RABBI
SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the home

PARSHAS BESHALACH

CHANGING COURSE

There's a Yiddish expression, "He'll cry like a beaver but walks straight into the trap."

By nature, a beaver cannot leave its path. If it encounters a trap, the beaver will cry for hours or days in front of the trap, but will then walk straight into it, because it cannot veer from its path.

Sometimes people do the wrong thing and they're not happy about it. Yet, they feel that they cannot get off the path they're on. In this week's parsha, Hashem tells Moshe Rabbeinu, *"Mah titzak ailay, daber el Bnei Yisrael veyisau* – Why are you crying to Me? Speak to Bnei Yisroel and tell them to push forward. The Bais Avrohom explains that this is a message telling us not to get stuck 'crying like a beaver,' but to change course and travel onward. Move away from what you've done and find a new path.

The Bais Avrohom tells of a man who came to the Yesod Ho'avodah zy"a and said, "Hashem should help, I should be an *erhliche Yid.*" To which the Yesod Ho'avodah responded, "Hashem is always ready. What are *you* going to do about it?" Don't just scream to Hashem. You have to do your part to move forward.

This is also true in interpersonal relationships, where people often fall into old patterns even as they see and admit to the difficulties, still won't do what's necessary to change. There was a man I spoke to who told me about the difficulties in his marriage. In the conversations, he owned up to several things he did wrong. "I'm not stupid. I'm very self-aware and I know I was wrong,", but then just went on explaining why his wife has to change. What he seemingly didn't realize was that admitting wrong isn't more than a first step. If, what and how you plan on doing things differently going forward is more important.

People sometimes mistakenly feel that it's enough to know they were wrong. Apologizing is great, but if you keep going back to the same wrong moves that have hurt your relationship in the past, why do you think anything will be different?

Change isn't easy, especially when it comes to old and repeated patterns. But realize that you can't expect different results when you're doing the same old thing, nor is it reasonable to expect that only someone else will make all the changes needed. It's important to make a *cheshbon* and try to figure out what's causing the problem on your part. That's more important than owning up and apologizing.

Question:

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

Thank you for your shiurim. It gives me lots of clarity to understand myself and others.

I realized that some people are not as stupid as they seem, but rather they have not been dealt with properly.

I'd like to ask a question and hope you will be able to help me. After reading your book, I'm more aware of my personality and I recognize myself to be more sensitive and introverted. I currently work for a boss who is extremely negative and keeps hurting my feelings. Sometimes, I'm unable to work for an entire day because of his negative comments. I become completely emotionally overtaken by them.

I thought about looking for another job, but I'm afraid that I might land up with the same type of boss again. Should I make sure to only work in a good environment or rather work on myself to be able to survive it?

I'd really appreciate an answer. Thanks for all you do.

Answer:

Many people fall into the trap of trying to fix their surroundings. They decide that their environment isn't good, that other people are doing the wrong thing. Sometimes they're right, and it's other people's problematic and wrong behaviors which are impeding their success, other times they're simply convincing themselves that it's not their fault and is someone else's problem.

Either way, people often think that if they change the environment they're in, whether by changing their current environment or moving themselves to another environment, things will be better for them. While they may sometimes be right and their environment may truly be toxic for them, so long as your focus is on fixing or controlling what the people around you say and do – you're likely to find yourself in similar situations all over again.

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As you said, people need to be dealt with properly. When others deal well with you, it'll bring out the best in you. By the same token, if you deal correctly with the people around you, it'll bring out the best in them. Often you don't have to "change" anyone, as much as deal with them correctly.

Even when you're being mistreated or you're in a toxic environment, there's so much that you can do to deal with the situation differently and avoid the negativity. It's not about getting the person to change, but about doing what *you* can to cause or even just allow change, possibly even in another person.

There are many specifics in how to do it, but some of it has to do in how you treat your boss, how respectful you are, or how you tolerate abuse. You can't control what goes on around you and you can't make other people change, but there are things you can do that may help people around you change their attitude about you.

How does your boss treat other people? I'm sure there are some people he doesn't deal abusively with, so perhaps there's a possibility that he can treat you differently as well. Are those people maybe a bit more respectful than you? Do they express appreciation better or more often? I know it might not be part of your job, but it can do a lot to a relationship. Or perhaps they speak up in a very polite yet assertive manner when they feel taken advantage of or hurt? See what those people are doing differently than you are that gets them better treatment, and learn from them. Maybe they have a certain attitude that makes a difference.

There's another mistake people make when dealing with a situation similar to yours. People may read self-help books and take motivational courses to try and change themselves in an unreasonable and impractical way. People can and should grow. People can and should change. Of course, with incremental, gradual growth over time, there's a lot a person can accomplish. But it has to be within their capabilities.

You can't become a different person or become like the person you emulate. Be reasonable about how much you can push yourself and how much you can achieve. People who push too hard often find that any results are short-lived.

If you look around, you may see that some people are able to make major changes. It's possible that they had it in them all along and just needed a push to bring out that part of their personality. Just because one person was able to open a successful business, doesn't mean that everyone else has the leadership skills, attitude and know-how to do so. If it's not you, trying to copy it won't yield results.

It's important to have the correct balance. There's only so much you can do to change your environment. And there's only so much you can do to change yourself. Your question states that you're in a work environment that isn't good; should you change yourself or that person. It's a very fine balance. You may want to work on your tolerance level and learn to deal with the situation differently. At least some of the time, you may want to put yourself in a better environment, if possible. But you may have to find a balance and realize that you may not find the perfect comfort zone.

It's important to figure out how and with what to work on yourself, to become more tolerant. And maybe you'll come to realize that you are in a toxic environment that's beyond what you can handle, and look for something that's friendlier, even if not perfect.

What happens until you can find a better environment? For the meantime, I'd suggest you work on understanding your emotions. When a person understands their sensitivities, it doesn't make them less sensitive going forward. Understanding doesn't make it hurt less. But understanding that the hurt and offense came from your own issues, your sensitivity or lack of self-esteem, makes you realize that it wasn't that person's intention. You still won't like what the person said or did, but it may help you deal with it better.

Intense emotions can overtake logic. Logic and emotions can be contradictory. Logic may tell you to stay on the job because you're making money and it's stable, but your emotions may be telling you that you're being hurt and should leave immediately. In such situations, the pain can trump any logic. "There's no reason to stay on the job. The pay isn't worth the emotional difficulty." It may seem logical to do what your emotions are telling you. It can make it impossible to see two sides and to only see the side of emotions.

But if a person is self-aware and realizes how they're feeling, they can understand and see the logic. This can help them do what makes sense even when they're not so comfortable with it. "Even if I feel like this, I know what's the right thing to do. I know it's my own issue."

Moreover, understanding the situation can help a person prepare themselves in advance. In this case, you can prepare yourself before the workday by playing out situations in your mind. You can realize that your boss says certain things from his own pain points or weaknesses.

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To take this a step further, maybe you should look for another job with a friendlier boss and healthier environment. But realize and accept in advance that it may not either be perfect. Be reasonable and don't think you're looking for a perfect comfort zone where you'll never have to deal with any inconvenience.

And here's another tip; when going for job interviews, you may mention something about your previous employer and job situation and that you're looking for something more friendly. But don't badmouth your old boss. It's a sure way of turning off a potential boss.

In general it's important to realize that while money isn't everything, a big part of why we take a job in the first place is to cover the bills and earn an income, and looking for a job that's more emotionally comfortable but incomparable in terms of what and how you earn, it's worthwhile taking into consideration the pros and cons in regard to what it'll take to earn this money somewhere else and if this amount of discomfort is worth that or not. I've seen people be too quick to throw away a good paying job that they were not able to replace responsibly, all for a lack of comfort which may have been relatively "worth it".

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Let's apply this to shalom bayis. It's important to understand and attain the healthy balance of pushing yourself a little bit more at a time, and realizing that things won't always be exactly the way you're perfectly comfortable. Still, be careful not to push yourself so far that it's counterproductive. Being a martyr for your spouse's sake, or doing something that seems right because someone else was able to do it, will only cause you resentment. It won't make you happy.

Then there are people who make the mistake of expecting to be accommodated. They don't want to change the way they do things. "Accept me the way I am." That's also a mistake.

Jobs are somewhat disposable and can be changed easily enough. But marriage is not like that. You want to make it work. You want to be together for many good years.

Push yourself a little bit. Get out of your comfort zone. Work on yourself to be more forthcoming, accommodating, accepting. At the same time, realize that it's okay to talk about things that are important to you and be understood for it. It's a fine balance. It should be a healthy balance.

Compromise isn't always about coming up with a third option. It's about each party going a little beyond their zone, making small changes and meeting the other one in the middle. That's the yardstick of a healthy relationship.

Wishing you much Hatzlacha,
Rabbi Shimon Gruen

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME
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