RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

Parshas Haazinu

The Power of Tefillah

Reb Moshele Koznitzer zy"a, in his Sefer Kehillas Moshe, talks about *tefillah* as related to this week's Parsha. He quotes his father, the *heiliger* Koznitzer Maggid, who said that despite the fact that Hakadosh Baruch Hu has thousands upon thousands of *malachim* who sing countless *shiros* to Him up in Shamayim, His main pleasure is derived from hearing a Yid *daven*. So much so, says the Koznitzer, that even if a person only concentrates on one *bracha* out of the entire *Shemone esrei*, Hashem enjoys it more than all of His thousands of angels' singing combined. Learning how much Hashem aspires to listen to our *tefillos* is such a big *chizzuk,* especially now, during the days of Rachamim and Ratzon.

The Kehillas Moshe interprets the first *possuk* in this week's Parsha as an extension of this idea. *"The heavens shall hearken and I will speak, and the earth shall listen to the words of my mouth":* Hashem sits up in Shamayim and listens to us pray, upon which He sends *hashpa'os tovos* down to us.

He continues with the next *passuk*, *"My teachings (Torah) will drip like rain, my speech (tefillah) will flow like dew".* Torah, he explains, is like rain, which is life-giving, but can also be deathly when studied improperly (See Yuma 72b). *Tefillah*, however, is like dew; it is always good and always welcome. Hashem appreciates our prayers at all times.

I often hear people complain that their spouse does certain things to the highest level, while they allow other, more important things to slide. For example, the wife might go all out with the Yom Tov menu, the plating and the tablescape, but her husband won't hear a single positive word from her.

There are things that are quite commendable and beautiful, but like rain and the Torah, they can be damaging in the wrong setting. Staying out at the office every waking hour in order to be able to provide for your family while neglecting their emotional needs is not appreciated by anyone.

The seemingly less significant smile, compliment, positive energy, are often like dew – always welcome, and always appreciated. It is not so difficult to make a family member's day. Say something nice and it can be like *tefillah* - a pleasure to listen to.

Question:

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

Thank you very much for your informative *shiurim*. I wanted to ask for your advice on how I should react in the following scenario: my husband was brought up in a very strict, demeaning and disciplinary manner and he treats our kids the same way. I was told not to interfere when he does this, as it is very harmful for children to see their parents arguing. However, how do I react when he calls my children derogatory names, like "idiot" or says that something they did or said "disgusting", or he speaks to them in a sarcastic tone? The children look to me for help, and I think it is the worst for my oldest son, who I fear has started stuttering as a result.

I'll add that he speaks to me that way, too. For example, when I serve him a meal he'll remark, "You need to learn how to cook", implying that I don't know how to, as well as other hurtful remarks. Should I just let it go?

Thank you!

Answer:

I get this question a lot, both from men and women.

There is no doubt that verbal abuse, even though it doesn't physically inflict pain, is a terrible thing. It causes tremendous emotional anguish and trauma, and can sometimes ruin a person's life. If someone tells you that what you said hurt them, never underestimate the pain it may have caused them, and certainly don't exacerbate their pain by belittling their feelings. *"Why do you get so offended? Big deal! I was nervous! What are you, a child? Why do you have to be so sensitive? I can't say anything to youyou!"*

If you are on the receiving end of such barbs, don't be fooled into thinking that you are overreacting. Verbal assault hurts! It is the literal translation of "*Life and death are at the hands of the tongue*" (Mishlei 18:21). It is a grave offense and has no justification.

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Even if this is how your husband was brought up, it is still hardly an excuse. It's nice of you to not fault him, but regardless of how true it is that his upbringing is what caused this (which is not necessarily true since other siblings of his – with the same upbringing – may behave differently),

the damage it does to your children isn't any less because of it.

Of course, you should not judge your husband or accuse him of being intentionally malicious. His behavior likely does not stem from him being a bad person. It might be a result of his upbringing, as you say, or because he has a difficult personality. But at the same time, you need to know that his actions are not justified.

Having said that, it is quite possible that either his personality or things he's experienced have caused his ego and tolerance level to become fragile and worn down, and he only feels whole when he is knocking somebody else down.

This can often be observed in children, as well. Usually, a child who bullies others doesn't do it because he particularly enjoys hurting others or even because he doesn't know better. Most of the time, it happens because he is very vulnerable and insecure himself, struggling to find his footing among his peers, and the only way for him to feel any sort of control is if he mistreats others.

Unfortunately, this is not something that everyone outgrows, and there are adults who deal with their lack of self esteem the same way.

Your husband might need more attention and respect than others do, to feel better and more secure about himself. Don't look down at him for it. On the contrary, try to give him as much positive attention and honor as you can, before he begins bullying, so that he doesn't have the need to put down others or yell at them. Your focus should be on how you can make sure that he isn't feeling so broken inside to the point where he is challenged by his surroundings and needs to lash out this way.

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It is true that you should not be getting into an argument about your disapproval of his actions in front of the kids. It is never a good idea and might cause more harm than good.

However, when your children come to you to complain, they need to feel that you understand them. Some parents will dismiss a child's report and tell them, *"It's okay. A father is allowed to talk this way. My father also did it,"* or anything along those lines. Other parents will completely justify their children. *"You're absolutely right. Totty should not have spoken to you this way."* Both of these approaches are incorrect. In one, your child is not feeling heard. In the other, you are siding with your child against their parent. Your job is just to validate your child's pain; you don't even have to acknowledge that their father was mean to them.

You can tell your child that perhaps his Totty is very overwhelmed, but he wasn't trying to hurt him. Remind him that his Totty loves him very much, and although you realize how in pain he is right now, his father surely did not mean to harm him. Don't make the conversation about proving to the kid how much his father loves him, though. "*Why do you think Totty buys you toys or learns with you? You think he doesn't love you?"* Understand that logic will not work now. They just need your support and empathy.

Never dismiss your child's pain or tell them they're overreacting, especially when you know it's true. In a case where it is not an ongoing situation – as the questioner's case might very well be – and you know the child *is* overreacting to getting yelled at, you might want to downplay the child's drama a bit, but they still need to feel that you hear them and understand them.

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After calming your child down, it would be advisable for you to approach your spouse during a calm moment, and out of earshot of the kids. Tell him that while you are sure he meant no harm, and that it's possible that "Chaim" is taking it too personally, you still feel like what was said to him was really hurtful.

At the outset, it's better if you don't let on that the child came to you to "tattle" because then it might seem as if you are teaming up against your spouse. If he denies all wrongdoing, you can casually mention that the child told you about it so you know for sure that he does feel hurt.

If your husband insists that there wasn't a better way to get his message across to the kid,

you might want to offer to be of assistance next time. Maybe you can talk to your child and tell him to be more respectful, or whatever other thing your husband yelled at him about.

Your husband also needs to feel like you understand him. Remember, chances are he has a fragile personality, a lack of confidence and an inflated ego! Directly challenging him and his perceptions is bound to backfire and accomplish nothing.

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Similarly, when your husband puts you down, you should let him know how you feel. He might try to downplay his wrong, but stick to your story. Don't discuss with him if his manner is normal or not, or hurtful or not. Simply state that it hurt YOU. When someone talks about their own perceptions and experiences, there is nothing to debate.

Tell him that when he speaks to you this way, it makes it very hard for you to do what you need to do, such as serve him his meals. If need be, you might consider clarifying what it is that you might not be able to do if this persists, simply to express clearly in what way you cannot tolerate this any longer. This is not simple and must be communicated right, so please get guidance before "putting your foot down". The point is just that it's not about you controlling his choices, rather it's about his behaviors not dictating yours.

Expect that he will belittle your response and/or make you feel like you are the problem. Don't be impressed by that. If you doubt yourself and think that maybe you *are* taking things too personally, seek out a third party who is able to give you some clarity. But when you feel clear about your message; say it nicely, calmly in a confident - yet non-challenging - manner. There are situations in which firmer steps are required and if your situation requires that you should reach out to a knowledgeable professional who can guide you through your particular situation.

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To sum up: Verbal abuse is a legitimate form of abuse, and knowing how to challenge it is the first step to a resolution. In a gentle and non-confrontational way, express how hurt you or your child feels, and make sure he knows that you are aware that he didn't mean it that way.

Remember to acknowledge even the slightest improvement, something that is sure to encourage more improvement, as opposed to pointing out why and how it's not yet enough, or he didn't "get it" yet, something that's sure to discourage him from making the effort. Share with your husband the feedback on every positive gesture or comment of his, and tell him nicely what you'd love to hear from him. And once again, heap loads of respect and attention onto him so that he doesn't feel the need to put others down.

Don't expect instant results. This will take time and patience, especially when this is the type of speech he grew up on. However, with the right approach, calm and confidence, and lots of *tefillah*, you will BEZ"H see a difference.

Wishing you all the best
and a gemar chasimah tovah,
Rabbi Shimon Gruen

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