RABBI
SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons
for the home

PARSHAS MATOS MASSEI

SETTING UP FOR A BETTER FUTURE

Parshas Massei lists the various stations where Bnei Yisroel rested throughout their travels in the Midbar. The *parshah* begins: "These are the journeys of Bnei Yisroel who left the land of Mitzrayim." Commenting on this *passuk*, the Kozhnitzer Maggid in his *Sefer Avodas Yisroel* teaches that often, people want to serve Hashem but are hampered by behaviors and tendencies they find hard to change, which prevent them from reaching the heights they're aiming for. Without addressing and overcoming issues from one's past, it's difficult to move on.

This is why the *passuk* notes the fact that Bnei Yisroel left Mitzrayim. There's an emphasis on having left the past in order to travel through the Midbar and reach Eretz Yisroel, the place where Hashem can be served in the most ideal manner.

This concept is applicable not only when it comes to personal growth but also with regard to relationships. Sometimes, people try to "make things work" by doing things differently – but not the things that caused the problems in the first place. If you start calling home more often or work on being more giving without addressing the things that really bother your spouse, chances are that your positive gestures are not going to have the effect you'd like. That doesn't mean that you have to postpone general improvements in your relationship until core issues are resolved, but it does mean that clearing the issues that are causing the stresses and difficulties should be your priority. Otherwise, frustration and disappointment at your lack of progress are liable to cause you and your spouse to despair of improving things.

ברכת מזל טוב לידיד נאמן
הרה"ח ר' אהרן סמט שיחי'
לרגל לידת הבן למזל טוב
יה"ר שיזכו הוריו לרוות ממנו רב נחת דקדושה לאורך ימים ושנים טובות

Question:

Question 1:

Dear Rabbi Gruen

I really enjoy and appreciate your lectures. Maybe you can address the following, because I imagine it's applicable to many people.

I'm a newlywed and listen to your lectures because I feel it's important that I start off my marriage right. But here's my question: If everyone wants to start off right, and everyone goes to *chosson* classes and *hashkafah* classes, why do we still see so many marriages failing? Is it because the *chosson* teachers aren't doing a good job? Could it be that no matter how many lessons you get and how many lectures you listen to, everyone will (or at least might still) have problems?

Also, do you give private *chosson* classes or can you recommend someone who does, and does it well? Is there a piece of advice (or some ideas) that you feel that if only shared or explained before marriage, would really clear the path from difficulties and challenges?

Thank you!

Question 2:

Thank you so much for addressing my questions [in a previous essay] and clarifying that my job is to focus on myself to see how I can do better. I understand that when it comes to myself, I cannot change my wife's nature and have to see what I can do.

But what about when it affects the children? My wife has a very nervous nature and she was raised in a nervous home. I was raised in the opposite extreme. She's often nervous and yelling at the children. When she wants to ask a child to do something difficult, she tells me to say it because she doesn't want it to come out too strong. I can probably help out more at home to keep the tension lower, but it wouldn't change how she interacts with the children. It'll just be a band-aid. Am I being unrealistic?

Thank you.

Answer:

First question first: Will couples who listen to more lectures before they get married have a happier marriage? Does more training beforehand help couples to avoid problems later? And if the answer is: yes, in theory, why don't we see the benefits? Are we going wrong somewhere?

If there was one simple formula that would enable every *chosson-kallah* to avoid all future problems, that would be great. Unfortunately, no such formula exists, and no matter who prepares a young couple for marriage, issues may still arise.

People become geniuses in hindsight. "You know why they have no *shalom bayis*? Because he grew up with controlling parents... because she was spoiled by her parents..." The same applies when things go well. "You know why they never fight? Because she grew up in such a healthy home..." Explaining the past is relatively simple. It's the future that's hard to predict – because soon enough we realize that what applies to one person is totally inapplicable to another. The young man with a difficult background whose parents were controlling has a brother who's doing very well, and the young lady from a healthy home has a sister who just got divorced. And if you try to

explain things by blaming "the other side," we run into other contradictions.

There's really no magic. We all rely on *Siyatta diShmaya* and nothing is ultimately in our hands. So many variables can throw things off. No matter which *chosson* teacher you go to, there's no foolproof method you can be taught. There's no guarantee that if you replicate something that someone else tried with success, you too will experience good results. And that's why there's nothing I can say that will make the future perfect for every person who follows my advice.

For people who don't have *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* in the picture, it's very uncomfortable to live with such uncertainty, and throughout the centuries, numerous philosophers and scientists have come up with theories that claim that if only we could know all the variables, the future would be an open book and we could make predictions with total accuracy. But despite huge advances in comprehending the laws of nature, the notion that any person can accurately predict the future based on knowledge of the present is just as ridiculous today as it was in the past. Only Hashem can know all the variables – and change them, if and when He so wishes. Only He can determine the future.

This is certainly true with regard to a couple's level of marital harmony, where so many factors come into play: the personalities of the *chosson* and the *kallah,* their respective teachers, their families, friends, backgrounds, levels of maturity, IQ, emotional maturity... and then all the circumstances and situations that Hashem will throw their way! There's so much involved in the workings of a relationship that it's ridiculous to assume that a specific piece of advice from anyone can make the entire difference. That doesn't mean that seeking out advice isn't important – it is – but it does put the potential impact of any one piece of advice in perspective.

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Another point to bear in mind is that no matter how good the advice, it's only as good as the person who implements it. Having a good teacher is not enough. And even if you are fortunate enough to find a wonderful teacher who tailors his advice to your personality and situation, they don't know your spouse... Maybe you're doing all the right things, but your wife has issues with giving and receiving. Maybe you're genuinely doing your best, but your wife is taking advantage of your generosity and good-heartedness. The point is that each marriage has its unique issues and no amount of generalized advice is going to help when these unique issues rear their heads. That's why personalized advice addressing both spouses is so essential.

I recently spoke to a group of divorced men. We discussed relationships and knowing how much to give and when, and not tolerating abuse. After the class, a man approached me and told me how refreshing it was to hear such things talked about – things that no one else is saying. How many *chassanim* or *kallos* are taught to be kind and giving *and* to notice red flags of abusive behavior? Are they being taught how to respond when they're hurt? ("I'm sure you didn't mean it, but I was hurt when you said that.")

The real issue might be not *what* you were or weren't taught in *chosson* or *kallah* classes, but rather *when*. Being presented with such issues before you're married is somewhat like reading a driver's manual before you ever step into a car. You may be able to pass the written test, but you won't know how to drive. It's the same with *klalei haGemara*. There are rules in how to learn Gemara – what's a *kushya*, what's a *teirutz*, a *raya*, a *machlokes*... If you learn the rules without opening a Gemara, chances are you won't know how to apply them. There's a cute story about someone who brought a *shailah* on a chicken to a rav that brings this idea to life. The rav picked up the problematic item, studied it carefully, and then replied: If this is a lung it's *treif,* but if it's a heart it's kosher. Knowing the *halachah* in Shulchan Aruch didn't give this rav the ability to know how to apply it. Real life is about applying the rules correctly, not just about knowing the information or convincing yourself that you're on the right track.

Marriage is like that. It's very difficult to take all those abstract rules you learned before you got married and apply them to actual situations in your marriage as they arise. Some relationships require you to be *mevater* more, or to give more compliments. Others need you to express more confidence and learn how to become a strong decision-maker and leader. How will you know what to apply when? Only by having humility and asking for guidance.

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With regard to your question about a good *madrich*, realize that the most helpful guidance you'll get will be after you're already in the relationship. That means that when you're looking for a *chosson madrich*, look for someone who will be available for you after you get married. There are *madrichim* who will give as many as 50 hours of classes before the wedding, but afterwards, they're impossible to reach. Choose a *madrich* who commits to making time for you after you're married, someone who will make the effort to get a feel of who your spouse is. Someone who'll keep his finger on the pulse until things are stable.

And be prepared for this to take time. Get help with issues that arise; don't assume that struggling is part of the package and that "everyone struggles, so it must be normal." Even if the issues you're dealing with seem small, address them too. You can never know how significant even a "small" issue may turn out to be, and as you fix things, one at a time, you gain confidence in your relationship. That, with lots of *tefillah* and *Siyatta diShmaya* will get you very far indeed *iyH.*

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Many people, even with all the education and advice, still fall into the trap of trying to change the other person, and now I'm moving on to address the second question. Trying to change people is going to cause you a lot of problems. People were raised differently, have different styles in *chinuch* or running a home, and have different issues to deal with.

In this vein, the closest I can come to giving a single universal piece of advice to *chassanim* and *kallos* is: Be aware that you are about to marry *someone else*. Your spouse is different to you and thinks differently to you, and may do so until 120.

More than anything else, marriage is about acceptance. Of course you should try to marry the person you feel will be the most compatible and suitable – and the easiest for you to live with happily. But never assume that this means your spouse needs to be exactly like you. And once you're married, don't assume you'll be able to change that person into becoming like you either. Instead, accept your spouse for who he or she is, and learn how to live the happiest life you can with the person Hashem sent you.

I once spoke to a *yungerman* who was working with struggling boys but wasn't seeing the success he was looking for, even though he truly meant well. I told him that you can't change people – all you can do is try to understand them and work *with* them. With struggling youth, he would have to accept that they might continue liking things that he didn't like. They might have different definitions of success. He agreed with me, and realized his mistake... and then, as we parted, he asked me: *But lema'aseh, how can I persuade them to do what I want?* He had grasped the idea in theory but was still a long way off understanding what true acceptance means.

You can't change who your spouse is or even what they do. You can only decide what you're going to do about it, (something that we discuss often in other essays). You might need to decide whether to step in more or less often. Maybe you'll want to be home during more stressful times. You can think of different ways to discuss your specific problems so that even if you can't change your wife, she may do something you want just because you asked nicely. Try to figure out which are the core issues, and think of ways to approach them differently so that you don't find yourself repeatedly in the same situations and getting frustrated all over again. *Hatzlachah rabbah!*

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

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MATOS MASSEI 5782

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