RABBI
SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the home

PARSHAS KI SAVOI

TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING

In his sefer *Chomas Hados,* the Chofetz Chaim stresses that when a person needs something, Hashem wants him to *daven* for his needs, and specifically to use his voice. When we're happy, we should sing to Hashem just as we did after *Yetzias Mitzrayim.* And when we need a *yeshuah* we should cry out to Hashem. These *tefillos* should be specifically *bekol* – out loud. In fact, Moshe Rabbeinu tells us, "*Vayishma Hashem es koleinu* – and Hashem heard our voice." It doesn't say that Hashem heard our prayers; it's our voice that's important. We shouldn't just murmur a request or "think" our thanks. They should be clearly verbalized. And when we do so, we influence others to turn to Hashem with their needs, too.

Obviously Hashem knows our thoughts, and the fact that we are so strongly encouraged to speak to Him out loud teaches us important lessons about communication. Proper communication means sharing with others and not assuming that they know what you're thinking, because "how could they not?" This also applies with your spouse and children, even though you may think that you know each other well enough not to have to spell things out. When you start to verbalize more, however, you also start to realize how many of your assumptions were false. Don't take for granted that anything is self-understood.

Recently, someone shared with me that he was doing a certain thing for his wife, but she wasn't showing any appreciation, and it bothered him. Based on an idea he heard from me, he decided to tell his wife, "It would mean so much to me if when I do this for you, you thank me for it. I know you're grateful, but it would still mean a lot to me to hear it from you." His wife started to thank him and he enjoyed it. But then he thought, "Isn't it weird that I'm getting pleasure from the thanks that I asked for?"I explained to him that aside from the fact that the words themselves were pleasant to hear, without getting the thanks, he couldn't be totally sure whether what he was doing was truly appreciated – or even noticed. When his wife expressed her thanks, it was an acknowledgement that she realized and appreciated what he did.

This man's open communication led to him receiving what he wanted. Likewise, his wife's verbal expression of her thanks led to them building a better relationship based on true appreciation.

This week's essay is dedicated in memory of

הרה"ג מרביץ תורה רבות בשנים באהבה ובנאמנות לתלמידיו

מוה"ר בנימין ב"ר שמעון שלמה בן ציון געשטעטנער ז"ל

שעלה בסערה השמימה לדאבון לב משפחתו ותלמידיו ביום י"ד אלול שעברה

Question:

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

Thank you for your *shiurim* on TorahAnytime. I very much enjoy listening to them.

B"H I have been married for almost a year now to the most amazing and loving husband. My husband is a people-pleaser by nature and always wants to make me happy. However, when he doesn't want to do what I want (which is totally okay), he feels very guilty for not "making me happy." I tried explaining to him that he is entitled to his opinion and shouldn't be my *shmatta*, but he still feels guilty. (Our differences of opinion can be on the most trivial things, like I want to go here and he wants to go there...) I sometimes feel that maybe I shouldn't share my thoughts/wants/ideas, because I know how it will make him feel. What can we do about this?

Thanks in advance.

Answer:

I can imagine that some readers are thinking: "*That's* a problem? Halevai I would have such a 'problem!'" But we should never trivialize someone else's experience, even if it seems mild in comparison to what we might be dealing with ourselves. Knowing how to listen and express empathy is an important skill, and practicing it is not dependent on fully comprehending what the other person is going through.

That said, I still do want to note that on a certain level, this does sound like a beautiful problem – what a lucky couple, with each spouse only wanting to please the other and avoid causing the other pain. And I'm not saying this to trivialize the aggravation it may cause, as I just mentioned, rather to point out that whoever finds himself in such a situation should certainly thank Hashem and feel grateful for the positive aspects of such a situation. And whoever doesn't should take care not to become jealous. Comparisons of *shalom bayis* are destructive and should be avoided, and they also do nothing to help you attain what you jealously observe. Furthermore, such observations are often false, because you can never really know what other couples are dealing with. All the same, we should learn from others to do and become the best we can.

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You mention that you've been married for about a year. That means you're past the honeymoon stage and are probably no longer in la-la land. Most likely you feel that you know what your husband is like and don't expect him to change. Sometimes, though, things do change over time. It's possible that your situation is the way it is because at one year in, it's still relatively early on in the game.

A person once sent me an email saying that he listened to a *shiur* of mine and heard me mention a specific thing that I said could be detrimental to a marriage – but he's already been married for four months and has been doing this thing "ever since" he got married, and sees that there's no harm in it. Regardless

of the personal advice I gave him, it's interesting that people who have barely begun their married life and are still in that beautiful dreamland stage feel comfortable sharing their "experience" with others, and even questioning the advice of those who are a lot further down the road. So the first thing I want to suggest is that if you've only been married for a year, you shouldn't assume that this is how things will always be.

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While it's wonderful that your husband wants to please you and you don't want to take advantage of him, I do understand that you mean to imply that there may be an unhealthy codependency in your relationship. (For those who aren't familiar with the term, codependency is generally describing a relationship where one person feels responsible for how the other person feels.) A husband who's a people-pleaser to the point that he doesn't want to do anything unless his wife wants it, and feels bad whenever he can't do what she wants, could have a problem. This could simply be his personality, or perhaps he was taught that he must always please his wife – but either way, it's not healthy.

Ironically, however, there may be some codependency on a wife's part too. You shouldn't be devastated that your husband is feeling bad. It does seem that he has an issue to resolve here in feeling uncomfortable or even guilty at being unable to please you, but it's an issue that *he* has to resolve, not you. You didn't create this situation and are not responsible for it, unless you're actively contributing to his guilty feelings.

In fact, it's clear from what you wrote that you're doing your best to help him overcome this problem, encouraging him to feel comfortable having his own opinion even if it differs from your own. But you also write, "I sometimes feel that maybe I shouldn't share my thoughts/wants/ideas, because I know how it will make him feel." Take your own advice, and remember that you too are entitled to your own opinion! The responsibility for how it makes your husband feel is your husband's, as long as you express your ideas and wishes in a reasonable and undemanding way.

Your husband may come to learn how to accept his own feelings and desires simply from seeing how you are comfortable expressing yours. Or he may need help in overcoming this issue. But there's no reason for you to feel guilty.

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Unfortunately there are people who handle such situations very badly and then blame their spouse for the results of their own behavior. If a husband makes his wife feel guilty for not being able to accommodate him, he may end up feeling bad at her discomfort which he knows he caused. Of course what he should do at that point is stop – but what some people do instead is compound the problem rather than admit and apologize. "What are you feeling so bad about? You should have more confidence; you shouldn't let things get to you..."

Needless to say, this is not the way to give your spouse more confidence! But there are husbands and wives who behave like this and then complain, "My husband's such a *shmatta*..." If they really want a spouse with backbone, then they have to behave in a way that doesn't make the problem even bigger, and instead encourage their spouse to hold their own opinions and feel confident about them. (And sometimes, the issue is really about how the husband is supposedly everyone else's *shmatta*, doing what they want of him, when the wife wants her husband to be solely devoted to *her*...)

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I'd also like to address another, related issue, which is quite common. Sometimes, people are unwilling to accept favors because of their own feelings about being on the receiving end. Perhaps they're worried that the other person doesn't really want to do the favor. Perhaps they're worried that the other person will constantly remind them afterward of "how much I did for you." But in a situation where one spouse obviously does want to please the other and will not demand excessive shows of gratitude, what's the problem with happily accepting, as long as the giving is also done in a healthy manner?

Picture this (typical and common) scenario:

Wife: *We should get to the wedding by seven. My grandmother will be so happy.*

Husband: *Oh. I have my* shiur *until half-past-eight, but if you want, we can go for seven.*

Wife: *No, no. It's not for* ***me****, it's for my* ***grandmother****.*

But the husband doesn't want to do it for the grandmother. He wants to do his wife the favor, even if she has her grandmother in mind. So why not just say, "Thank you! That means a lot to me" and everyone will be happy. Remember, he's not charging you for it, he is not resentful, and he'll probably never ask for something in return. If your instinctive reaction (even if you don't verbalize it) is, "But it's not for me!!!" then you may have a problem in knowing how to receive.

In a healthy relationship there has to be both give *and* take. *"Lo tov heyos ha'adam levado."* It's okay to need someone. If someone wants to give you something, you should be able to accept it with gratitude – and that in itself is a form of giving, when you give that person the pleasure of your appreciation.

I recall the story of a *chashuve* person whose wife used to prepare a special soup for him. When she passed away, his children managed to get the recipe and make him the soup. He asked them not to make it again. "Your mother once told me how much effort goes into making this soup and how much everyone enjoys it. In fact, I didn't like it at all, but I saw how much it meant to her so I complimented her on it. Then she started making it for me all the time, but I still don't like the soup." Taking can be a form of giving.

If none of these alternative scenarios are applicable to your situation, I apologize for using your question as a springboard for issues that many other couples experience. In your case, I would advise simply sitting down with your husband and having a discussion. "I think both of us will be happier if *both* of us are happy. Just as it makes you happy to do things for me, it makes me happy to see you enjoying the things that you like doing. I also like the discussions we have about how to accommodate each other. Let's work on this." If there's no codependency, such a conversation should take care of the issue.

A marriage based on trying to please your spouse at all costs is not going to be successful. Total self-effacement is not healthy. It ultimately leads to resentment on the part of the giver and a whole host of difficult feelings in the person on the receiving end. Successful relationships are about giving *and* taking.

Hashem should help you both to give and receive, gracefully and happily, for many years to come.

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

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TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME
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