

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

THE STRONG WIFE

In this week's *parshah* we learn about the *simanim* of a kosher animal. Along the way, there's a lesson about becoming a kosher Yid.

The Belzer Rav *ztz"l* would occasionally ask certain of his chassidim to collect *tzedakah* for various purposes. One day, he summoned a chassid and asked him to take on the task. The chassid hesitated.

"I would be delighted to make my own, considerable contribution," he ventured. "Going out to collect, knocking on doors... that's very hard for me to do."

"It's wonderful that you want to help," the Belzer Rav responded. "The truth is that there are two types of help we are often called upon to give. The first type is as you describe — giving of one's own possessions — and it is certainly admirable. This is likened to the first *siman* of a kosher animal, that it chews its cud, giving something of its own. But there are also times when we have to demonstrate the other sign as well, that of *mafreshes parsah,* which hints at stretching out one's hand, going out and getting others to give.

"It's not always enough to donate from our own resources. We need to enlist others, even if it's hard, even if we feel it's beneath our dignity to go knocking on doors. And that's what I'd like you to do."

The Torah teaches that when it comes to giving *tzedakah*, the needs of the recipient are paramount, not the resources and character traits of the donors. If a very wealthy man who was accustomed to having a servant run ahead of him in the street becomes impoverished, we are required to give him *tzedakah* that includes a servant running ahead of him in the street. Even if we, personally, find this ridiculous and superfluous, if it represents the standard the recipient was accustomed to, this is what is required from the donor.

The Gemara tells us that one who provides for his family members fulfills the *mitzvah* of *tzedakah* constantly. Here, too, the laws of giving *tzedakah* apply; we must give according to their needs rather than according to our preferences. This might, at times, involve moving out of our comfort zone and doing things we never imagined doing. But if that's what's needed, we will find the resources.

And, when we look deep inside ourselves, we'll find that Hashem has already given those resources to us, so that we can give to others.

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Parshas **Shemini**

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Q QUESTION

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

First of all, thank you for all of your wonderful *shiurim*. I have gained a lot from them.

In a recent *shiur* you discussed how it's the woman's job to take care of the home and how a man is supposed to be strong. I am having a big problem in my marriage because my husband is so weak. We have been married for over ten years, and right after we got married it became obvious how incapable and emotionally weak he is, aside from having anger issues.

Baruch Hashem, after many years of work, things are so much better and I try to keep remembering this and be grateful. But the problem is still there and still has a tremendous impact on our marriage. I am working on understanding that it is not his fault, but it is still difficult.

My husband falls apart from the smallest thing, such as a comment someone made to him or things not working out the way he expected. He is chronically overwhelmed. He needs help with even the simplest decision such as whether to invite his parents for a Shabbos meal, and that often means that decisions we should be making together take forever to finalize, because he wants to make the decision himself and he likes to deliberate forever on irrelevant details before he commits. Alternatively, he gets overwhelmed at having to make a decision on something urgent and refuses to discuss it at all.

He has a part-time job which doesn't cover our bills, so he relies on handouts from our parents and *tzedakah*, and that was never the plan. It makes me feel very vulnerable, but he seems to have no intention of looking for a better-paid job.

Very often, I feel like his therapist because he needs my *chizuk* for anything out of the ordinary. There are times when I like helping him, but overall, I just wish I had a man in the house. He also doesn't seem to realize that I'm also a person with needs. I often feel very vulnerable from an emotional standpoint. My husband has a very insecure way of approaching our relationship and it always feels so false because of this, which makes it hard for me to respect him as well as to feel loved. Even though I know he's trying so hard to make me feel loved, it ends up feeling like a burden because he wants me to constantly reassure him that he's "getting things right."

In a nutshell, these are the two areas that I find hardest to deal with: the physical burden of responsibility for the household and trying to deal with his way of making decisions; and the emotional burden of having a husband who leans on me for *chizuk* all the time.

I hope you can help me. Thank you



A ANSWER

I would like to help you and will try my best. I can imagine how stressful this is and I don't underestimate the practical and emotional difficulties that you face due to your husband's personality. I can't help you change your husband's nature, and that's probably not what you are hoping I'll do. However, what I can do is give you the tools to shift your perspective a little, and from a new vantage point, you may discover that you have more options for dealing with these challenges more effectively.

You write that your issues with your husband became obvious right after you got married and from this I understand that you weren't aware of them beforehand. Virtually everyone gets married with a certain picture of their spouse in their head, soon to discover that they only had a small fraction of the picture.

Few people would pass up the opportunity to press a magic button that "fixes" their spouse. The Rebbe R' Zusha of Anipoli *zy"a* famously said that were he to be given the option of changing or fixing anything in the world, he would decline and say to Hashem, "Thank you, but everything is perfect already." Most people are not on that level of *emunah* and acceptance. In fact, most people, given the chance, would press that magic button to fix things in themselves as well. However, we don't usually have a problem accepting that we're not perfect, even though we are aware that there's quite a lot of room for improvement. It's accepting other people's failings that is so hard.

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One of the reasons we may hesitate to even try accepting others is that we assume, wrongly, that it means we have to learn how to like all the things we currently dislike so much. That's not what acceptance means. Accepting that your husband finds it hard to make decisions and that he seems to need a lot of emotional support doesn't mean that you'll suddenly (or ever) enjoy these aspects of his nature. You may still find things deeply frustrating on occasion, and you may still need to confront practical difficulties. All acceptance means is, "This is who he is. I can't change him and I'll stop trying to do so."

But that's not enough. If you continue to see his shortcomings as problems, then accepting his nature is only going to get you so far. You may give up on reforming him but you will likely continue to resent him, however much you try to convince yourself that, as you write, "it is not his fault."

You're right that it's not his fault. He's not being like this to spite you, and it's unlikely that he enjoys agonizing over decisions and feeling so dependent on your *chizuk*. It appears Hashem gave you a husband with these particular characteristics for a reason; after all, you could have been given a husband with other shortcomings instead. Surely you didn't expect him to be perfect, right?

You would prefer to have a husband to lean on, someone strong and decisive and a source of emotional support for you. Instead, you were given someone who's quite needy in certain areas. Perhaps, as a result, you have been motivated to develop areas of your personality that you likely wouldn't have, if your husband had been the strong man of your dreams. You have actualized potential that could have gone unrecognized given different circumstances.

You may not have enjoyed doing this, but there's still room to acknowledge it and even appreciate that you have been facing challenges that brought out the best in you. Seeing this as an achievement instead of seeing your situation as a punishment may help you to view things in a different light.

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I'd like now to address the specifics you mention. While it's understandable that you group everything together as the results of having a "weak husband," looking at each issue separately makes things appear much more manageable and far less severe.

Let's start with the idea of who is "supposed" to run the home, a question that often causes so much friction. In general terms, the Torah does outline the structure of the Yiddishe home with the husband as breadwinner and provider. This doesn't mean that husband and wife may not come to a mutual agreement that in their home, things may run a bit differently. If a woman accepts upon herself to take charge of areas that are traditionally in the male sphere, no matter what they are, and both are happy with such an arrangement, there's absolutely nothing wrong with it. Many Gedolei Torah attribute much of their ability to serve Hashem on a high level to the support of their wives.

Problems of roles and responsibilities only start when a switch of roles is being demanded or forced. It's true that women are generally expected to take responsibility for "running" the home and being an *ezer k'negdo* for their husbands. Being an *ezer k'negdo* doesn't, however, mean that you are responsible for making your husband happy, relaxed, content, and fulfilled.

You don't mention what happens if you ever decline to be his source of *chizuk*, nor indeed whether you have ever tried that. Generally, it's okay to politely say, "I can see you're overwhelmed, and I'm sorry it's so tough for you right now. I wish I could help; perhaps later I'll be able to. I'm *davening* that things should become easier for you." Feeling obligated to prop up your husband when you feel exhausted yourself is a recipe for a great deal of resentment.

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Therefore, when your husband deliberates for hours or days over a minor issue and then wants you to step in and save the day, it's for you to decide whether you want to do that. If he becomes overwhelmed because he pushed off making a decision and now he is left in a sticky situation, that's not your fault and you shouldn't feel guilty about it. You can and should sympathize, and if there's something you can and want to do to help you should do it, but that's as far as it goes.

In areas that affect both of you, where he wants to be part of the decision-making process but simply isn't deciding anything at all, you may need to step in for the sake of your family. It's great that you want to allow him to be the one to decide, but when it reaches the point that everyone is suffering due to his indecision, something has to be done.

Practically speaking, what this means is that you tell him, calmly and respectfully, "I really would like your input on this decision. I don't want to make it on my own. We have to reach a conclusion by tomorrow evening, so if you still haven't made up your mind by then, I guess we will have to do what I decide, even though I don't like taking sole responsibility. I just don't see any other way."

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This next piece of advice may sound hard, but it can make a tremendous difference. Even if this situation recurs every single week, try to look at each event as a separate challenge, rather than "one more piece of evidence that my husband is impossible to deal with." Remind yourself that the challenge is not "about" your husband; it's a practical problem that needs to be solved.

This week it's a practical question of which AC unit to buy; last week it was a decision about where to spend Yom Tov; a month ago you decided which camp to send the children to for the summer... These are essentially technical issues. Don't make them "prove" anything about him; don't allow yourself to see them as reflections on his character. The less you personalize and generalize, the simpler things will seem.

With that, "practically" speaking, sometimes your husband will be part of the decision-making process and sometimes he won't. You won't let decisions wait until the last minute anymore because of your or his belief that both of you "have" to input your ideas, simply because that isn't practically the best way to deal with things.

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This applies to the question of *parnassah* as well, which you mention. You describe feeling vulnerable due to his dependence on others for handouts, but it appears from what you write that he is the one who takes the responsibility for obtaining these handouts, not you. If he were demanding that you ask your parents for regular financial assistance, things would be different; since he isn't, my advice to you would be to leave this in his hands and not concern yourself with it at all.

You may wish that he earned more and felt impelled to find a better-paying job, but you really don't have the right to dictate to him in this area which is "his" rather than "ours." So, while you may not like the way he chooses to provide for his family, the bottom line is that he *is* providing for you.

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You write a great deal about how you view your husband. I wonder how much of this he realizes for himself — how would he respond if someone asked him, "What does your wife think of you?" I don't mean to imply that you are to blame for his feelings or insecurities; I'm just wondering whether part of the reason why he comes off as so insecure might be that he knows you see him as weak and needy. Perhaps, if you begin to show more respect for him whenever you can, this could gradually build him up so that he no longer feels so insecure.

You describe a husband who needs you for *chizuk* both practically and emotionally; what is there to respect? The answer is: A lot. First of all, he wants your *chizuk* in order to function. He doesn't want to lie in a rut and blame the world for doing nothing. He supports you and your family, and he takes his responsibilities for you so seriously that he agonizes over every decision in an attempt to get it "right." Sometimes, he gets so stressed out about the burden he carries that he gets angry and frustrated, just as most of us do on occasion.

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You write that you want a "man in the house." It's important to remember that you *do* have a man in the house, albeit not the "ideal man" you believe would make you perfectly happy and content. It seems that you merely merited having a man who, like you, has faults and flaws and weaknesses. Hopefully like you, he is trying to deal with them rather than use them to excuse his shortcomings.

And maybe his leaning on you for *chizuk* shows that he admires your ability to help him in the areas where he needs help. Not all women are blessed with husbands who are willing to admit that they need their wives. Not all husbands respect their wives' opinions so much that they rely on their judgement on a regular basis.

Is it possible that where you see weakness, another could see humility? Where you see indecision, another could see someone who takes life seriously? That where you see someone who relies on you for *chizuk*, another could see someone who treasures and admires his wife for her ability to problem-solve and encourage?

You may never entirely get over your desire for a strong husband to lean on, and that's okay. Just don't let your disappointment in this area overshadow all the gifts of your marriage that you never asked for but were given just the same.

You got married ready and willing to give certain things, and Hashem sent you a husband who needs other things that you thought you didn't have it within you to give. Discovering your hidden potential is just one of the many blessings in your marriage and it wouldn't have happened without the husband who is just the person you need.



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