Torah Lessons for the Home

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

| Parshas Va'era |

Me You n' We

PARSHAS VA'ERA: CREATING AND MAINTAINING BOUNDARIES

In this week's *parsha* we read the words of Hashem: "On that day I will separate the land of Goshen, the land inhabited by My people, that the Arov will not be found there etc., and I will delineate the boundaries of your people versus those of My people." (8, 17). The *meforshim* explain: Salvation could not arrive until there was clear demarcation between *Yisroel* and *Mitzri*. We are not a nation unless we are fully separated from the nations. We affirm this every week saying, המבדיל בין קודש לחול, בין ישראל לעמים, Hashem separates us from the nations.

On the other hand, we know that it is our duty to be an *ohr lagoyim*, a light unto the nations (Yeshaya 4:26). The Jewish people are supposed to be visible enough to the gentiles so that they want to imitate us. "You shall keep my commandments; they are what make you wise in the eyes of the nations. They will look at you and say 'Behold this great nation is wise and understanding'." (Devarim 4, 6).

We must maintain a certain relationship with the gentiles, but the only way for that relationship to succeed is if there are clear boundaries in place.

BOUNDARIES: THE CRUCIAL FACTOR

I devoted a full chapter to the topic of relationship boundaries in my book "Get Along With Everyone" as well as in "The Basics of Shalom Bayis". In my opinion this topic is just so crucial to healthy relationships and so often misunderstood, that it bears repeating again and again.

In order for a relationship of any type, to be successful, it must be defined by certain parameters. Who is in this relationship, and what is in it for them? I've found that the best way to do this is to divide the interactions of a couple into the three categories of Mine, Yours and Ours. Some of the things in my marriage belong to me, some of them to my wife, and some of them pertain to both of us equally. Most conflicts arise when boundaries are breached, so care must be taken to allow each spouse his or her space in the marriage. This is a topic that is often misunderstood, people have so little understanding of it. They tell me "Shouldn't my husband change to make me happy?" and the answer is no. It may be a nice thing to do, but it is certainly not required, or even necessarily recommended. You married this man and he's just

as entitled to have tastes and opinions as you are.

NOT JUST FOR CONFLICT PREVENTION

I just want to clear up a common misconception before we tackle this subject. Boundaries are not put in place because there are problems; the neighbors are always fighting, so they put up a fence. No, that's not why a marriage needs boundaries. Boundaries are there in order for the marriage to function smoothly.

A marriage is a union between two individuals. For optimal results each individual should be treated as such, and his unique preferences respected. Hashem created all people with their own way of thinking, with their own desires, likes and dislikes. You don't marry so that you can lose your personality and fall into some sort of joined mold. Marriage should bring out the best in you, not suppress it. How can you feel loved or cared for if you have to negate *you* in order to feel it?

MINE YOURS AND OURS

When something pertains to both of you, there's no excuse for ignoring your spouse, nor is there any excuse for you feel you weren't listened to. When it's 'ours', it pertains to both of us, and both of our opinions should factor in the decision. When something is not 'ours', the ball is essentially in the court of one of the parties. That is not to say that the other party can't express an opinion, but it has to be with the mutual understanding that "this decision is 'yours'."

BUT IT'S MINE

While the "Mine Yours Ours" approach should work perfectly, selfish people will always find a way around it. Like a man said to me; "If my wife wears pointy yellow shoes everyone will look at *me* funny, so it's really Mine!" This couple was a good match because his wife had the same issue "How can my husband grow a beard if it bothers *me* so much?"

When people get into manipulative mode it may be hard to recognize the truth, but the fact is that if your neighbor doesn't like your wife's shoes, that's his problem. Your job is to respect your spouse, and your husband's beard is *his* beard and his wife's shoes are *her* shoes. A healthy relationship is where you recognize each other as individuals and you are happy letting your wife get her way, you're happy letting your husband get his way. You recognize that this is the man I married, this is the woman I married and if I disagree with her tastes, that's ok, but this is who my spouse is.

DON'T YOU HAVE TO BE ACCOMODATING?

Don't we know that an *isha ksheira,* a good wife, is one who "goes along with her husband's wishes"? Don't we know that a husband has to "love his wife like he loves himself and honor her *more* than he honors himself!?" (Rambam). So shouldn't your spouse try to be accommodating towards you? And the answer is no. *You* should try to be accommodating towards your spouse. But whether your spouse wants to accommodate you or not; that's his business. Don't overstep your boundaries. Just because he cares for you, he no longer loves himself?

Another point: an *isha ksheira* is one who goes along with her husband's wishes, not one who is dragged kicking and screaming. If you feel that your boundaries are consistently being violated, that your space is constantly being invaded; then you've crossed over from being accommodating to being exploited. A wife's goodhearted nature should never be used against her.

THE KEY TO CONNECTION

Chazal tell us אם אין דעת הבדלה מנין – "*daas* is a prerequisite to proper separation". The kabbalists explain that the *middah* of *daas*, knowledge, corresponds to *dveikus,* connection. True knowledge is achieved through properly connecting with the subject matter at the deepest level. This is why the *passuk* states "Adam ואדם ידע את חוה אשתו – 'knew' (he connected with) his wife Chava". And this is why separation can only be

achieved through *daas*. It is only possible to separate that which is already connected.

Thus, proper boundaries can only be achieved in a marriage if there already exists a deep love between the spouses. Let's explain this further.

DON'T VIOLATE MY BOUNDARIES

Some of my clients have been to traditional marriage therapy before coming to see me and they get confused about this topic. In traditional therapy the concept of boundaries is often discussed in a different context. "In order not to get hurt, you must set boundaries".

I am not referring to difficult situations. I'm talking about healthy boundaries for healthy relationships. A relationship should be defined by clear boundaries. A marriage needs boundaries like a country needs borders. You may not need landmines and snipers at the borders, but if there's no border, then who are you?

LACK OF BOUNDARIES UPSETS A RELATIONSHIP

Recently I was counseling a man whose wife knew no boundaries. Everything in the marriage was decided by her. And she put prices and conditions on everything; "I'll give you this only if you do that. You can't do that because you didn't do this yet". I told him that he can't accept it any longer. Your spouse shouldn't be bossing you around all the time. It destroys the balance of your relationship. If the husband gets resentful and the relationship sours, ultimately both will suffer. By constantly telling someone how to act, you're in effect telling him, I only care for you when you behave in a certain way; this is unacceptable.

It takes a lot of *chochma*, diplomacy and tact to work around such a situation, but it must be done. A situation where one spouse dominates and manipulates the other is not a healthy one, and must be corrected. It might be advisable to seek counsel with a neutral third party in such a case, to find the right balance and help in implementing it.

Let's just mention that some situations do call for overstepping boundaries. If someone's personaldecisions are affecting you and your family, it calls for intervention. But don't do it yourself, make sure to discuss it with a competent rabbi. Don't act on your own, get someone else's advice. Sometimes you need to put your foot down and sometimes more will be accomplished by remaining silent.

THE ANXIOUS CHOSSON

It was two weeks before his wedding when Simcha came to see me. He was beset with anxiety. "What happens if my *kallah* doesn't like this about me, or that, or the other thing". He literally couldn't sleep at night because of these thoughts. If someone is taking the great step of marrying you, hopefully, their feelings for you will override this or that triviality. If they can't, there is something wrong. Who else should accept you if not the person who cares for you most?

Perhaps not all marriages are like that, but they certainly should be. A wife shouldn't feel that she will be accepted if only she changes. You don't get married to a reflection of yourself. One shouldn't say "I would care for you if only you were more like me". Rather than manipulating your spouse to get what you want, manipulate yourself to accept your spouse for who he is.

CHINUCH: DON'T TOLERATE HIJACKING

In *chinuch* too, there must be boundaries. A child may tell you "Totty you *have* to…" when my child tells me that, I say: "What is this, a holdup?" In our home we have boundaries and our children know that if a request is phrased as "you have to", then the response is an automatic no. A child must know that he can't make decisions for his parents or make demands. However reasonable the demands may be, giving in to them sends a wrong message.

A CHILD IS A PERSON TOO

Mine, Yours and Ours apply to children too. A child is entitled to her own space as well. Why should there be a power struggle over something that's none of your business anyway? If your daughter wants a specific pencil case, why should you be fighting with her about it? If it's particularly expensive, that's fine, you can explain that to your child. But if it's within your price range and appropriate for school, so why are you mixing in? It's hers! Not because she's saying so, but because you understand so.

A child doesn't have to feel intimidated and controlled all the time. Sometimes parents turn to me because their children are defiant. They fail to realize that they are the cause of their child's defiance. If a child is consistently smothered, if his boundaries are constantly invaded, we can be confident that sooner or later he'll bush back to protect his borders. You can't constantly attack someone's borders and expect obedience.

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-Q&A-

Please feel free to send any questions, on this topic or any topic to RabbiGruen@Lehair.org

Question: Why do I have to conform to so many things in order to get my child into a *frum* school. Why are they so controlling? Why don't they just teach my kids and leave me alone!?

Answer: I have a different question: Why are there rules for kids? A school should educate children on what is right and what is wrong, they should do this so effectively that rules should be superfluous. That's with regard to the children. But since the school has no opportunity to educate parents, it makes sense to give them a list of rules to abide by. If you want me to educate your child, we need to be coming from a similar place, and so there are certain demands that need to be met if you want me to deal with you.

But there's another, perhaps more important point here. The rules of a school aren't there to coerce anyone into what they don't believe in. There are many different approaches to Judaism and each sect has their own schools. The "frum" rules that you refer to weren't put in place to make *chassidim* out of *litvaks*. The rules are there as an assessment of whether you're the right fit for the school. Each school caters to a certain standard of religion, and if you're not willing to abide by the rules you're free to find a different version of yiddishkeit and its own school. Nobody is forcing parents into anything. The fact is that you yourself have "frum" rules, you wouldn't accept kids from non-shomer-shabbos families into your school either, right? So everyone has their own standards and should seek out a place that caters to their standards.

You should also keep in mind that schools get way more applications than they have space for, so obviously they'll accept those that seem to be a better fit. There may be corruption out there as well, but these points are often misinterpreted…

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