Torah Lessons for the Home

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

| Parshas Bo |

On Questions and On Answers

BO: COMMUNICATING WITH PHARAOH

Several times in this week's *parsha*, Pharaoh asks Moshe Rabbeinu a question and Moshe answers. If we study these communications we can learn important lessons for communicating with difficult people. These lessons aren't for all of your conversations, but when you're dealing with someone who is very difficult – hopefully not your husband or wife! – these skills can be indispensable. Rather than quoting the entire *parsha*, I would advise the reader to read through this essay and then go back into the *parsha* to see how Moshe excelled in his communications.

All throughout the *parsha* up until his bitter end, Pharaoh keeps up the pretense that he is the boss and keeps ordering Moshe around. Yet Moshe sticks to his message, and doesn't reprimand Pharaoh or get into lengthy conversations; he says what he has to say. He knows when what and how to answer Pharaoh, so we'll study these skills briefly.

RULE #1 ANSWER QUESTIONS ONLY

Sometimes people get stuck answering something that wasn't even a question. They get into lengthy debates that could have easily been avoided. Learning what not to answer is a great skill that can help you avoid so much difficulty. If your coworker says "Oh, you're late again!" – that wasn't a question. She's not your supervisor; she's not your boss and you don't have to explain your lateness.

Then there's something that sounds an awful lot like a question, but it's not. For instance: "Who do you think you are walking in here late every day?" That sure sounds like a question, but it's actually the same remark as the one in the previous paragraph. If you know that someone has a difficult personality and is expert at getting into fights and arguments; don't answer her unless she actually asked a question. If someone asks a question it deserves an answer, but many times there was never a question to begin with.

This is similar to what Chazal teach us דע מה שתשיב לאפיקורס "Know what to respond to a heretic". Note, we're not being told *how* to respond. But we have to know *what* is deserving of a response. Not every challenge deserves an answer. So our first tip is: Only answer a question, nothing else requires a response.

RULE #2 ANSWER THE QUESTION

If your wife asks you what time you're coming home, the answer is not "Stop micro-managing my day" or "What does it matter? You'll be

sleeping anyway". It was a very clear question and it should be fairly easy to provide an equally clear answer.

RULE #3 ANSWER BRIEFLY

I heard an interesting idea in which the mechanics of a good answer is explained. For the next few rules, let's refer to this idea that the proper way to answer difficult people is to keep your answers B.I.F.F. or Brief, Informative, Friendly, Firm. Let's discuss these:

In the above example you were asked what time you'll be home. The brief answer would be "approximately ten" or "not later than ten" "not before ten", that's all. You don't have to add an explanation. If the questioner wants an explanation, that's a different question, but this question was asking for a time, and that's what your answer should be: a time.

The briefer your answer, the less potential for a flare up and the more you say, the more liable you are to provoke the questioner. Keep it brief and to the point. It may be that the questioner was aiming to drag you into an argument, by answering briefly, you are ensuring that the question remains a simple question and nothing more.

RULE #4 ANSWER WITH INFORMATION

Your answer may be very brief, but your answer just won't make the cut if it doesn't contain information. Fuzzy answers are not answers. "When will you be home?" "I don't know". Oops, no information in that brief answer! So, in order to get an answer there must first be a question, once there's a question, and you gave it a brief and informative answer, you've closed the circuit and successfully ended the conversation. That's why it's important to give informative answers.

RULE #5 ANSWER FRIENDLY

You don't want to answer in manner that says, "let's argue". What is really underlying all of these rules is the premise that you want to end this conversation as soon as possible. Remember, you're dealing with Pharaoh and there is the ever-present risk of him suddenly shouting "Off with his head!" Or to be more realistic, you're dealing with your mother-in-law and there's always that risk of an argument breaking out. The more information/logic based and the less feelings/emotion based, the better off you are.

So don't risk your body language, tone of voice, or way of writing giving over any feelings of hostility. Act as friendly and disarmingly as possible. It's very hard to be a grouch in the presence of your sunny disposition and upbeat manner. So make sure to smile straight through those brief and informative answers!

RULE #6 ANSWER FIRMLY

If you want your answer to be accepted, so that you can end the conversation without losing your head, you'll have to make it clear that your answers are final. You're not being apologetic, or leaving room for negotiation. You were asked a question, and you gave an answer. "When are you being home tonight?" "Approximately ten". If you can say that without sweating or appearing tense, sounding uncertain or unsure of yourself, you've answered the question and concluded successfully.

CHINUCH: ANSWERING YOUR CHILD SUCCESSFULLY

These rules can be a great tool in dealing with children as well. "Will you get me that toy Totty? Please?!" you can answer "Yes, if the store is not out of my way" or "if the toy is not too expensive". The question deserves an answer, not "Stop haranguing me". The answer is as brief as possible, it contains lots of information. You're being friendly, you're not being negative. And you're being firm, you've stated your terms clearly and your child knows what to expect. It's so good when you have the rules of communication laid out like that!

WHEN YOUR CHILD DOESN'T KNOW WHAT HE'S ASKING

Sometimes a child might ask what she thinks is a simple question, but the parent might get very intimidated. For instance if a child asks "How do we know that Hashem exists?" some parents might break out in a sweat and begin calling *kiruv* professionals. Others might give a long winded *pshat*

in the *parsha* of *mattan torah* with quotes from *rishonim*.

But the best answer is a confident and brief sentence. "Our grandparents saw Him and heard His Voice at Sinai!" There is no need to discuss Christianity, or Emunah or The Holocaust or Cancer. It was a simple question, and there is a simple answer. And the briefer your answer, the less of an issue the question becomes. It also helps that the answer is informative; you're not saying "Of course Hashem exists", you're actually adding new and relevant information. You're being friendly by answering the question; you're not saying "Oh, and next thing you're going to marry a *goy*!" You're being firm when you answer with confidence.

So that's an example of how you can use your rules of communication to prevent a situation from escalating. Such a question, which is probably completely innocent, could have turned into something so sinister. By treating this question right, you've saved yourself and your child a lot of heartache.

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-Q&A-

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

Question: What's wrong with divorce? Isn't it a mitzvah in the Torah? Doesn't the *gemara* say that it's a mitzvah to divorce an *isha ra'ah*? So what's the issue?

Answer: Really I have to ask this questioner why he's sending me this question. Did I ever say that there's something wrong? It's a mitzvah in the Torah, and there's a whole masechta about it, so why would I say that it's wrong. Maybe you're asking the question because deep down you know that there's something wrong with divorce. Maybe you're in a struggling marriage and you would just love to throw in the towel, but something is stopping you, and you want to know what it is. This question deserves an answer.

Throughout the generations, *tzaddikim* tried to bring *shalom* between husband and wife, starting with Aharon Hakohen in the *midbar*, down to the *Tannaim* who write "*v'hava'as shalom bein ish l'ishto*" down to our recent *gedolim*. So obviously divorce is not the first option.

In my opinion, the reason it's not option A is because when something is a possibility, it's a shame not to make it work. It's true that it's very problematic for the children, and the trauma can leave scars on them forever. But that's not the reason *chazal* were against divorce. A *zivug* is from Hashem and should not be discarded when it becomes inconvenient. It's a shame when two people can get along and they don't.

I know that it's not easy, I'm not making light of anyone's struggles and you really can never compare two relationships or make assumptions about someone else. But did you really try everything? Just because it looks easier to hit reset, doesn't mean that it's right. If there's help that you can get, then why shouldn't you get it?

It's true that the gemara mentions an *isha ra'ah*, who should be divorced but I think that we can find something deeper in this gemara. The words chazal use are *mi sh'yesh* ***lo***- *isha ra'ah*. And perhaps we can say that it has to do with perception "If she is bad for **him**". As long as you perceive her as bad, then it's true, she's an *isha ra'ah*. But can it be that she's only that way because you perceive her that way? It could be that by your attitude, you're blocking her from success.

You say that she's bad; is she bad to her mother and neighbor also? Why only to you? Perhaps if you learn to have a better attitude, if you begin dealing with her differently you will see that it will become *mi she'yesh* ***lo*** *isha tova* and everything will turn out well.

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