

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

SWEET DREAMS?

Parshas Mikeitz opens with the first of Pharaoh's dreams: "*Vayehi mikeitz shenasayim yamim*..." Pharaoh sees himself standing at the edge of the river and seven cows emerging. He then wakes up, falls asleep again, dreams again, and then wakes up a second time: "And behold, it was a dream."

The Divrei Yisrael *ztz"l*, relating "*shenasayim*" to sleep, says that there are people who sleep through their entire lives, attaching significance to things that are just parts of a dream. Only when it's too late do they wake up and realize how they have wasted their lives on the inconsequential.

This world appears so very real, and it is extremely hard to continually remind ourselves that it is a "fleeting dream," merely the preparation for what comes afterward. But as hard as it is, it's still so important. Otherwise, we risk passing our days chasing after things that don't matter at all and never paying attention to what will end up making all the difference. Just as a dreamer often finds it hard to wake himself up in the middle of a dream, so too is it a challenge for us to see through the façade and focus on genuine reality, but this is what our holy *sefarim* teach us is expected of us. When we understand that the alternative is waking up when it's too late, with nothing but regret to show for long years in this world, we'll find a way to achieve it.

When we get caught up in the here-and-now it's easy to get distracted, but reminding ourselves of our goals and true purpose in life helps us prioritize and choose wisely. So many difficulties that we encounter, both personally, as well in our homes and relationships, can be resolved when we draw our attention back to the big picture and the really important things in life.

This week's essay is dedicated

להודות ולהלל
להשם נפשינו בחיים
על ניסיך שבכל יום עמנו

Parshas **Mikeitz**

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Q QUESTION

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

First of all, thank you for providing a way for me to vent when I feel like my dam broke and my thoughts are just spilling out uncontrollably.

Most of my thoughts are my resentment of my husband, and I want to share the following incident so you can understand where I'm coming from.

One evening, my husband brought home a *tzedakah* collector for dinner without giving me any advance notice. I was in the middle of bathing the children and had to stay in the tiny children's bedroom while he ate, because our apartment is so tiny. I felt like my space had been invaded and I had no privacy in my own home. When he left, the counter was covered with the used dishes for me to wash and I had to hurry the children into bed without their normal evening routine.

Then I sat down to eat dinner with my husband. I was so upset. This has happened plenty of times before, and every time I tried to say something it ended badly so this time I said nothing and tried to keep my expression neutral. I didn't talk to my husband, and all he said was, "Wow, sitting opposite such a grouchy wife sure gives me a great appetite!"

At this point I couldn't hold myself back anymore and I told him that I hadn't been grouchy when he got home — I'd been happy and beautiful — but when he threw the whole evening into disarray with the guest I hadn't been told about, I got totally stressed out. I politely asked him if next time, he could ask me first, but he didn't validate my feelings at all. He just wanted to feel admired for his great *mitzvah* of *hachnassas orchim*, and he shot back, "When a Jew needs a meal, I'm not going to ask you, ever. Forget it."

He left me feeling like I was the one with the problem — like I'm the stingy nasty person who can't stretch herself to feed someone who needs a meal (when it was me, not him, left with the cleaning-up to do). What's more, my children also lost out because I couldn't give them their usual goodnight ritual with this stranger in the living room.

But it doesn't help to say anything. In the past, when I have tried, I just get, "Oh, you poor thing," in this sarcastic voice. I guess he probably has all kinds of complaints against me and of course I know I'm not perfect, but I don't know what to think anymore. Who's the villain and who's the victim? Is it my fault for focusing on his faults? Or is he really being abusive? I find myself wondering if my marriage is going to fall apart, but maybe I'm just the crazy one and over-dramatizing an issue which shouldn't be a big deal.

I would so much appreciate some clarity here. And, thank you for allowing me to vent, because even just that helps.

A ANSWER

You end by questioning yourself and asking if you're crazy, so I'll begin by affirming that you aren't. In a situation such as the one you describe, it's normal to feel resentful and it's normal to feel some relief from venting. Feelings, whatever they are, are always valid and it's important to have them validated.

That said, feelings are just that — feelings. Emotions are not always an accurate representation of reality. They aren't "wrong," yet we shouldn't trust our feelings to tell us the entire truth of our lives.

This is why it's important to vent to the right person. Don't choose a person who will validate not only your feelings but also the thoughts and perceptions

you attach to them. While it's understandable to *feel* so frustrated that you worry that your marriage will break up, *thinking* that this is what will happen is mistaken. You don't want someone taking *that* too seriously.

Even if, as you write, this isn't the first or the second time that something similar has happened, you should take care to keep the focus on this aspect of your relationship and not extrapolate to your entire marriage. Even if, for example, a spouse appears to be self-centered in one area, that doesn't necessarily mean that he is in general a self-centered person and that he doesn't show any consideration for your feelings in any part of your marriage.

Keeping the focus specific and accurate is important, not just because it gives a more accurate picture of what's going on, but also because it makes it much easier to find a solution.

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The general dynamics of the situation you're describing are quite common and I'm frequently approached by men who tell me how much they would like to welcome guests in their home, only their wives can't deal with it, for whatever reason.

Sometimes, the husband feels that the wife is being unreasonable and sees her as preventing him from fulfilling an important mitzvah. *Hachnassas orchim* undoubtedly is an important *mitzvah*.

Then again, building one's *shalom bayis* is certainly no less important... Instead of being resentful at feeling "controlled," a husband in such a situation can decide of his own accord to put his family first. Whenever someone feels a special connection to a certain *mitzvah*, what they have to remember is that fulfilling it shouldn't come at anyone else's expense.

When I was a child I remember hearing R' Yaakov Galinsky *ztz"l* tell a joke about a man at a *chasunah* who goes around the hall and removes a few dollars from each person's pocket. When confronted, he protests that he's engaged in a very important *mitzvah* — enabling all these people to give *tzedakah* — and that he's actually doing it in the most *mehudar* way, *matan beseser*, where neither the donor nor the recipient are known.

In general, if your *mitzvah* in one area is causing distress in another, it's probably a good idea to stop and reflect on whether there isn't a better way to go about things. With a bit of creativity and goodwill, a person can find plenty of ways to fulfill *hachnassas orchim*, or any other *mitzvah*, without making anyone suffer.

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In your particular case, your husband hasn't yet come to meet you half-way and you're frustrated that he doesn't seem to understand your feelings. You can still make the first move to change the situation for the better, and the best way to start is by recognizing that while he may not be going about things in the most considerate fashion, he still has good intentions.

Your husband apparently has great *sipuk* from welcoming guests into his home, and although you find it challenging, perhaps you can figure out how he can continue to host people without it taking such a toll on the rest of the family. Until that happens, you'll be seeing your husband as someone who tries to control you, and vice versa, and the resentment will only grow.

If you approach him at a calm time — not in the heat of the moment when your frustration is bubbling over — and first tell him how much you admire his devotion to Jews in need of help, you'll be setting the scene for an entirely different type of conversation from the one you've probably been having until now. It's very hard to swallow one's burning feelings and smile and wait for a good time to raise the subject. But it's very much worth the effort.

Recognizing his good intentions doesn't mean that you have to give in and let him do things the way he wants. Similarly, his recognizing your feelings about unexpected guests doesn't mean that he must never bring a guest home without prior warning.

Acknowledging his good intentions and showing flexibility isn't a sign of weakness. It's actually a sign of strength and confidence, and it also makes it much more likely that the other person will respond in kind.

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After clarifying that you understand and respect his good intentions you should clearly and respectfully tell your husband that while he did not necessarily do anything wrong, nonetheless you would so much appreciate if next time, he could do things differently. "Next time, it would mean so much to me if you could just give me a call from shul to tell me that you're bringing someone home, and then I can be ready in time. Like this I don't have to rush the children into bed."

It's possible that your husband will reply as he has done in the past: "Why should I call?" While such

a response can be hurtful, it is very likely that it is a cover-up for his awareness that he lacked sensitivity and consideration in the past. It's hard to climb down from that tree in an instant and humbly say, "You're right. I'm sorry." The real test will come next time he wants to bring someone home and, despite his protests, he does actually call you to tell you that he's bringing home a hungry Yid.

Try to overcome the temptation to explain why your way of doing things makes more "sense." While justifying your position may seem logical, it actually makes things more complicated. It's already difficult for a spouse to admit that he may have slipped up — if you now present an entire argument, demonstrating how wrong he is, he's likely to respond defensively and try to disprove any points you make.

In any case, determining "right" and "wrong" (or, as you put it, who the "villain and the victim" are) is not at all straightforward. What's more, it doesn't even matter. This is about your feelings and those of your husband. Feelings aren't right or wrong. They just are, and in any relationship, we have to take them into account whether or not they're logical. Trying to prove that your feelings are more justified than his is generally useless at best, and often counterproductive.

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Fundamentally, what you're trying to do is change behavior, not feelings. No one can alter another person's feelings (although they may change as a result of acting differently). In your case, there may be a few practical things you can do yourself to address your resentment. For instance, you could gently mention to your husband that the added mess at the end of the day after you're already exhausted from putting the children to bed is just too much for you, and then suggest that if he could tidy away the dishes, (or use paper goods instead), it would make so much difference.

You might also suggest that the children can't be confined to their bedroom in the evening, and also that you need to be able to access the kitchen, and then add that you hope he won't mind your presence as well as that of the children.

Looking at the broader picture and trying to address the issues creatively will be easier once you validate your feelings and accept that your husband's feelings are valid, too.

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Such situations, where one spouse's nature appears to directly conflict with the other's, are common in marriage. It's entirely natural to feel frustrated whenever such conflicts arise, and to sometimes get overwhelmed and even despair. Overcoming those feelings isn't easy.

Often what it takes is to "wake up" from the superficial appearance of our lives and try to see beneath the surface, looking more objectively at two people, a husband and a wife, who are genuinely trying to find the best way to build a *bayis ne'eman be'Yisrael* and may have different "right" ways of going about it. Waking up to ourselves and to each other is what's needed to make our way through life and fulfill the *mitzvos* in the best possible way, with our priorities straight and our relationships becoming stronger than ever.



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