

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

TAKING AND GIVING THE LEAD

In this week's *parshah*, the Torah describes the *mechatzis hashekel*, the half-shekel each person is required to donate toward the building of the Ohel Mo'ed. "The rich person shall give no more; and the poor person shall give no less than half a shekel," the *passuk* states.

The Toldos Yitzchak writes that these words can be seen as guidance for all of us in our *avodas Hashem*. A truly wealthy person is someone who is rich in Torah learning and does many *mitzvos*. Such a person should take care not to credit himself or become arrogant at his achievements.

As for the person who is poor in Torah and *mitzvos,* he should take care not to become despondent and should focus on the little he has done and can still do. Instead of seeing himself as pathetic and unworthy and reaching the conclusion that nothing he does is of any value, he should encourage himself to do whatever he can and remind himself that each and every good deed counts.

The word "shekel" refers to a measure of weight, and when it comes to learning Torah and doing *mitzvos*, we all need to remember that even the tiniest measure of good can tip the scales of the whole world to the side of merit.

This concept applies in many areas of life. It is common for people to think to themselves, "I'm anyway such a bad wife, so what difference does it make if I give my husband supper with a smile?" or, "I'm in any case a terrible father, so what's the point of learning five minutes with my son when he needs so much more than that?"

All relationships can be improved by even a tiny move toward the positive, and no one should ever despair of fixing things. No one is so flawed (or so perfect) that the impact of their actions won't be felt.

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Parshas
Ki Sisa
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Dear Rabbi Gruen,

First of all, thank you so much for your weekly *shiurim*, which I listen to every week and which provide me with so much inspiration. Hashem should bless you with lots of *brachah*. I have a question to ask and would greatly appreciate it if you could give me some clarity.

I'm a young mother of three little kids *ka"h*. My husband is a wonderful husband and in general a wonderful person. He has a very easy-going personality while I am just the opposite, quite intense and more rigid. Although we have changed a little over the years, with both of us moving towards the middle ground, I still find myself acting like too much of a strong wife with a tame husband, and I never wanted things to turn out like this.

One major area of contention is when I need his help with the children. Things can become very stressful and when I have to ask him nicely to help me I feel like exploding, such as on Erev Shabbos when the baby's crying and the other children are acting wild. I find it so hard to take a deep breath and ask him in a nice, calm voice, "Please can you pick up the baby?" when what I really want to say is, "Can't you see what's going on here??"

I've asked him several times to offer his help so that I don't have to ask. When I do have to ask, it often comes out sounding like a command, because I really need his help so I can't give him the option of saying, "No." I really don't want to end up bossing him around. But he always replies that he prefers me to tell him exactly what needs doing, because otherwise he doesn't know what to offer.

That just makes me feel even more frustrated, and when I read about wives asking for advice on how to deal with a tough kind of husband, I often think how lucky they are to be married to someone assertive. I have the same issue with *chinuch*, where my husband often asks me what we should do when he doesn't know how to deal with a situation.

I realize that all this makes me sound like a terrible wife, but I'm really trying not to be like this. I actually feel awful about telling him what to do, even at times when I really do need his help, such as when I get home from work and have to deal with everything when I'm exhausted, and the moment he walks through the door I ask him for help, without giving him any time to relax after his long day (even though I didn't get any time to relax either). I feel guilty about this; am I being fair?

I know he's a wonderful husband and father, and in fact I try to emulate his flexibility and become more easy-going, but I still struggle with my strong-willed nature and would like your advice on how to allow him to become a stronger husband and father, especially at hectic times.

I know that he would like to see things change, too, because he once told me in a honest, vulnerable moment that he wants me to respect him more. I told him that I really want that too, but because I'm a natural leader with a strong will it's hard for me that he's not so strong. I try to work on *shalom bayis* and it's my number-one priority and in general, we do have a good relationship — and I'd even say that this problem has brought us closer because it makes us discuss meaningful issues. But in practice, what can I do to change the dynamics?

Thank you



I'll begin by commending you for the self-awareness of the issues that you and your husband are dealing with. We all have our blind spots that prevent us from seeing ourselves as others do and identifying areas that need work. People who remain stubbornly in denial will always struggle with their relationships and end up causing unnecessary suffering for themselves and their loved ones.

You mention how your behavior makes you "sound like a terrible wife." I don't think you sound like a terrible wife at all. Everyone has things they need to fix and you are doing what you can to improve your marriage and looking for advice in the areas where you feel stuck. There's nothing terrible about that — quite the opposite. Being overly self-critical is discouraging and unhelpful.

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The issue you describe is a common one, and affects people equally the other way around: a husband who is controlling and a wife who is submissive. This is a problem either way, as no one should ever seek to control another person. However, as you intuitively feel, when it's the wife who is the dominant personality, things are more complicated and if the situation isn't properly addressed, it can cause more problems than when things are reversed.

You do mention that your husband told you that he would like to feel more respect coming from you, and that you responded that your personalities make this hard for you. That's understandable, but it doesn't excuse you from according him the respect he deserves simply because he is your husband. Given that you acknowledge what a wonderful husband and person he is, you can surely recognize in him many qualities that are worthy of respect and this can make it easier for you to show it.

If you still find it hard to verbalize this, you can write him notes and do whatever you can to show and express your respect. It can be more challenging for strong-willed wives to feel and show respect for their husbands, but when they find ways to do so, the accomplishment is greater.

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I haven't given you any advice on "how to allow him to become a stronger husband and father," and there's a reason for that. You can "allow" your husband to change his nature, but he may never actually turn into a different kind of person, because personalities are ingrained; they don't change. The best we can do is work on ourselves and address issues that arise. In general, however, strong-willed people remain strong-willed and easy-going people stay that way, throughout their lives.

This means that your husband is very unlikely to become strong and assertive, just as you may never become soft and flexible. If your husband were asking for my advice, I could discuss ways for him to try to assert himself more, but since it's you asking, what I suggest is for you to take baby steps toward incorporating more of the behaviors you're trying to adopt.

To use one of the examples you provide, you can start giving your husband a little down-time when he gets home from work, even when you're exhausted too, and you shouldn't wait for him to ask for it but should give it regardless. Yes, it will be a challenge for you, but each day you persist in your new behavior will help you to become more accustomed to it. You may never become a truly stress-free, easy-going person but you can, step by step, stretch yourself beyond your comfort zone and give your husband what you feel he deserves.

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Simultaneously, you can and should tell your husband what you're trying to change in yourself, as well as how hard it is for you, and how much you want to do things differently. It's actually important that you stress how much this is your challenge and not his problem or his fault, because then he'll know, if you do "explode" occasionally, that it's due to your nature and not his shortcomings.

You can, for instance, tell him, "I'm just venting because things were so hectic at work, my boss wasn't happy with my project, there were traffic jams all the way home, and the baby didn't stop screaming... I'm sorry I'm so frazzled. I'll get over

it, *be'ezras Hashem*, and I appreciate that you're here to hear me out." A husband who is given such an "introduction" to the evening is more likely to excuse a rushed supper and an impatient or distracted wife than one who is on the receiving end of, "Why do you always get home so late? Can't you see that the baby's screaming and I'm not coping?"

Another benefit of being so open about your feelings and challenges is that it prevents you from denying them yourself. It can be hard to be so vulnerable and all too often, people avoid admitting uncomfortable truths by deflecting the blame onto others. "I wouldn't be so stressed if he..." "I would have been able to deal with the situation calmly if she..."

That said, I would like to clarify here that prefacing an angry rant with, "I had a terrible day, and so..." doesn't excuse the inexcusable. Yelling, blaming, berating, and saying anything hurtful is still wrong and won't achieve anything other than hurt feelings all round. While it may be possible to understand why a person flies off the handle and says and does things that should never be said or done, it doesn't mean that it's pleasant to live with them.

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In general, the more open you can be, the easier it will be to resolve things. This applies to asking for your husband's help at home as well. Yes, you would prefer for him to intuitively know what needs doing and to do it without you even having to mention it. Unfortunately, you didn't marry a mind-reader. People often need to be told things in order to know them, just as I need to give *shiurim* in order to give over the ideas in my classes.

When it comes to husbands helping at home, it's to be expected that many of them genuinely don't know what to do. And even if they do know what needs doing, they often don't know how their wives want things done. At the end of the day, it is the wife who runs the home and the husband who offers his help. It is of course his home, too, but if he contributes to its smooth running, certainly you should thank him, just as he should thank you for the things that you do.

Getting used to saying "thank you" can be hard, but it does get easier over time. Even if you can't say it the way you think it should be said, any expression of gratitude, even just a smile, is so much better than nothing at all.

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You write that your number-one priority is your *shalom bayis* and that dealing with this issue has brought you and your husband closer. In any marriage where each spouse takes responsibility for the things they can change rather than blaming the other for not doing what they think should be done, the relationship will improve, *be'ezras Hashem*.

Even when it's hard, even when it seems like changes are so small and slow, we have to remind ourselves that they are nonetheless significant. No one should ever lose hope of improvement, as long as they keep moving in the right direction with the right goals in sight.



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