

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

FROM BEING RIGHT TO GETTING IT RIGHT

In this week's *parshah*, Avraham Avinu hosts the three *malachim* and begs them to accept his offer of hospitality: "And I will take a morsel of bread, and sustain your hearts; afterwards, you shall pass on, because you have passed by your servant." The *sefer Noam Megadim* notes that the words "*achar ta'avoru*" (afterwards, you shall pass on) hint at the greatness of forgiveness, of being "*ma'avir al midosav*" and overlooking the hurt others have caused us.

Any wrongdoing requires a *tikkun* of some sort; it could be fasting or some other kind of suffering. When a person is hurt by someone, and refrains from responding, that is in itself a form of *tikkun*. This is what the *passuk* is hinting at: If a person has sinned, and should fast as atonement — and then someone harms him and he withholds his response and forgives the other person and judges him favorably — he is no longer required to fast for his own sins, which are forgiven. Now he can eat, being that he was *ma'avir al midosav*.

Essentially, the person who hurt us has done us a huge favor, giving us the opportunity to refrain from responding. But that's only something to think about when someone hurts you. When it comes to the feelings of others, it's crucial to be as sensitive as possible. Let's not make the grave mistake of hurting others and giving them the "opportunity" to forgive us!

Sadly, many people habitually hurt others "unintentionally" and excuse themselves by saying, "I'm just not the kind of guy who thinks before saying something. I didn't mean anything." They may even be telling the truth, but the fact that they are hurting others obligates them to figure out a way to become more sensitive rather than justifying their insensitive behavior.

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Parshas
Vayeira
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Q QUESTION

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

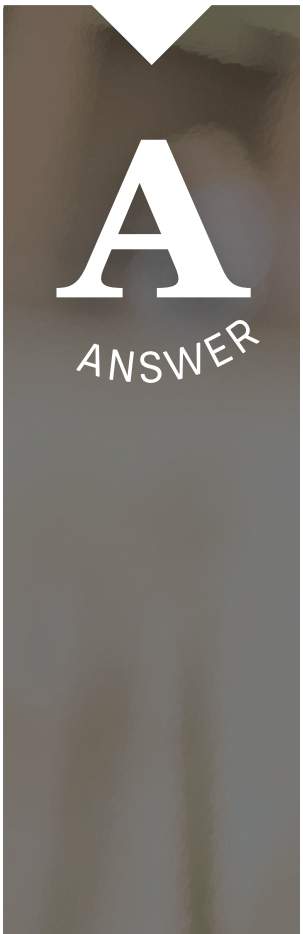
Thanks for all the *shiurim* that you give. I listen to them weekly. My question is not about my *shalom bayis* or *chinuch* — it's just about me.

My wife and I love listening to your weekly *shiurim* and learning about *shoresh hanefesh*. I bought your *shalom bayis shiurim* (not for my *shalom bayis*, because it's very good, *baruch Hashem*) just to understand your *shittah*, and it really changed my way of thinking about other people.

I'm a light-hearted, happy-go-lucky type of person. This is what's causing a problem that I have. Sometimes, I make comments or react in ways that most people don't take personally, but sensitive individuals can find hurtful. Personally, I'm quite easy-going; if someone said similar things to me, I likely wouldn't even notice whether they were hurtful or inappropriate. Fortunately, my wife is more passive and tolerant, so I don't face this issue with her. However, I've realized that my sister-in-law gets very offended by my comments and reactions.

Can you help and advise me on how to be more careful when I can't even pinpoint where I'm going wrong?

Please advise!



A ANSWER

The type of situation you describe is a typical one. People are wired differently, and it's normal to notice different levels of sensitivity. When one spouse is far more sensitive than the other, this usually leads to a lot of pain until the less sensitive spouse learns to be more understanding and considerate, or the more sensitive spouse learns how to be more understanding and forgiving (or a combination of both).

In your case, you have much to be grateful for in that your wife has a tolerant nature and either doesn't feel or glosses over insensitive things you say and do. This is not something to be taken for granted.

I'd add, however, that although you're confident that your wife isn't hurt by your "comments and reactions," as you describe them, you should still consider the possibility that she does sometimes feel hurt and has decided to say nothing. It's also possible that she does occasionally respond, but you misinterpret her words. Given that you admit you don't realize where you're going wrong, perhaps you also don't realize how many people are getting hurt, or that they're trying to let you know it.

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Being sensitive comes naturally to some people and is far more of a struggle for others. But nobody's absolved of the responsibility to think before they

speak and act, even if they're convinced that they're doing nothing wrong and that others are overreacting in their responses. In a way, the fact that your wife seems to be tolerating your impulsivity and lack of forethought is a mixed blessing for you. Perhaps if she was a more sensitive person, you would have had to confront this aspect of your nature far sooner.

Many people expect more understanding, more tolerance, and more forgiveness from their spouses: "She knows what I'm like; she should realize that…" or "He should know that I didn't mean any harm." When we turn such phrases around and apply them to ourselves, that's when we start to realize that we might be expecting too much of others. Very often, those closest to us are less forgiving and understanding simply because they're expecting those close to them, namely us, to be *more* sensitive and caring. And, while we each need to take our side of the equation to heart, it's clear that one really should be more sensitive and more caring to those closest, regardless of how forgiving they are.

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Given your nature, becoming more sensitive to others isn't easy or natural. This is why the first step you need to take involves accepting that regardless of whether others are "too sensitive," you should take their natures into account. Your responsibility is to minimize the hurt you cause, and that requires admitting that even though you think the things you say and do are "objectively fine," other people disagree.

This isn't about right or wrong. Emotions don't respect logic, and there's no categorical answer to the question of "who should change how they think or feel." And, as I mention often, "If you're the one asking, it's you." Human beings are inherently self-absorbed and a huge part of our mission in the world is overcoming our egoistical tendencies and putting others before us. Those who succeed in this are rightfully considered great people.

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The next step to take is pinpointing where you're slipping up. If your sister-in-law is getting upset, analyze why. She may even have told you; if she hasn't, you can ask, or ask your wife to ask her. Once your mind is open to the possibility that you really did say or do something insensitive, you'll soon find areas you need to work on.

The temptation in such cases is often to downplay or trivialize what you did. It's very uncomfortable to admit wrongdoing; it's far easier to blame the victim for being "too sensitive," "fragile," "overreactive," and so forth. Don't do that. It's hurtful for the person already hurt to be told that they're just overreacting. And, again, you're setting yourself up as the final arbiter of what is hurtful and what "shouldn't" be.

Another thing to beware of is the temptation to justify what you said or did. "I only said that because…" "You know I'm impulsive and don't always think things through…" In fact, justifying wrongdoing can sometimes be considered worse than the wrongdoing itself, as Rashi teaches us. When Lot's shepherds allowed their flocks to steal from other people's fields, Rashi explains, instead of apologizing, they justified their behavior. Since all the land would eventually be inherited by Avraham Avinu, they argued, it was okay for them to start enjoying its fruits now. Perhaps it was Avraham's perception that the justification was worse than the theft itself that contributed to his decision to separate from Lot.

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Therefore, the first thing to do when someone tells you that you've hurt them is apologize. You may and should stress that you had no intention of hurting them, adding that you will try your best to avoid doing so in the future.

And, if you really don't understand what you did wrong, ask them to explain why they were so hurt.

Most people will respond positively to a genuine apology. All the same, it's important to be aware that there are those people who will take advantage of your vulnerability and either blow what you did out of proportion or even fabricate wrongdoing entirely. This is where an objective third party can be helpful. If someone is claiming you wounded them and you truly don't understand why, ask someone outside the situation to weigh in — not to decide whether it was "wrong" for someone to be hurt, but to help you gain perspective that can help you both in the future. For the most part, apologizing for the past while objectively discussing the future is helpful, regardless of how "wrong" someone was for getting hurt. An

apology isn't a commitment to always accept being wrong going forward.

An exception to this occurs with people who gaslight, intentionally or unconsciously. (It can be difficult to distinguish this type of person from the type of person who merely exaggerates, so it's wise to ask someone outside the picture for their opinion.) Such people have their own set of issues to deal with. It's important not to blindly accept their account of things and offer abject apologies even though what you did was non-existent or clearly trivial. But don't argue with them, as this will achieve nothing. Instead, just apologize briefly without too much explanation, and then move on.

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While some people need help in the "then move on" part, it seems to be something that you, with your easygoing nature, will naturally find easy to do. This is why you will have to guard against moving on too soon, before the other person is ready to do so, as they remain unconvinced that you are taking them seriously.

Being a fun-loving and impulsive person makes you a great friend and enjoyable person to have around. Your spontaneity is part of who you are, but it's also at the core of your problem, as you'll have to work much harder than others to assess your words and actions before putting them into motion.

It also comes naturally to you to overlook the hurtful or dismissive things other people may say to you. If you remember that this is also an inherent part of your nature, you'll find it easier not to expect others to do likewise. In fact, you might do well to enhance your self-respect just a little and not pay so little attention to the way others perceive or treat you.

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By writing and asking for advice, you're already showing a level of self-awareness that many with a nature similar to yours lack. It's wonderful that you're opening up to the possibility that, as much as you see nothing wrong in what you're doing, other people's views are valid and should be taken into account.

We can never truly know what other people feel, and even when they tell us, it's often hard to truly grasp what they're saying, as we each have our own set of feelings which influence the way we interpret things. This is why it's safer and better to err on the side of being more sensitive, both when it comes to how we treat others and how we react when they tell us that we have hurt them.

A genuine apology is a very great thing and can repair even severely damaged relationships, as it shows that we have lowered our defenses, stepped beyond ourselves, and truly looked at the other person. This is very hard to do and can take years of patient work as well as honesty and vulnerability. But when other people see that we're heading in the right direction, they will *b'ezras Hashem* respond with appreciation and admiration, respect that we truly deserve.

And although this deserves a discussion of its own, I'll finish off by mentioning that if someone apologizes to you, accept it without getting stuck on whether they really mean it, or how many times they messed up in the past. We're all human and want Hashem to forgive us, so let's try to emulate His ways and do the same.



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