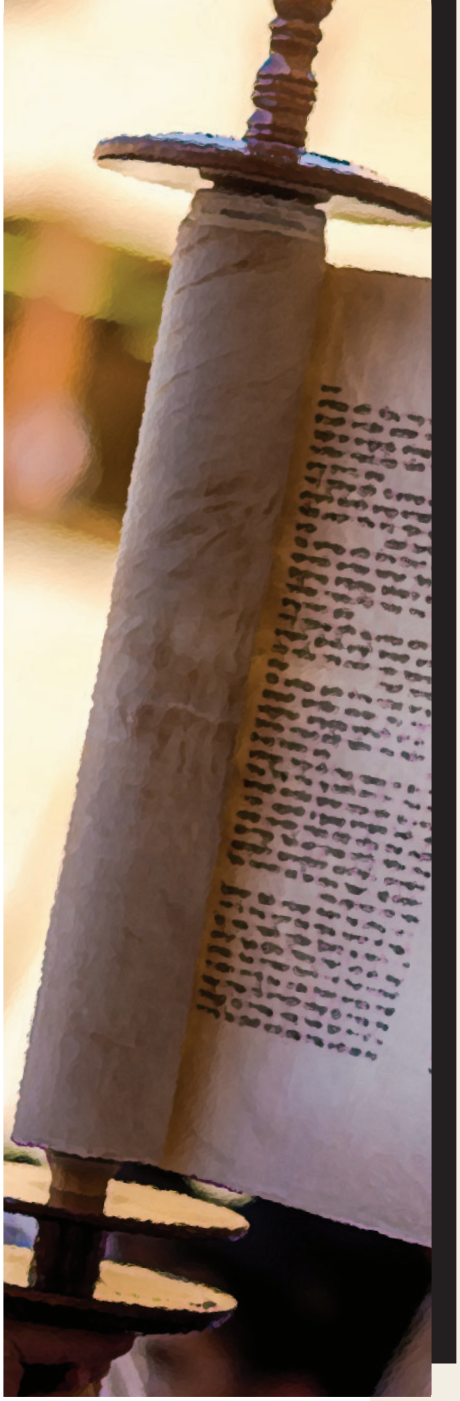


RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

JUGGLING RELATIONSHIPS

After the Torah describes all the many ways in which the Jewish People are to keep away from impure and harmful relationships, this week's *parshah* opens with a warning that the *kohanim* must be even more careful in this area.

The *Orach Lechaim* notes that one of the reasons *kohanim* must be more cautious is that they are tasked with bringing people closer to one another and to Hashem.

Whenever one tries to bring people closer either to one another, or to Torah observance, there is a danger that the proximity can become problematic. Those engaged in *kiruv rechokim* are sometimes exposed to harmful influences. Similarly, those who try to help others repair their *shalom bayis* may be exposed to painful situations. Knowing how to keep a safe distance even while engaging in such holy matters is key to safeguarding oneself. Furthermore, many people who try to fix other people's relationships end up letting their own relationships (with a spouse, with children etc.) suffer as a result.

Knowing which relationships take precedence is essential. In most cases, there's no need to choose between them; one only needs to be aware of which one to focus on and which takes second place.

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Parshas
Emor
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Dear Rabbi Gruen,

I was recently sitting with a group of friends and many of the women said that they don't have time to listen to *shiurim*. All of us agreed, however, that your *shiurim* are the only ones worth listening to at this stage in our lives, since they are short and relatable and always leave us with practical advice (plus a *vort* on the *parshah*). So I wanted to share our collective appreciation.

But I also have a question.

I am *baruch Hashem* married to a wonderful young man, and we live just a few blocks from my parents. Understandably, we go over to their house often, and sometimes even stay overnight. My problem is as follows: I have an older unmarried sister who (I hope this doesn't sound inappropriate) is drop-dead gorgeous, dresses like a model, and knows it.

Whenever we visit, she very much manages to stick herself into my husband's face. She's always "suddenly" in the room when he's there, becomes very loud, and makes jokes sort-of directed at him (and more things too).

I don't think she does this consciously but being single, perhaps she doesn't realize the effect she has.

My husband is a true *yarei Shamayim* and a *chassidisher yungerman* but as I'm married to him, I'm aware that he notices her. It's also important to note that he will never behave inappropriately back.

My relationship with my sister is very complicated (long story) and the few times in the past when I made gentle comments such as asking her not to sit directly across from my husband at the kitchen table (when she wasn't even eating but only sat down to "keep us company") it ended in disaster.

To sum up, due to the circumstances, we HAVE to spend time by my parents, and staying away isn't really an option. If we lived even just a little further away or out of town, this would be a totally different story.

Me or my parents talking to her isn't an option at all either (again: complicated family dynamics).

In other words, I don't think there is anything practical that I can do. I've gone through all the options for months now and don't see any way to change the situation.

My question is: What should my attitude towards the situation be? When I'm with my family, I'm tense all the time, and hyper-alert at my sister's every move. I get snappy with my husband as well which I know doesn't make for a very attractive wife.

I've never discussed this with my husband, as I don't see what would be accomplished and I don't want to *chas veshalom* imply that he's acting inappropriately (which he really isn't), and also because I don't want to make this officially into an issue. But it's still there, and I'm sure everyone can feel it. More so on my end than on his, probably.

My relationship with my sister is also extremely important and I can't do anything to jeopardize it.

What can I do?

Thank you



This is a very sensitive issue, and I don't have all the details needed to give comprehensive advice. Even if I had all the necessary information, people often still need help implementing the advice they are given. In such situations, I always advise seeking one-on-one guidance rather than relying on the reply to a letter or a *shiur*.

What I can do is examine a few ideas on the issues you describe. The first thing that strikes me is that you have mentioned quite a few issues, and don't seem to be clear on which of them is at the root of what's bothering you.

You write that you have a strained relationship with your sister, complex family dynamics in your family of origin, worries about what your husband really thinks about all of this, and perhaps also insecurity about your *shalom bayis*. All of these are real issues and need to be addressed—and it will help immensely if you can figure out which of them are issues in their own right and which are just outgrowths.

This reminds me of the time when a woman approached my wife for advice, saying that she had "issues with *emunah*, with her *shalom bayis*, and with her mental health." Only after some exploration did it become clear that the real issue was that her husband wasn't satisfied with her level of *tzniyus*. "If I had more *emunah*, I wouldn't have problems with *tzniyus*," was how the person put it. "And then, we wouldn't have all these fights, and I'm sure I wouldn't be feeling so bad about having a husband who doesn't appreciate me." Figuring out where everything started was vital in order to know how to tackle all the offshoots.

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It appears from your letter that your difficult relationship with your sister predates your marriage. In that case, it's definitely something to examine more closely, irrespective of how that's playing out now in your life.

You apparently can't move away and (understandably) don't want to cut her out of your life entirely, so figuring out how to create healthy boundaries to safeguard your relationship with your husband is vital. Right now, you're living in fear of how everyone will react to you expressing your thoughts. That's not good for you or anyone. I do believe that it's possible to come to an understanding with your sister that makes it clear that your *shalom bayis* comes first.

Unfortunately, I often have to advise people on how to decide whether to prioritize a relationship with a spouse or with a child. However, when it comes to *shalom bayis* versus a sibling relationship, there's no question that *shalom bayis* takes precedence.

Without knowing more about the tension between you and your sister, there's not a lot I can suggest to improve your relationship. What I can suggest is that regardless of what you decide to do, you should always have compassion for her situation. It's very hard to be an older unmarried sibling, and while of course you know that, it's easy to forget it when you're feeling your own distress.

It's unnecessary to verbalize your compassion for her situation. Just keeping it at the forefront of your mind is enough for your interactions with her to come across as gentler and more empathetic, and if she starts to sense that, it could have a knock-on impact on all the issues you have described.

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Now turning to your husband, you write that he behaves in an exemplary manner and that is wonderful and not to be taken for granted. Chazal are very clear that in such matters, no one is above suspicion and everyone is subject to temptation. I have heard many fine and *ehrliche* young men complain about how family get-togethers are a real challenge due to similar issues. While your presence is a safeguard on a certain level, it is still very necessary to be aware of the dynamics here and take all possible precautions.

This is partly why I want to stress how important it is that you do discuss this with your husband, despite your misgivings. Bottling up one's emotions is almost never a good idea and you've already noticed how snappy and irritable you can become because you feel unable to really discuss this issue.

How you present it is key. Focusing on your own feelings will make it much easier for your husband to accept than any hint of accusation. You could say something along the lines of, "I have this issue with my sister always hanging around when we visit my parents. Maybe I'm being over-sensitive, and certainly there's nothing I can put my finger on, but I just feel really uneasy. I know this is not about you, and I admire the way you show so much restraint. Do you think there's something we can do about this?"

I think it's highly likely that your husband is bothered about the situation too and will welcome you finally bringing it out into the open. Discussing it can definitely bring you closer together and of course makes finding a solution easier. When two people are on the same page, there's almost nothing that can't be resolved; when two people are at odds, even the simplest problem becomes insurmountable.

Often, in such cases, a wife can ask her husband if it's okay if she presents the issue as "his problem." That makes it easier when it comes to speaking to a sister. You could even (only with his permission, of course), say something to her like, "I know my husband is a bit extreme in this area, but..."

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You write that talking to your sister "isn't an option at all," but I'm afraid it really *is* the only option. You've already tried both avoiding the topic and hinting, and both methods have failed. Continuing with failed methods is only going to make you both resentful.

So, as with your husband, you will have to be open and clear. And, as with your husband, this absolutely can be done without making your sister feel under attack. Stress that she's not doing anything wrong, and that the problem is with you (or your husband).

Obviously, you must avoid saying anything like, "You're single, so you don't realize that..." which will only rub salt into her wounds. It's not easy, but may be smart, to be open about your feelings of insecurity, and I do realize that being so vulnerable is very, very hard. If you keep in mind that she, too, feels vulnerable as an older single, it may be easier for you to open up to her.

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Another important point to keep in mind is that when you visit your parents, you're at your sister's home. She lives there; she shouldn't feel obligated to get out of the way when a married sibling arrives. Perhaps, if you want to eat supper quietly with your husband, you could eat in the dining room, or somewhere else. Expecting her or any other single sibling not to enter the kitchen when you and your husband are there might be a little unreasonable.

Another option might be to visit your parents without your husband from time to time, or even, in the event that your sister isn't open to adjusting her behavior, for your husband to stop visiting entirely. While this is far from an ideal outcome, your *shalom bayis* is more important than your relationship with your sister and you are unfortunately not free to rule out such an option. It's also possible that taking this step will enable you to improve your relationship with your sister in your husband's absence, spending stress-free time with her just chatting or discussing various issues, and making her feel your equal in every way.

I would like to stress here again that you really do need individual guidance. The person advising you needs to know much more about the dynamics than you have revealed in your letter; they will also need to assess the results of implementing the advice they give and make necessary adjustments based on how your sister and husband react. It would be a terrible shame to take any unnecessary course of action and deal with the repercussions; likewise, it would be terrible to assume that no such action is necessary and end up sacrificing your relationship with your husband.

Once you involve someone wise and objective, you will feel reassured that you're doing the right thing. Hopefully, you'll find a way to give your *shalom bayis* precedence and still have the *siyatta diShmaya* you need to bring about the best possible outcome for everyone at once.

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME: EMOR 5785

To contact Rabbi Gruen please call **718.841.6557** or e-mail **rabbigruen@lehair.org**
To subscribe to receive the weekly essay, please email **parshalessons@lehair.org**

Please feel free to send any questions, on this topic or any topic to RabbiGruen@Lehair.org