RABBI
SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the home

PARSHAS BEHAR

WHAT A WIFE CAN DO

One of the very important mitzvos we learn this week is *"Lo sonu ish es amiso* – one should not cheat his fellow." One must be straight in his dealings and should not fool others and cheat them out of their money. Rav Moshe'le of Savran, a disciple of the Rebbe Reb Baruch'l of Mezhibuzh said, "Who can one fool? You can't fool Hashem. You're not allowed to fool a fellow man. And to fool yourself? There's nothing grand in fooling a fool!".

It would seem that fooling a spouse would fall into the same category as fooling one's self. People sometimes think they can outmaneuver their spouse. You can't. While I'm not an advocate for complete honesty and transparency (because there are times when that's not healthy), if a person thinks they'll get around a situation by telling white lies and "faking it", just know that it doesn't work.

The marriage relationship is a paradigm for our relationship with Hashem. You can't fool Hashem. And in many ways, you can't fool your spouse either. You live with your wife, you live with your husband, and when you live so closely with someone, they understand you. If you want your spouse to believe you, you should mean what you say and be consistent. Because your husband or wife won't be fooled for long.

This week's essay is dedicated by

משפחת ר' נפתלי צבי הורוויץ שליט"א

שנזכה שיאיר לנו ולמשפחתינו אור התורה
בזכות התנא האלקי רשב"י זי"ע

Question:

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

I have been following your lectures for a while and I think there is a lot I can learn. I am reaching out to you hoping it will help me get back some control in my life.

I have been married for more than 20 years, *Baruch Hashem*. I was blessed with a nice family with smart and talented children. We already married off the older ones and our youngest is already a teenager. My husband is a very good-natured person and we have the same goal and values in life. Still, he has no idea how to relate to others, including myself and my children.

Now that we're dealing with teenagers - which is challenging enough - the lack of relating properly becomes very painful. Of course, he sees himself as the victim and thinks he NEVER makes a mistake. He is a very black-and-white type of person. He will never admit that intervention is needed. He will never commit to going for help. The way he sees it, *I* am the problem and need to learn to live with other people. Or else the children were disrespectful, although they do respect him until he gets triggered. In addition, my husband lost his job. He sits home all day. I go out to work which makes the situation worse.

At this point my husband sees me as an opponent and we are both so hurt from each other that we are losing the little connection we worked to build all these years. It's like a bomb that's ready to explode. As much as I try to keep the peace, I am failing badly. I realize that I cannot change him. But where do I go from here to make a positive, effective change that will relax the home a bit?

Thank you.

Answer:

This is an intense set of questions about an intense situation. I want to specify that it's not usually possible for such a forum to change a situation that has been going on for a long time. Such a situation usually requires one-to-one guidance.

Also, it's important for me to preface my answer by saying that I hope I won't come across as being critical. Any kind of constructive critique I may offer is not to imply that the questioner is the cause of the problem. Just the opposite. By asking the question, you are the beginning of the solution. If the question would have come jointly from the couple, I would have had more to say, but I'm addressing the questioner, who specifically asked what she can do to work on this issue from her side. And as I've said many times (something worth repeating and remembering): a person can only work on their own behavior and cannot change other people.

So for starters, acknowledge that you can't change your husband, and be ready to start doing what you can, without the goal of changing him. Generally however, when you approach a situation correctly, even just on your own, you'll be surprised to see how much change can be caused in another person, and in the situation in general.

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You mention that your husband is "a very black-and-white type of person." If I may point

out, the wording of your question is presented in pretty black-and-white terms as well. It's easy to see a black and white person in black and white terms, but seeing your husband as "always," and "never," may be a reflection of your own split perception and black-and-white thinking.

After so many years, it may seem like a lost case and like a "bomb that's ready to explode." But that's only if it's not dealt with properly. That's why it's so important to deal with it in the right way. Don't try to simply "stick it out", that surely won't bring about positive change. You mentioned that you married off some of the children. Unfortunately, some couples only stick together long enough to marry off all their children and then part ways. But why not use the opportunity when you're anyway together to make things work. If you still have children at home and you're not ready to *chas veshalom* let this relationship dissolve, then why settle for it "passing"? Look for ways to make it actually work!

There's a joke about an old couple who came to the rav for divorce proceedings. The husband was 104 years old and the wife 101. The rav asked them why they were getting divorced at this point. "We were just waiting for the kids to die..." Don't wait for the right time to get divorced and don't wait for a better time to work on your marriage. Do what you can do as soon as you can do it.

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You mentioned some details about your husband: his general nature, he lost his job, sits home all day, communication issues, etc. If I may point out, it seems like he is a very sad and broken man. In fact, he may have always been a little broken and very sensitive.

Being tough and challenging toward a broken person, or even allowing him to feel challenged because of his fragility, won't work. Take his sadness into consideration because that will help you figure out what you can do to make things better. Being extra empathetic and understanding will be the first step to get *you* anything. In other words, to eventually make *yourself* happier, you may want to try giving a lot of love and affection, without him having to deserve it first.

Many times, a person will complain about things that bother them and make them upset *because* they aren't getting the empathy and love they really need. Once they get that, they won't be so bothered by the other things. There's a cute story about a class on a trip to the candy store. All the boys are told to take candies for themselves, but one boy doesn't take. The owner notices and says, "Why don't you take candies? Here, I'll give you some," and give him a handful of candies. The boy tells his friend, "You know why I didn't take candies myself? The owner's hands are much bigger than mine. I wanted *him* to give me."

Sometimes people want to get what they need from someone else. But if they don't get, they start taking in different ways. Except that taking it yourself doesn't have the same effect. Taking respect or taking acknowledgement doesn't make a person satisfied so they try taking it – demanding it – more often.

If your husband is sad and feels that you or the children are not respecting him enough, he's probably very hungry. And if he's very hungry, feed him what he needs.

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A man came to me for advice on *shalom bayis* and then I didn't hear from him for a while. I thought it was a good sign, but he called me back a few months later that he's back to square one. He said he tried my advice for a few weeks but it only worked short term. I asked him, "Could it be that it worked as long as you were doing it?" He agreed. Work on a marriage is constant.

The Gemara says that Hashem is constantly being *mezaveg zivugim*. Rav Shimshon Pincus explained that this can't mean that Hashem is busy making *shidduchim* all day. He explains that Hashem is constantly working on the *zivugim* that are *already matched up* and making them happy.

If Hashem is constantly tending to your marriage, you should do the same. Don't assume your marriage can go onto cruise control because "things are okay now". I've seen good marriages go off track because one party didn't feel the need to invest like they used to. But I've seen the opposite too; troubled marriages that were saved because one party decided to tend to it.

If you tried giving respect and acknowledgement and attention in the past, good. But it may only continue to work if you continue to give it. A marriage is constant. You may be dealing with a spouse who needs an ongoing feeling of being very respected.

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This is a very important idea for everyone to think about: *"What does your spouse think you think about them?"* It doesn't matter what *you* think. It matters what *they think* you think. If your spouse doesn't think that you think highly of them or doesn't feel needed by

you, you have a problem. You want the person you're close to to feel that you think highly of them and need them.

Some people think that "needing" is represented by all the things you ask them to do. Constantly asking your husband or wife to do things for you doesn't prove you need them. It's a veiled complaint that they're not offering something. Telling them how about what they're not doing only proves that they aren't needed because they're not serving that purpose. Needing means communicating that that which they give you already is meaningful and special to you. *That* gives the feeling of being needed. And that feeling will often make the person soften up and be able to give you back.

This is all the more important for a person who is feeling challenged and doesn't have a job when you do, *etc.*

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You mentioned that your husband won't go for help. People think that going for help as a couple will be the answer because you'll have an opportunity to talk about what's bothering you and a seemingly objective third party will tell him that he's wrong. But making him feel worse will not help your marriage. "Going for help" means seeing what *you* can do for your marriage.

There *are* ways to share your feelings and figure out what he can do without making him feel like he's the cause of your unhappiness. But you first have to make him feel good, respected and needed. This is not a quick fix and takes consistent work. It may also take a lot of time until you get something back.

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It's not pleasant living with people who *never* make a mistake. But sometimes people don't feel comfortable making a mistake because they're not allowed to, or at least they feel so. If you don't accuse him, confront him or challenge him about things, you may end up hearing him acknowledge the mistake himself. "I shouldn't have done that."

By not pointing out the mistake and telling him what he should have done instead, you are leaving room for the mistake to be acknowledged. And when he does admit to a mistake, don't make him feel like a failure for it. Thank him for apologizing and accept it gracefully.

Respecting a husband is a fundament of Jewish marriage and that will get you the best results. Again, don't wait for him to deserve it. Just give it consistently. Treat him like a king and you will end up being the queen.

Wishing you all the best,

Rabbi Shimon Gruen



TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME

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