Torah Lessons for the Home

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

| Parshas Matos |

Loyalty and Competition

From Father to Husband

Parshas Matos begins with the *halachos* of *nedarim*. One of the things that we learn about is how a father has the right to accept or nullify his daughter's *nedarim*. The *posuk* then continues that if this daughter gets married, her *nedarim* are now up to her husband. Now, only he can make the decisions about her *nedarim*; if he likes them, good, and if not they are invalid.

These *halachos* contain an important insight into the proper balance between a woman's relationship with her husband and her interaction with other people in her life. While single she is under her father's jurisdiction, but once she gets married the rules change. Her husband takes the place of her father.

Is it a Mitzvah?

We also see this in the *mitzvah* of honoring parents. Men and women, single and married are obligated in this *mitzvah*. However, the *halacha* is that a married woman is *patur* from serving her father or doing work for him, because she has a preceding obligation to her husband.

She is not just *patur* but allowed to do it if she wants like we find by *davening* or sitting in the *succah*. Rather, she is *patur* because her obligation to her husband comes first, and giving precedence to honoring her parents would be an aveirah rather than a mitzvah. Suppose someone's mother would like help in cleaning for Pesach, but her husband would prefer for her to be home; going to her mother would be the wrong thing to do.

The Torah Perspective

It is very important for a wife to realize that her husband is the new "father". This is an issue that comes up in many marriages and it must be clarified. The framework of marriage cannot be determined by concepts such as a wife "setting boundaries" in her duties to her husband or "protecting her own space" and similar new-age ideas. The Torah perspective is that once a woman is married, her duty is to please her husband.

Even if your husband tolerates your putting someone else's needs first, it is still the wrong thing to do. It might not be *assur*, but it's not the right way for a wife to act. Obviously if he says openly that he's happy with her helping her mother, then that is fine, but otherwise the rule should be as we see in the parsha: *B'neureha bais aviha*, in

her youth she is in her father's house. Afterwards, when she is married, her place is in her husband's house.

Loyalty is ...

I would like to bring up a related topic, and that is the *midda* of loyalty to one's spouse.

The Gemara explains that the reason a husband can nullify his wife's vows is because "*Kol HaNoderes Al Da'as Ba'alah Noderes*", women make vows with the mindset that they should be subject to their husband's approval. According to the gemara, it is a woman's innate nature to be extremely loyal to her spouse. Had she known that her vow would make him unhappy, she would have never made it!

The Torah perspective of a woman is that her husband comes before anyone else. The opposite is true too, by the way, a husband must always put his wife ahead of anyone else.

You Also Have Needs

This doesn't necessarily mean that you need to put your spouse's needs before your own. Actually, if a person is not happy themselves, they probably won't be able to make anyone else happy either. But no one else should come before the wife or husband.

A husband should never feel that he has to compete with someone else for his wife's attention. For example, a husband comes home and finds his wife on the phone with her sister. Now that he is home, he would like to talk to her. As she continues the conversation with her sister, he begins to get upset, feeling that he is competing with her for his wife's attention.

The wife might want to explain that this is the only time she can reach her sister, or to blame his insecurity, and question why he's getting triggered by something like that. But she should understand that when there is competition for a spouse's attention, it is not a sign of a healthy relationship. Loyalty means he should always come first.

Just Don't Trigger

A man came to the doctor begging for his professional help. "Doctor, Doctor whenever I move my hand in a certain way it hurts me terribly".

"I would say that you should be careful to avoid moving it in that way!" was the doctor's response.

Obviously, one wants a solution to the problem from a doctor, not advice on how to circumvent it. In life, though, sometimes the simplest and most direct answer to a problem is to stop doing whatever is causing it. If your spouse is getting triggered by something that you are doing, stop doing it!

I can't have friends?

People ask, does this mean that I can't talk to my sister? No, of course not! Talk to her all you like, but if you are doing it when your husband comes home and he wants your attention, then the right thing to do is to get off the phone. This has to be seen in the proper light. This is not an obligation or something that a person should feel that they are being forced to do. It's simply that a healthy relationship means that your spouse deserves your attention before anyone else and he should never feel that he has to compete with anyone to get that attention.

The opposite is true as well. If a man comes home late from shul because he is schmoozing with friends and his wife feels that he is putting them before her, that is wrong! She must feel that she is her husband's *first* priority, that she comes before anyone else.

This doesn't mean that once a person is married he can't have any relationships outside of the marriage. Actually, a controlling spouse is also a problem that needs to be dealt with. However, a person shouldn't feel that he has to compete for his spouse's interest or attention.

What You Should Say

Let's go back to our earlier example, of a husband who comes home and finds his wife on the phone. As we

said, she should really get off and focus on her husband. But there would be nothing wrong with saying, "Now that you are home I would like to have the time with you, but my sister is only available now, do you mind if I speak with her another few minutes?"

The same is true for the husband. He can explain to his wife how much he needs to be able to spend some time with his friends, but that he doesn't want to do it at her expense. As long as things are explained nicely the spouse won't feel that their position in the relationship is threatened.

Changing Your Mind

Sometimes a husband will reject his wife's suggestion but then accept the very same advice from someone else! This happens all the time and it is so hurtful. "Oh! Coming from me that idea was no good, but now that your friend said it all of a sudden you think that it is worthwhile?"

If you change your mind about a recommendation you previously turned down, be sensitive to your spouse's feelings. It would be advisable not to mention the reason you're changing your mind. Just say: "I thought it over and I think that you were right after all."

A Respected Opinion

Even if it's coming from a Rav that the husband consulted, the wife's kallah teacher or someone's therapist, it still creates an unhealthy sense of someone else competing with the spouse.

It is definitely important to turn to Rabbonim and others who are qualified to give guidance and advice. However you must be very sensitive, in how their viewpoint is presented. One possibility might be to say the following. "Your opinion is certainly the most important. I care about you and my greatest desire is to please you. I only went to the Rav to hear the right way to look at this question in halacha or hashkafa, but I wouldn't consider making any decisions without discussing it with you, so let's try to be on the same page." As we mentioned earlier, giving over the viewpoint without discussing its source can help avoid friction.

Competition Hurts

Chaim* was learning exceptionally well in cheder and he felt very good about how he was doing. This feeling of success was a constant motivation for him to keep on going. One day Yehuda* joined the class. Yehuda was an excellent learner too, and this created competition for Chaim, robbing him of the positive attention and taking away all his enjoyment in the learning. He began to feel discouraged, eventually abandoning the beautiful path that he had been on.

Obviously the second boy had done nothing wrong by joining the class and the Rebbe had been right in giving some of his attention to Yehuda. Just the same, the feeling of having to compete for the Rebbe's attention had a very negative effect on Chaim.

In a deeper and more committed relationship like marriage, a person's expectation and need to be their spouse's first priority is much greater. Having that challenged would be much more serious.

Maybe it's Not Competition

Our discussion has focused on being sensitive about causing a feeling of competition, but this issue is certainly not one-sided. The spouse that is feeling hurt needs to be careful not to misinterpret the husband's or wife's interest in other people. It really need not be understood as putting them into second place.

A person has many people that are involved in their life and each one is a different type of relationship. A wife's connection to her mother, or a husband's with his friends isn't the same as their relationship with each other, and shouldn't be mistakenly perceived as competition.

If you feel that your spouse is misinterpreting something as competition and getting hurt, talk to them about it. Discuss it and try to resolve the issue. But as long as they perceive

it as competition, be sensitive and don't just ignore it.

Chinuch: You're My Only Child

This issue is also relevant in raising our children. At home with siblings, and at school with classmates, a child can sometimes feel that they need to compete with others over the attention of their parent or teacher. Ideally every child should be treated as a true *ben yochid*, but practically that doesn't really happen. Therefore, it is important that we give our children a strong healthy feeling of their special uniqueness and to make a point of noticing the areas in which they excel.

Especially when you're in touch with a teacher about your child's behavior or an incident in school, be careful that your child shouldn't feel threatened by your stance on the subject. Even if you side with the teacher, your child should still feel loved and understand that your position and actions are motivated by your love for him. Your child needs to feel that they are the most important one to you.

-Q&A-

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

Question: I began to see that my son was not happy in cheder, so I called his Rebbe to discuss this with him. I felt that instead of being attentive and sympathetic to the problem, the Rebbe got very defensive. After several times, I saw that there was no point in calling, but I don't want my son's unhappiness to be ignored. What can I do about this?

Answer: I don't know how you sounded on the phone. But if you gave the attitude of accusing or blaming, it makes sense that the Rebbe became defensive.

There's no reason for you to feel uncomfortable or intimidated either, just be open and clear saying something like, "I see and value all the effort you put into my son, but I'm noticing that he is just not happy. What can we do to help him?"

This stresses the cooperation between you over your son's happiness, and avoids putting him on the spot to give an explanation or come up with an answer.

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