be aware that you are certainly not the only one experiencing such feelings.

It is also normal for a child to lean more towards either parent, and that is subject to change at any given moment – as childhood behaviors normally do. You might feel like your child should feel more indebted to you as his mother, who has given so much more to him than his father has. But children are not able to grasp this logic, so expecting them to come to this conclusion would be somewhat delusional.

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Of course there are cases where a child gravitating toward one parent is a problem. And it's important to notice when anything becomes extreme, as it can be a sign of a bigger underlying issue that would be a shame to ignore. Yet as long as there is nothing extreme going on, such as your child expecting you to wake your sleeping husband to give him his bottle, there isn't really much for you to be worried about. If your child sees you competing for his love, he might subconsciously begin using his powers to turn you against each other and also use it as leverage to get what he wants. If anything like this is going on, you have a real problem. Otherwise, let it go and it will pass.

For now, if you really find his behavior disturbing, perhaps you might want to observe your husband interacting with your child. Is it possible that he is doing something that you might not be doing yet? Is he more patient, more playful, more focused when he listens to your son? You might want to try to do some of the things he does and see if your child starts noticing you more.

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There are parents who try to "buy" their child's love by stuffing them with gifts or sweets, and while that may work in the short term it is not healthy and should not be encouraged or pursued. As long as there is a healthy dynamic between your spouse and your child, there is no reason to be jealous. After all, as a couple you are one unit. It is not about "me" and "you", it is about "us". Just like a store owner wouldn't be upset if a customer came in when his partner was there, it shouldn't bother you when your child is closer to your significant other. On the contrary, when your child grows up secure in the knowledge that your husband and you are on one page, and asking something from one is the same as asking something from the other because you are both in sync, it will give him the security and stability he needs to grow up a healthy, well-rounded child.

Sometimes, when parents are at odds with each other, they purposely try to lure the children away from their spouse as a form of taunting them by showing off as the "better parent". I am pleased that this does not seem to be the case in your family, being that your husband also wants to help you find a way to deal with this situation.

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Every problem has a benefit too. In this case I think it's important to mention that sometimes when you think about the opposite problem it might help you get a little perspective and realize that you are luckier than you think. There are mothers who complain that their children overburden them because they will only let their mother help them with things. Others are even more extreme and refuse to have anything to do with their fathers and there is no relationship there at all. Baruch Hashem that is not your problem.

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It's good to keep the following in mind. The time from when you enter into the marriage until you become parents is meant to be utilized to build your relationship with each other and find your unique rhythm and dance. That way, by the time your children come, you have established a healthy and secure foundation for them to grow up on and you will BEZ"H model the lifestyle that your children will be happy to follow.

I hope some of what I had to say was helpful and I wish you much Nachas and closeness from your child.

All the best, Rabbi Shimon Gruen

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