

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

INHERITING AND TRANSMITTING AN AYIN TOVAH

The *mishnah* in Pirkei Avos teaches that we should be the *talmidim* of Avraham Avinu, not of Bilam Harasha. As descendants of Avraham Avinu, we surely can develop his traits, foremost among them an *ayin tovah*, but that doesn't mean transformation happens on its own. It definitely requires real and ongoing work to acquire this *middah*.

Having an *ayin tovah* means that when we see other people with positive attributes, with success in their lives, with all the good things that we want for ourselves too, we feel happy for them and "*fargin*" them. There's almost no real translation for that word as it's a Yiddishe *middah* and one that's not easy to attain. It's incredibly challenging to reach the level of truly feeling glad for someone else with no taint of jealousy — yet we still need to attempt it.

As hard as it is for us to achieve this, for some reason, we expect our children to be able to overcome the very same impulses and emotions that we often resign ourselves to never overcoming. When we look at their "petty" disputes and complaints, we see them as trivial and expect, even demand, that they eradicate their jealous feelings.

Finding the right way to address children is key to *chinuch*. Their jealousy is not unlike our own, and therefore, the best approach is to be realistic about them just as we are about ourselves. Assuming that all it'll take is a one-on-one lecture about the gravity of jealousy is unreasonable. We must be understanding and validating if we want our messages to be well received, and yet, just as we must avoid resigning ourselves to being less than what we can be, so too must we keep raising our children with not just the hope but also the expectation that they will grow up — and grow.

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Parshas
Balak

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Good evening Rabbi Gruen,

First of all I would like to thank you for the *shiurim* on TorahAnytime. I'm a huge fan of yours and really benefit from them.

My question is as follows. I have two sweet boys, *ka"h*; the older one just turned four and the younger one is almost three. Since they are so close in age, they have this competition every step of the way — they both want to be first for everything (which sometimes leads to dangerous situations if they're both rushing to the same place).

Please let me know what the solution is and how to deal with it, or, if you've already dealt with something similar, you could refer me to another class where this topic was discussed.

Thanks in advance and wishing you much *hatzlachah*!



I may have addressed similar questions in the past, as you are far from the only parent dealing with sibling rivalry and jealousy. Since this is such a commonly experienced issue, it's worth revisiting the topic. I'm hopeful that many people will benefit.

Jealousy between siblings is not only common — it's to be expected. It's always been this way, ever since the very first set of siblings appeared. Conflict fueled by jealousy is something we find throughout our history, even during times when the Jewish People were on a very high spiritual level. In the Gemara, we find that Chazal, far from being shocked or surprised at jealousy among siblings, even endorse the feelings in certain circumstances, such as an orphaned girl wanting and being entitled to the same kind of wedding her older sister had. Yet, for some reason, so many parents are not just shocked but horrified when they see their children fighting, resenting what the other has, and so forth.

Avoiding an extreme response to this is important. There is no reason why parents of jealous siblings should interpret the situation as a sign that their *chinuch* has failed and their children are doomed. Our children are just children, only starting out in their life-long struggle to overcome challenges in *middos*. Being realistic about what they can attain and when, is key. I recall seeing a series of children's *middos* books in a store, each one marked as suitable for a different age group, starting from age two and going up through the years. The book on jealousy was marked "age five and up." Someone else in the store wryly commented, "I think 'age 20 up' would be more accurate."

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So, why do we react so strongly to faults in our children which we share? It's not necessarily a bad thing that we do, of course — no one should give up on their children, just as no one should give up on himself. It's possible that we see our children as mirroring our own issues, which is why they hit home harder. Perhaps we think that "If they start working on it now, they won't end up like me..."

Given that insight, it's important to remember that just as all the knowledge and logic in the world hasn't helped us much to overcome jealous feelings, logic won't help our children much either (if at all). What we can do is encourage and praise good attitudes and model better ways of dealing with challenges, while empathizing with what they are going through. In the natural course of things, children outgrow most petty rivalries.

What about the forms of jealousy that are not outgrown? While it's important not to over-dramatize the evils of jealousy, it's just as important not to downplay them. Parents should not blithely dismiss jealousy as "just one of those things." It is common and it is to be expected — and it should be dealt with, as part of our responsibilities as their parents. Certainly if there is any danger involved when children push and shove in trying to be "first," or if one child is bullying another, this has to be stopped right away.

And, we should certainly avoid making things worse, such as, showing favoritism to one child.

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When dealing with specific instances, debating and explaining is unlikely to work with children, especially when they're still small. (It generally doesn't work with adults, either.) Jealousy is an emotional issue that isn't solved with even the most flawless logical arguments. All we can do is sympathize with a child's feelings and show them we understand, and then, in a calm moment, suggest a solution, when possible.

The "solution" might be one of them getting the first turn the next time around, or just a reminder that they had the first turn the previous time. But these ideas shouldn't be presented before showing that you understand and feel for your child. If you put forward a solution along with an attitude of, "This is how things work, whether you like it or not," you can expect the child to remain with his hard feelings. When a parent conveys a sense of empathy and understanding, the suggestion will likely be accepted far more readily.

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While younger children are often jealous of older siblings and their privileges, this kind of rivalry can be easier to address. Even when they resist accepting why an older brother or sister has something they don't, they probably

do understand it, and it can help to calmly tell them, "When you're four, I'll let you do that, too."

When it's the other way around, and an older child feels upset or even insulted at being treated just like a younger sibling, there may be ways to make them feel older and more important. This doesn't have to be achieved by tipping things too far in the other direction where the older child always goes first, gets a bigger reward, etc..

As children grow older, jealousy can also surface when one child is obviously more successful than another. Dealing with such situations is part of life, but that doesn't mean that parents should just tell their children to just deal with it.. Each child shines in a different way, but some need more polishing, and that's the parent's job — to help each child see his strengths and to build upon them.

Giving each child enough individual attention will go a long way in general to easing all kinds of upsets and angers, and while the time spent is sometimes hard to find, it's something that pays incredible dividends.

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I would also like to end by addressing one additional point of jealousy, not between siblings but between members of the community or extended family, where other issues can come into play if families have different ways of doing things. Certainly we need to instill pride in our children that we hold ourselves to higher standards and aim higher in general. At the same time, we need to be aware that there are grey areas between the "clearly prohibited" and "permitted," and that our children are constantly being exposed to those grey areas. It's important to know if and when to compromise on our terms and willingly allow something that ideally, we would prefer not to, to avoid children becoming obsessed with the feeling that they are missing out. This is no different from typical jealousy which is so normal that it's hard to eradicate.

Better than compromising is to offer kosher alternatives, which may be expensive in the short-term but will be well worth the investment, as they communicate to our children that we understand their feelings and want to make their lives as sweet and Torah'dig as possible.

With enough sensitivity, we can help our children learn how to tolerate the difficult pills of life and even grow from them, to be happy, well-adjusted, *ehrliche Yidden, be'ezras Hashem*.

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