

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

REVERSING A DOWNWARD SPIRAL

In this week's *parshah*, Hashem tells Moshe Rabbeinu: "Speak to the *kohanim*, the sons of Aharon, and say to them: Let none defile himself ... among his people..." The Orach l'Chaim points out the apparent repetition of the instruction ("speak to the *kohanim*, the sons of Aharon" and "say to them ... among his people") and interprets it as referring to two different types of people with regard to how they serve Hashem.

The first type serves Hashem wholeheartedly and distances himself from others who don't measure up to his own exacting standards. If he encounters them, he argues with them and berates them for not going in the correct path. But he fails to give clear guidance on how to do so, as he prefers to remain at a distance.

The second type also serves Hashem, but "among the people." He continues to mingle with those on a lower spiritual level, although he has no intention of becoming like them. In practice he needs a great deal of *siyatta diShmaya* in order to avoid being negatively influenced by them.

The first type, the Orach l'Chaim states, needs a reminder to be like Aharon Hakohen and to "seek peace and love all humanity." This is a far better path than separating oneself from others and missing out on the opportunity to draw them closer to *avodas Hashem*. The second type needs a caution to avoid being defiled by contact with those whose ways are wrong.

Those engaged in any form of *kiruv* need *siyatta diShmaya* for their efforts to bear fruit. Working with those who start off more distanced can be simpler; it can be much harder to maintain respect and caring for someone apparently close who seems to be trampling on their heritage and tradition, and to find an effective middle way — to avoid arguments and disdain while not validating wrong behavior. When we succeed in this, we can hopefully give those people teetering on the brink the strength they need to turn back to Yiddishkeit and the *lichtige* path.

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Parshas
Emor
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Q QUESTION

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

Your English *shiur* on Parshas Chayei Sarah, on not being a husband's *mashgiach*, touched me on an open wound, especially given what you said about how the issue is relevant to so many. Sadly, in my case, that's too true. Thank you for being the right person at the right time.

I'd like to bring up a point that you didn't touch upon in that *shiur*, and that is catching things in the nick of time. No healthy human being takes off his *kappel* one sunny morning. There's always a gradual decline.

What would be your approach with a husband who comes home with his *peyos* cut off? Why not take those necessary steps before he reaches that far? Of course, extreme situations call for extreme measures so you can't respond to skipping *tefillah b'tzibbur* the way you would to trampling on a real *issur d'oraisa*. But many people would have never reached that point, had they been helped earlier on in the game.

Assessing the situation is definitely important, as you noted, but I think it's safe to say that many, if not most cases start with no bad intentions. Call it laziness, neglect, or even old-fashioned *ta'avos*. That initial breakthrough in the previously solid structure is what leads to a second step down that can easily spiral out of control.

So in short, when it's just a different standard than you would like or want, assessing is important. But any serious-enough decline in Yiddishkeit should be a red flag.

Using the example of an unfiltered smartphone; many consider it to be a "ticket to Gehenom" and rightfully so. Wouldn't it be better (and even easier) to deal with an *ehrliche yungerman* you watch struggling at the brink rather than deal with the mess of one who is already drowning?

How to do it, I don't know. That's my question to you, the professional.

I'm watching my husband, a *frum, heimishe yungerman*, a *ben Torah*, who means well, wants to be good and do what's right, walk around with an unfiltered smartphone hidden in his pocket. I can't tell him anything because as far as I'm aware, he doesn't know that I know he has it. Showing support and having a strong, close relationship is important. True. But it definitely is not enough when the *yetzer hara* is burning in his pocket. With just a touch of his finger the whole entire world of *ta'avos* and *schmutz* is open in front of him. How can we bring the bird safely home before it flies too far away?

By the way, to be genuinely open, warm, and supporting to a husband in such a situation is impractical, too. You can't have unconditional love for a grown-up. When you never know when he uses it and what he watches, it leaves you anxious 24/7. That blocks the flow of emotional connection.

A ANSWER

Before I say anything else, I will stress what I stressed to the wife whose question I addressed in the Parshas Chayei Sarah class: You need one-on-one guidance to navigate your way through this very difficult and painful situation. While I can give you some pointers, you need both the support and the advice of someone who is familiar with the details, who can walk you through it, at your side.

Take care to find someone who offers you clear suggestions and solutions rather than just commiseration. You also don't need someone who wants to "get to the root of the problem" and "understand" why someone is struggling with Yiddishkeit. Though people often try to make it complicated and protest that it's

"trauma" or bad parenting and so forth and that one needs to address the causes before looking for ways forward, it's usually not so complicated. Fighting the *yetzer hara* has never been easy, and looking for "explanations" (read: justifications) for wrong behavior (certainly in adults) is nothing new — and worse a waste of time and money.

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You make an excellent point, that if possible, we should do our best to address problems while they're still small. Knowing when and how to step in is not easy, especially as once a problem is visible, things have often already become much worse than they appear.

There's a lot of talk about what people call "kids-at-risk." There is such a thing as an at-risk child, but it's usually not what people think it means. A child who is already acting out is not at-risk — he's already beyond the "risk." Of course he may be at risk of getting even worse, but it's the child who is still conforming but seems unhappy, the one who is still learning but without *geshmak*, who has trouble accepting guidance from authority figures but generally behaves okay — who is "at risk." It's wonderful if we step in at that point and protect such a child from succumbing to the risk. It requires a great deal of awareness as well as overcoming the urge to do nothing because "it's just a phase" or "he'll grow out of it" or some other rationalization.

In your situation, while I don't want or intend to scare you, if your husband is already hiding an unfiltered phone, he is likely further down that path than you realize or want to acknowledge. That doesn't mean that he no longer wants to do the right thing, but it does mean that you need to tread very carefully. Very often, guidance that a husband or wife receives in such a situation will stress that you should not intervene and should only focus on maintaining a positive relationship, without, of course, validating the wrong behavior. The time for protesting or stopping this may have passed.

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You write that showing support and so forth is not enough. It might not be. Your husband is engaged in a fierce battle and is slipping. You don't experience his challenges and probably find it hard to relate to them. But we all have our own experiences of the *yetzer hara* and know how hard it is to combat. We also know that having someone standing at our side telling us how badly we're doing is not the most effective incentive to improve.

So, what about this support? Should you even try? Of course. We are obligated to care about our fellow Yidden, and the first person on the list is one's spouse. If he was drowning, you would throw him a life-preserver if you couldn't drag him to safety; you'd do what you could to encourage him and get him to believe that he can overcome his *nisayon*. What you wouldn't do would be to tell him how stupid he was to fall into the deep water, or give up on him and turn your back as he sank beneath the surface. And you certainly wouldn't downplay the issue and tell him that it's not a big deal to drown and that you're okay with it.

Unfortunately, many spouses take an extreme position in the mistaken belief that this will lead them out of the woods. Joining one's spouse in their descent is an all-round disaster, yet that's what some people do. Attacking and criticizing one's spouse can also lead to disaster; it very rarely has a positive outcome. There is a middle path, and that's the one you have to find.

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That middle path involves not only how you relate to your husband but also how you relate to yourself. In the *shiur* you cited, I counseled the wife in a somewhat similar situation to focus on her own Yiddishkeit, not her husband's. You need to strengthen yourself if you want to be able to strengthen others. That means radiating contentment with a life of Torah and making it clear that only an *ehrliche* life brings happiness. Your secure attachment to Yiddishkeit will hopefully create a strong stable foundation for your home and provide a constant reminder to your husband of what he really wants and why it's worth fighting for.

It's not easy, and you will probably need ongoing guidance from Daas Torah, especially if the circumstances change, in which case you need to be clear on what to do if certain red lines are crossed.

There are "general" red lines that apply to all families, and there are also personal red lines, things that you, personally, cannot tolerate. It's easy for people to say what you "should" be able to live with, but feelings aren't usually as easy to control as we might like or think. And, your feelings are just as worthy of respect as your husband's. If something happens that you simply can't bear, which affects you directly, you are totally within your rights to plainly state, "I'm sorry, but I didn't sign up for that. It doesn't work for me." Of course, without Daas Torah it's easy to be mistaken about how and when to apply such a concept, but it's a mistake to think you can literally self-obliterate for the sake of a relationship, or that it's even beneficial to do so.

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With regard to what you write — it's not "impractical" to be genuinely "open, warm, and supporting" to a husband in such a situation, although it is very hard; I won't deny that. It means seeing your husband as made up of conflicting parts, some of which are great and others which are less so. You describe him as a *ben Torah*, which implies that there are still aspects of his life, perhaps significant ones, where he's still doing okay. The wrong things he's doing don't cancel out the right, and it's important to remember that.

So, as difficult as it is, try to notice the good and tell him how much you appreciate it. This is where your advice to catch things in the nick of time becomes practical. Reinforcing the good is an excellent way to "catch" someone before they spiral downward. This reminds them that they are so much more than the part of their life where the *yetzer hara* is getting the upper hand. Not only that, it helps them to maintain their self-image as someone who is trying to do the right thing and who succeeds in many areas — and this is what can give them the confidence to keep trying in other areas where the challenge is greater.

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I won't promise magic results even if you do everything "right." It's simply not in your hands, even though there really is a lot you can do. Anyone with a bit of experience will tell you that there's no magic button that will turn things around, but the slow and steady indirect approach can move things in the right direction. You will need a lot of patience.

While it doesn't sound like it's relevant to your situation, I would add that there are times where a more direct approach is called for, and often it's worth at least a try. If you have never communicated about this, then as long as it is done with a great deal of *chochmah* and proper guidance, there's a chance that it can work and it's a shame to resist trying based on untested assumptions. Who said that simply asking him to put a filter on his phone will be met with a blunt refusal? Perhaps, if you show your husband how much it would mean to you, that will give him the boost he needs to overcome his resistance. If that means admitting that you went through his pockets, it's probably not the best idea, but there are ways of bending the truth where necessary.



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It's not easy to love a spouse unconditionally; in fact, it's not easy to love a child unconditionally either, once they are old enough to have their own preferences and opinions. All the same, we can try to behave as if we love unconditionally, accepting the person as a mixed package just as we accept ourselves as a bundle of contradictions and struggles. In fact, loving and accepting your husband might need to be preceded by loving and accepting yourself, not blaming yourself for what has happened, and focusing on the good in both of you.

The *passuk* tells us that, "*Chochmas nashim bonsah baisah*—The wisdom of women builds her home." It has never been easy to be a "wise woman," an *eishes chayil* who builds her home using the special *chochmah* that Hashem gave to women. You face a tremendous challenge, one that, tragically, so many face in this generation, but remember that many have turned their lives around from the abyss and have overcome *nisyonos* to build a *bayis ne'eman b'Yisrael*

B'ezras Hashem, with *siyatta diShmaya* and *tefillah*, you too will succeed.

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