Rabbi Shimon Gruen

Torah Lessons for the Home

{ Lech Lecha 5780 }

Dealing With Conflict

Run Away!

In this week's Parsha we learn a great lesson from Avraham Avinu. The *passuk* (13, 8) states אל נא תהי מריבה בינינו – "*I beg of you please! Let there not be conflict between us – we are brothers*"!

So what should our attitude be when faced with *machlokes*, as Avraham was? To run as far away from it as possible. Avram was Lot's uncle and his *rebbe*. He could have easily called Lot aside, and said: "Look, your servants made a mistake, this is what is right, and this is what must be done".

But no. what does Avram say? "*I beg of you, please! We're brothers!*" and he continues: הלא כל הארץ לפניך הפרד נא מעלי אם השמאל ואימנה ואם הימין ואשמאילה – "*There is so much opportunity for you, the whole land is open; let us separate - if you go this way, I'll go the other way*"...

Avraham Avinu does not try to explain why he is right and Lot is wrong, there is no debate. He states "We cannot coexist peacefully, and probably both of us are at fault. Let's split on good terms."

Avraham Avinu knew that "There are no winners in a fight."

"Not Fighting" Vs. "Peaceful Coexistence"

Sometimes people think that if they've succeeded in avoiding a fight, they've conquered the *yetzer hara* and succeeded at living peacefully. But "not fighting" is not enough.

After Avram and Lot split up, there was a war in Sodom, the place of Lot's new residence. "*And Avram mobilized a huge force to come to Lot's aid*" (14, 14). It wasn't an easy feat and it wasn't something you do for an enemy. Avraham worked hard on himself, and he actually felt love for "his brother" (ibid.). It wasn't just the absence of hate.

How Important Is It Really?

When faced with conflict we need to learn to look at it through Avraham Avinu's lenses. We need to understand how terrible *machlokes* is and feel the אל נא תהי מריבה בינינו "*Please, I beg of you, let there not be conflict between us!*" How important is this issue really? Is it really impossible to give up on?

I always tell people who are not ready to concede on a certain issue: "If the issue is not really important, you can surely give up on it, let the other side have their way. But if the issue is very important, then certainly let the other side have their way!"

The more important the issue is to you, and the closer it is to your heart, all the more

bitter the fight will be. You don't want a bitter fight. Once a fight reaches certain proportions it's nearly impossible to control. The *seforim* compare *machlokes* to fire. When people have opposing positions on a matter that touches them very deeply, it quickly becomes a blazing inferno, a wildfire of epic proportions.

So if the issue is very important, let your spouse have her way. Over time, perhaps things will change; perhaps you will have a chance of winning her over. But if you insist on your position now, good luck trying to battle that blaze!

The Manipulator And The Schmatte

It is so important to learn how to be *mevater* and accept someone else's views. Your *shalom bayis* is so immeasurably improved when you're not digging your heels into the sand over everything, and getting stuck on all the details.

Sometimes people tell me: "But how can I keep giving in? I don't want to be a *schmatte* and get stepped on all the time!" I'll share an interesting observation with you. Most of the people who are afraid of being *schmattes*, are in fact the ones who are treating others as *schmattes*. It's the woman who is constantly manipulating her husband, or the man who is constantly stepping on his wife who argue "but how can I be a *schmatte*?!".

You don't have to worry about becoming a *schmatte*! There are many levels between someone who gets her way *all the time*, and one who *never* gets her way. Somebody who can never compromise doesn't need to worry about becoming a *schmatte*, it's okay, you can compromise a bit here and there!

The Rewards Of Giving In

Recently I attended a funeral, where the eulogies were all about how this man always made sure to live harmoniously with others, how he distanced himself from various conflicts even when he was right and would have been the "winner". Everybody respects such a man, you only gain from being nice to others.

Chazal tell us (Rosh Hashana 17a) כל המעביר על מדותיו, מעבירין לו על כל פשעיו "*One who doesn't stick to his nature, but gives in to other people, is forgiven for all of his sins*". If you'll forgive other people easily, Hashem will forgive you easily. That's a pretty good deal to make!

The False Peace

The famed Chozeh of Lublin *ztz"l*, once said: "It is preferable to have a peace that is false than to have a war that is real!" Yes you're right, yes you have the *emes*, the truth and righteousness on your side. But you have war. Sometimes you're better off with a bit of falsehood, as long as you have peace.

This is especially true when dealing with those we love. If you have a fight with a co-worker, with someone in *shul*, with your neighbor – it's not so important, your emotions aren't running that high. But when dealing with your spouse or with other close family members, remember: I love this person! At the end of the day, you love this person, do you really want to "go to war"? Are you really ready to lose a loving relationship just so that "justice" is done?

Life is so much simpler when we keep the *passuk* of אל נא תהי מריבה בינינו in our minds and remember to avoid conflict at all costs.

Being Right For A Higher Purpose

Actually, there's another lesson that we can learn from this *parsha*: This wasn't about Lot interfering with Avram's personal interests. It was about thievery on the part of Lot's servants. His shepherds were appropriating property which was not rightfully theirs.

The rightful property owners; the people who were being wronged wouldn't differentiate between the shepherds of Lot and Avram. They would say "Men from the camp of Avram, 'the Prince of

the Lord' (Bereishis 23:6) have stolen from us". It could lead to a terrible *chillul Hashem*! Avram should have rebuked Lot, not for his honor, but for the *kavod* of Hashem!

But here we learn that we don't use Hashem for *machlokes*. We run away from *machlokes*! Your husband gets up late for *davening*? Let Hashem deal with it; we don't invite conflicts, אל נא תהי מריבה בינינו.

The Secret To Getting Rich

The *gemara* (Bava Metzia 59a) tells us that a husband who honors his wife will be blessed with ample *parnassah*. The story is told of Rav Pinchas'l Koritz'er *ztz"l*, whose wife was a big spender. He once said to her "Ser'tze, my crown, should I argue with you over your spending habits? One argument will cost me my whole *parnassah*!"

Notice what he did there: he honored her – thus opening for himself the heavenly channels of abundance – avoided a conflict, *and* got his message across about her excessive spending. בתחבולות תעשה לך מלחמה –"Go to war with cunning" (Mishlei 24, 6). But if you can *avoid* war through cunning, obviously that's the best choice!

When you're in a relationship with somebody, or rather, when you're in a marriage; it's a big deal. It's all encompassing. Don't limit yourself to one detail and destroy the entire relationship over it. You worked so hard to build a home, will you destroy it because one brick is out of place?

Chinuch: Children Learn By Example

Before we talk about avoiding conflicts with our children, it is important to make mention of the following. You can teach your kids whatever "morals" you want, but they will learn from your actions.

"Let there not be conflict בינינו – between us". What is the relationship between the spouses? When the father is on one side and the mother on the other side, who's stuck in the middle? בנינו "our children". If there is a conflict between the parents, the children will feel it. It's very important to avoid that from happening..

Not Noticing Everything

Sometimes a child will do something wrong, and the parent will pounce on her before she even realized what she did wrong! You don't have to point everything out immediately. You don't have to keep an exact tally of the times your child disobeyed the rules. It's ok to be a bit flexible and "not notice" everything.

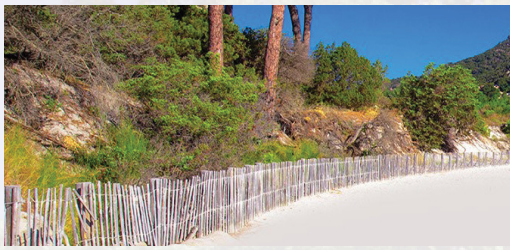
Constant criticism can destroy a child. How happy can your daughter be if at every moment she's being reprimanded for something? How do you think your son feels when his flaws are constantly pointed out to him? "I'm worthless, I never do anything right anyhow..."

Your child will not grow up a *pere adam*, a wild animal, just because you set him straight three times a day instead of thirty. Actually he has a bigger chance of growing up as an unhealthy adult if all he hears is constant criticism.

Be Positive

A child is allowed to get criticism once in a while, but you must make sure that the positivity clearly outnumbers the negativity.. Instead of pointing out what your child did wrong, you might say "You always remember when it's your turn to sweep, it's good that you forgot! Now I know to appreciate that I don't usually need to remind you!". If you can dress criticism up as a compliment, it's wonderful. But even when you can't, compliment her about other things. Don't criticize if you're not also complimenting.

Let us always remember to follow in the spirit of our forefather Avraham, and distance ourselves from arguing and bitterness. We can then hope to be blessed with a happy and peaceful atmosphere at home: a happy marriage, and happy children.



Q&A

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



Question:

My son, whom you would probably refer to as a "fragile child", came home from school with a very distressing tale. He just got a new *melamed* who acted very nastily towards him. The *melamed* took something away from him, embarrassed him in public, and also added some snide comments which hurt him deeply. How am I to react to this scenario?

Answer:

The first thing we must be careful to do, is not to attack the *melamed*. He is your son's *rebbi*, and it is your job to ensure that your son always treats him with the utmost respect. Many parents think that the way to sympathize with their children is by attacking the *melamed*, teacher or *menahel*. At the end of the day, these are the people your children must look up to, and you're sending a very unhealthy message by attacking them.

Of course, you can't attack the child either – don't blame the victim. Don't say: "Teachers never lie" "You probably deserved it" or things like that. Comments like these can deeply wound a child and his entire sense of self.

A child needs to feel he has a listening ear with his father. That his father heard him, and took him seriously: "Wow! He really did that? Is that how he made you feel? What do you think we should do about this? How can we fix this situation?"

You don't have to act on the child's recommendations, but give him a few options; ask him: "Would you like me to speak with your *rebbi*? Or the *menahel*?" Let him know that he is being taken seriously.

It might also be a good idea to try and get the child to see the *melamed*'s side of the story. Maybe he can understand that it's important that rules are enforced at the beginning of the semester. Maybe you can find some other *limud zechus*. But don't push the child to see his *rebbi*'s side. Put in a suggestion and leave it at that. You don't want the child to feel that you're siding with his teacher rather than with him.

Now, how to deal with the *melamed*: When calling a teacher, it's always good to double check the story with him first. Don't call up yelling and screaming "My son said this, my son said that!" Your child's teacher should always be treated with respect and dignity. No one on the school staff appreciates it when a parent takes his child's side and goes on the attack. Don't set yourself or your child up for difficulty.

Once you've listened respectfully to the other side of the story, you can ask for your son's feelings to be taken into account. Say, "Look, you're an experienced educator, you've probably already noticed that my child is more sensitive than some others. And of course I trust your abilities, but maybe here and there you can cut him some slack. Even though you must certainly reprimand him when he's wrong, maybe you can do it in a way that won't hurt him. I trust that you can figure out a smart way to handle him…"

This *melamed* may argue with you "I *am* sensitive towards your child" or something like that. Don't argue. You've said your part, and he heard. Don't think he didn't hear! This is a great tip in general when dealing with people. If you have something to say, there's no need to argue with people over it. You say it clearly, be assertive, and just leave it at that. The other person will change when he is ready.

If you're respectful in your communication, and use a non-accusatory tone; your words will probably be heard and accepted. Basically, the child has to know that he was heard, the *melamed* has to know that he's probably right, and hopefully everyone will be happy!

To contact Rabbi Gruen please call 718.841.6557 or e-mail rabbigruen@lehair.org
To subscribe to receive the weekly essay, please email parshalessons@lehair.org