RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

Parshas Ki Seitzei

Shifting the Goalposts

Rashi tells us that the war which opens this week's Parsha was not a war of self defense or preservation; rather, it was a *milchemes hareshus*. Klal Yisrael had *chosen* to fight this war.

The Tzemach Tzedek expounds on this Rashi with an insightful lesson. He says that while sometimes we are forced into a battle with our evil inclination, sometimes we choose our battles by opening an offensive and calling the shots.

For the most part, ehrliche Yidden do not have to go to battle over major transgressions on a regular basis; we usually aren't tempted to desecrate the Shabbos or worship idols, for example. But there are many things that are just not befitting a person of our stature, or, conversely, are commendable but not required, and that is where the "war" and the temptations and challenges ensue.

The Tzemach Tzedek continues explaining that while it may seem that some of our choices are "pareve" neither *mitzvos* nor *aveiros*, actually nothing is inconsequential. Everything is either a *mitzvah* or an *aveirah* and is worth fighting for.

When it comes to relationships, for example, we often have that one red line we wouldn't cross. We wouldn't deliberately shame someone, for example, to our mind that's a clear "*aveirah*" in the relationship and something that must be avoided at all costs! But then there are the little things – like saying thank you, asking for forgiveness, complimenting – that we have no trouble forgetting to do. We may not even see it as a goal to work towards, after all, it isn't really a deal breaker in life... or is it? Sometimes, those seemingly minute details make all the difference and are definitely worthy of our "taking up" the challenge willingly, long before it is deemed crucial and mandatory.

Make those optional suggestions your "thing" to conquer and acquire, and marvel at the difference it makes in your every relationship.

Question:

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

Thank you so much for your lectures. I have not stopped listening to them! You pack so much information into each topic and explain it all so clearly!

My twelve- and ten-year-old are organizing a day camp for my younger daughter, aged 8, as well as some additional family members. My 8-year-old is not very pleased that her sister, only two years her senior, gets to boss her around and be mean to her. She therefore chooses to attend only the activities that interest her. Her older sister does not like that at all. I tried explaining to the 10-year-old how she would probably feel if her older sister bossed her around, but while she seemed to understand, her actions have not changed.

Any ideas on how to make this work? Thank you.

Answer:

Thanks for the good word on my lectures, it is greatly appreciated.

While it may not mitigate your problem, the first thing you want to keep in mind is that sibling rivalry in general, is entirely normal. Parents often only see their own children, and they can get consumed by the issues they are faced with, thinking that surely they are the only ones with this problem. Rest assured that you are in plentiful company. Children are not born knowing how to behave and get along with each other; this is what the adults in their lives are here to teach them. The challenge of jealousy caused by an age gap and privilege differences, is particularly hard for many children.

I was once in a Judaica store browsing the kids book section and I came across an interesting find. There was an entire series of children's books with an age recommendation on the cover – ranging from 2 years old and up - and I was rather surprised to notice that while books on crossing the street carefully were labeled age 3+, the book about jealousy was marked "for age 5 and up". I pointed out to someone standing near me that it seems only five year olds are capable of conquering jealousy, and he humorously quipped, I wonder if 55 year olds can! There are many adults who struggle with jealousy, and as much as we should and do teach children about it, it's still to be expected to be a real struggle for a

child! These inborn struggles and challenges don't fade away all that fast, and are sometimes here to stay. A young child will envy his friend's toy, an older child will be jealous of the one who gets to be in charge, and an adult will begrudge bigger and more consequential things. It is so important to keep in mind that for many of us, jealousy is a lifelong struggle and not at all easy to overcome.

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Interestingly, some children who are prone to jealousy find it easier while at home, and some are more comfortable in school. Sometimes, when they are around children who are their own age, they feel a greater sense of competition and need to stand out and be above everyone else, feeling entitled to have at least as much as everyone else, while at home between older and younger siblings they are accepting of their position and status. Other children are just the opposite, at home they can't handle being treated younger than their older siblings, or not being treated significantly older than their younger siblings, while at school they feel comfortable being one of the bunch. Whatever it is, it's important to acknowledge that each child is unique and finds different things difficult.

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With regard to the situation you describe in your letter. Both of your daughters have valid arguments. The younger one is right to be upset that her older sister gets to order her around, and the older one is understandably frustrated that her oldest charge is refusing to cooperate and messing with her plans.

This is why you might want to talk to each of your children separately. They both need to hear different things. When you speak to your child, validate their feelings and empathize with their position. When they feel like you understand them, they are more likely to listen to whatever you have to say.

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Instead of jumping in with a solution, you might want to try and ask the children themselves what it is that they would suggest to mitigate the problem. Often, when the child is the one who comes up with the solution, it is easier for them to implement it.

If you do end up giving a solution of your own, don't impose it on your kids. Offer it as a suggestion, and allow them to decide whether it will work for them or not. Sometimes, after a couple of days, they will come to the same conclusion as you – only then it will seem to them as if it was their idea and they will do it more gladly. If you push them towards it, though, that probably won't happen.

In your particular case, I would suggest that perhaps the older sister can offer the younger one an important job, so that she feels needed and in charge. You can also ask the younger one if there is any way she would like to contribute to the camp and have her offer it to her sisters.

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There are times when we make plans and they do not work out. For whatever reason, even after multiple attempts, it just doesn't fly. We often get stuck trying to find a way to make our plans work when in truth, our best bet would be to drop the idea altogether.

Maybe a ten-year-old was never meant to make a day camp for her eight-year-old sister? Maybe there is no workable solution? That may not just be the case here, but in many different scenarios. We need to keep an open mind and realize when a plan was not meant to be, and that sometimes, changing plans or even throwing in the towel might be the best solution yet.

A teacher once complained to the principal that her student would not conform to the school dress code, even after being repeatedly reprimanded. When the principal asked the teacher how long these infractions and reprimands have been going on, the teacher said

that it has been several weeks. The principal was perplexed. "How much longer will it take for you to realize that this doesn't work?", he asked the teacher. It was time to change tactics.

I had a similar conversation with a parent, who was having a hard time with his children's sleeping arrangements. When I told him that he should switch up the ages a bit so that there will be less fighting, he had a hard time processing this. He had become so stuck in thinking that the boys *had* to sleep together and the toddlers *had* to be in the same room, that it didn't occur to him that the solution might be as simple as changing things up a bit.

In Yeshiva, we had groups of boys getting together to learn and schmooze, and there was always this one boy who would disrupt the whole conversation and wouldn't stop acting out. it was getting so bad, that the other boys went to the *mashgiach* and suggested that perhaps this boy needs to be expelled! The *mashgiach* had a much better solution. He switched the boy to an older group, where he wasn't so comfortable, but he felt good being promoted to a more mature class. There, he couldn't help but respect the older boys and the problems receded.

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Even if we feel silly repeating ourselves, our job as parents is to teach our children the ideal way to behave. This is what *chinuch* is. We have to keep telling them what we expect of them, and eventually, the values we impart will sink in.

However, we need to remember that we can't expect more from them than we expect from ourselves. We need to be patient and understanding of their struggles.

Children need a healthy balance of empathy and empowerment, where they feel like their problems are valid but they can handle it in the right way. But we also need to remember that *they are children*. Even if we tell them, for example, to give in when their friend is aggressive, we can't expect that they will actually do so gladly! We can help them learn the right way to handle it, so that eventually, they will know.

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One final point that I'd like to bring up: sometimes parents would like for their children to keep busy and occupy themselves. They don't care exactly how they spend their time, as long as they don't bother their parents. But sometimes, the child needs you to guide him and help him structure his day.

We don't want to stick our head in the sand and insist on making something work, simply because we are too lazy to do anything ourselves. Often, if we offer hands-on assistance, our kids' plans will have a better chance of working out.

Wishing you much hatzlacha,
Rabbi Shimon Gruen

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