Torah Lessons for the Home

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

| Parshas Beshalach |

The Value of Your Presence

Recognizing Another Person's Challenge

In Parshas Beshalach, the Torah tells us that during the years that the Bnei Yisrael traversed across the Midbar, they were always accompanied by a pillar of fire, the Amud Aish, or a pillar of cloud, Amud Ha'anan. In all of their years in the desert, they were always surrounded by either one: the fire served to light up the encampment by night, and the cloud directed them where to go.

Here's where the question arises. If the cloud's purpose was only to direct the nation where to go, why was its presence necessary when the Yidden were camping in one location, which was more often than not? In fact, in Parshas Masa'ei, Rashi points out that in all forty years of the nation's encampment in the Midbar, they only experienced 42 travails. If so, what was the purpose of cloud?

Perhaps Hakadosh Baruch Hu, in His mercy, left the cloud there at all times in order to provide the nation with a sense of comfort that when the time would come for them to travel once again, it would be there for them. It wasn't necessarily being productive, but it was always there. Its presence itself fulfilled a purpose.

You're Needed Here

The topic of presence, which essentially reflects on an individual's positive and healthy desire to be in the company of a spouse, has the potential to turn into one of unnecessary contention. So often, husbands will tell me that they get nervous when they come home to please their wife, only to realize that they're totally unneeded. Their wife seems to be managing perfectly fine without their help and they end up feeling like like a fifth wheel, their presence superfluous. In exasperation, they may tell their wife, "You want me around? You want my help? I came home and there's nothing to do." What such husbands find even more perturbing is that when they leave, having done nothing in their eyes, their wives seem upset. What did they give her that she finds so hard to be without? The way they see it, they simply wasted their time and energy.

Human presence is a very important component in a relationship. Especially for wives, having their husbands around—even if the husband is not doing anything other than hanging around the house—offers a deep sense of comfort and security. Obviously, everything should be done in a healthy way with proper boundaries and too much of a good thing is no good either, but there's something to be said about being present.

We find this concept to be true in *ruchniyus*. The Torah advises us to be in the presence of a righteous person and cautions us against the contrary.

If presence is a valid virtue, why does it lead to frustration, especially on the part of the

person who is expected to be present? Too often, we underestimate the value of our own presence. When we don't appreciate what it means to simply be there for another person, that just doing that is not a waste of time but that it fosters a sense of security and love, we feel uncomfortable providing this need. Whether you feel it or not, the message of "I'm here for you," which takes shape first and foremost in your physical presence, means so much to your spouse. If you're not tense or anxious, just being around is a gesture of your care for your spouse. Even without saying "What can I do for you?" you're doing enough.

If you're walking around in circles for half an hour and wondering what good you're doing by sticking around base, don't underestimate the support your presence provides. The moment you realize that simply being around makes your wife calmer and when you leave she gets tense and anxious, you know you're doing something big.

If Hashem had a reason that *"Lo yamush Amud Haa'anan,"* to never withdraw the pillar of cloud from the nation even when it didn't serve its apparent purpose of leading the way, there's a reason why your presence matters in your home—even if you're not cooking the food or washing the floors.

If you've ever made a Simcha or been a hostess at an affair, you've seen this phenomenon come into play. Why do we want guests at our affair, even if they come without gifts or they don't participate much in the dancing or otherwise? Why do we see a relative's or friend's presence as a show of their closeness to us? Because "being there" means a lot.

Once you appreciate the value of your own presence, by being present as often as you can, you can then work out the technical details of when it works for you and when it doesn't. Most often, when you're there enough in a healthy way, and give advance notice when you can't be, your spouse will understand that.

Arguments crop up when people don't appreciate their own presence enough. Since they don't see it as a virtuous endeavor, as an integral part of Shalom Bayis, they constantly seek means to excuse themselves from it, which in turn frustrates the spouse. As a result, the couple engages in unnecessary arguments regarding their roles in the home and the shirking of their responsibilities. When you appreciate your presence yourself, you could be generous with it to others. When an individual understand the value of a calm physical presence it preempts a lot of friction that comes from wondering what purpose he's really serving.

Another part in valuing another person's presence is expressing this appreciation. Telling your spouse, "I appreciate that you're here," goes a long way in validating his own importance. When you admit to your spouse that his mere presence means something to you, you're affirming it as a way to fulfill your needs. Don't be ashamed to say, "I like when you're here. It means a lot to me." This not only diminishes the other person's sense of discomfort, but also lets him know that he's serving a purpose.

If you feel that your spouse isn't present enough, don't fool yourself into thinking that you don't need them there. That's not true. An important component in a healthy marriage is companionship. Instead of talking yourself into not asking for it, take the courage to express your need properly. This is important for you—to get the presence you seek, and for your spouse— to feel needed.

Speaking of physical presence, it's important to mention the flip side: to give space when space is needed. For example, when a couple is on vacation for one week long, just because they're enjoying being in each other's presence immensely, that doesn't mean that one or both spouses don't need a bit of air on their own. One spouse may need some time for a phone call, or even to take a short walk on their own. Respecting each other's space is important. Two spouses in a healthy marriage can acknowledge that needed space is not a reflection of lack of love. It's a reflection of healthy boundaries.

Sit Near Me, Mommy

Children, like all human beings, appreciate the physical presence of their loved ones. A parent's calm presence provides them with a sense of security. How does this play out in the relationship? Parents could be busy with lots of things, so when their child asks for them to sit with him while he's playing Lego, and the to-do list is calling their name, they may wonder, "What good am I doing sitting here like this?" Especially

for people who like being productive, simply providing their presence to a child may seem like a nuisance.

But, it's important to understand what your presence means to your child. It gives your child a message of "I'm here for you."

Often, a child will learn or review a Gemara and ask his father to sit there with him. "If I have a question, I'll ask you," he tells his father, and resumes learning on his own. The father sits there, twiddling with his thumbs, wondering why he can't just go to the next room and come back when the question arises. It's no coincidence that the second he gets up to leave the child comes up with a question. It's not the answer that the child seeks; it's the sense of security that he derives from his father's physical presence in the room. Be there for your child.

Just as with a spouse, when a parent herself doesn't appreciate what her presence gives the child, she finds it frustrating to "just be there." On the contrary, when a parent understands what it means to the child to have someone who cares for them nearby, he will find in himself much more patience. He will be more willing to give it.

-Q&A-

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

Question: What's the right perspective with which to raise children: that they should aim toward being a good Jew, building a fine home and conducting himself according to Torah in business and personal matters, or with the *She'ifos* of being first and foremost a Torah scholar who spends his days engaged in Torah study?

Answer: I suspect that this question emanates from a flawed understanding of Judaism's perspective on values. Why must these two visions be a contradiction to each other? Or, more importantly, why is one right and one wrong? When we see the various means of service to Hashem as a hierarchy, one is automatically better and one worse. With such a perception, depending on our own assumptions, we may see the Torah scholar as someone who's living in a bubble, not in touch with reality, and/or self absorbed, or the good Jew who engages in business as not pious enough, and too immersed in the pleasures of this world. If the Torah scholar's way of serving Hashem is what we see as the only right way, everyone else's service of Hashem takes on a mediocre light in our eyes.

Instead of focusing on a vision for your child, it would be wise to shift the focus instead of the unique value of every Yid. When a parent understands that every person has a unique purpose and that we all must do as must as we could to be connected to Hashem at all times, he can raise a child who appreciates these values.

A child should grow up hearing gadlus in Torah and avodah being promoted and encouraged, but it should never be at the expense of not respecting all other kinds of greatness. A child should not grow up with a black and white understanding that greatness in Torah is the only accomplishment in a Yid's life.

Life takes each person on his own individual path. Not everyone becomes a Gadol BaTorah just as not everyone makes it financially. It's not one or the other. It's about doing what's right.

Our goal as parents is to be able to teach our children that there are many different ways to reach greatness. In this vein, children should never hear anyone being put down for being one way or the other. When we put down someone for not following our vision, we give the child a message that if they don't do as the parent envisions, they're second class.

A child should be raised to look up to everyone, to see the good in every person. He should be constantly complimented and encouraged for any and every good deed, even if it's not exactly what we envisioned from him at that time. He should grow up to be committed to Torah and connected to Hashem, in his own way. When a parent sees the good in his own derech and in others, the child absorbs this message.

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