

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

# Torah Lessons for the Home

## THE MIRACLE OF HUMAN NATURE

The *sefer Bais Yaakov* relates an encounter that took place between the holy Baal Shem Tov and a certain philosopher who questioned the miraculous nature of Kriyas Yam Suf. The philosopher claimed to have calculated the precise moment when the sea was about to split and assumed that Moshe Rabbeinu had been similarly successful. If so, what was the miracle? It was simply a matter of getting there at the right time.

The philosopher traveled all the way to the Baal Shem Tov in order to present his theory, but when he arrived, the Baal Shem Tov preempted him and summoned the townspeople to hear a *drashah* during which he utterly demolished the philosopher's ideas.

Indeed, Kriyas Yam Suf was destined to occur at that particular time from the Creation of the world, the Baal Shem Tov said. Nature was set up in such a way that on this precise date, at that precise hour, the waters would part and Bnei Yisrael would be able to cross. But Who set up nature that way, and why? The philosopher was looking at events backwards, he implied. Bnei Yisrael did not utilize the fortuitous splitting of the Yam Suf to cross the sea — rather, Hakadosh Baruch Hu established the time and place of Kriyas Yam Suf over two thousand years in advance, so that Bnei Yisrael would be able to walk through the waters when they needed to.

Whenever we are awed at so-called natural phenomena, we must remember that Hashem created them — so too, whenever we encounter the different natures of human beings, we must remind ourselves that Hashem made each person the way he or she is. When we come up against "nature" — a broken leg, a smashed glass, an illness — it's often far easier to say *gam zu le'tovah* and accept Hashem's authorship of the event, than it is to accept Hashem's role in partnering us with someone whose "nature" may conflict with our own. But their nature is from Hashem, too, and it's our job to learn how to deal with it, not protest against it.

Dealing with difficulties and "breaking" our *middos* is an integral part of *avodas Hashem*, but some people have the mistaken belief that this means, "I can do anything if I only put my mind to it," which is sometimes presented as, "*Ain davar omeid bifnei haratzon*—Nothing can stand in the way of the will." However, it's clear from our *sefarim* that the *bechirah*—free will—of a person exists only within specific limits. Not everyone is capable of learning for eight hours at a stretch; not everyone is capable of preparing a *seudah* for a hundred people and remaining calm and good-natured.

There are always choices to be made within a person's capacity and those are the decisions we are responsible for. Within a relationship, however, it's incorrect to expect people to always find a way to agree with each other and alter their natures to accommodate one another. It's unnatural — it's against Hashem's will. Instead, our task is to remember that Hashem made each person's nature as it is (precisely in order to challenge us in the areas we need to work on), and to learn how to live with each other with the minimum friction and maximum love and acceptance.

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Parshas
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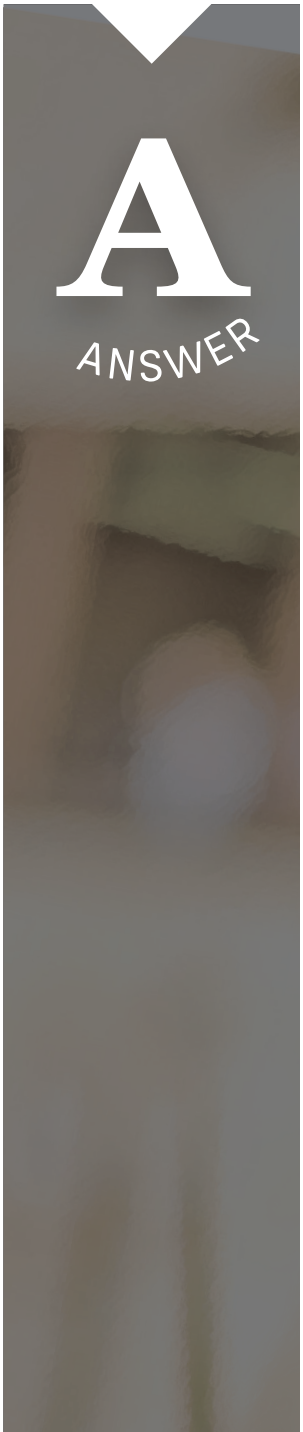



**Dear Rabbi Gruen, I hope you can advise me with a certain problem.**

**My wife is obsessively clean and needs to keep the house tidy at all times. My mother was exactly the opposite, and I grew up in a home where it was fine if things were a bit messy and not everything got put away — no one cared. My wife gets really stressed that I'm not as clean and tidy as she is, and I also get very upset at her for being obsessed all the time with things that I just don't see as so important (again, because of the way I was brought up).**

**We've been married over 12 years and aside from this issue, everything is fine *baruch Hashem*, but this aspect of our relationship presents ongoing difficulty and it affects our entire marriage. I would be very grateful if you could help us out.**

**Thank you**




First of all, I would like to commend the person writing the letter for recognizing that this problem, troubling as it is, exists within a basically good marriage and is the only real issue he and his wife are struggling with. That said, even a single significant issue can cause a great deal of stress for a couple.

Learning how to navigate relationships, and especially marriage, can sometimes seem very complicated, so it should be reassuring to note that there are really just a few basic principles to getting along with others. While new theories and interesting ways of looking at things can be stimulating, it's often much more worthwhile to review the fundamentals and make sure that we have really internalized them and understood them correctly.

One of these fundamental principles is that everyone is different — and that's the way Hashem intended it to be. No one should feel that he needs to justify the way he is by explaining that "I was brought up to think like that," or "because of what I went through, I see things a certain way." Of course we are obligated to work on ourselves to refine our characters, but there is only so much a person can do to alter his character, as his unique nature places natural limits on what he can and cannot achieve, and often it's just fine to be who you are and accept that this is who you were intended to be.

This is why, when it comes to relating to other people, including a spouse, the only correct (and effective) way to proceed is to first accept that they are the way they are. This happens to be a pragmatic approach to life (because efforts to change others inevitably fail) but more importantly, it is how Hashem intended things to be. It's not when all else fails; it's absolutely *lechatchilah*.

Therefore, it doesn't matter why your wife feels it's so important that the house is clean and tidy at all times. Neither does it matter why you don't feel any need to be tidy, or why you feel under pressure to be cleaner than you naturally would be. This area of conflict with your wife (like the Yam Suf), was set up as part of nature from the time of the world's creation. The only question remaining is how to deal with it in the best possible way.

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Of course when possible, it's wonderful and much easier when spouses can agree and work together. All the same, it's vital to internalize that there is nothing wrong with two people, even two spouses, thinking differently about certain things, liking different things, being interested in different things. Every couple should go into marriage expecting to find many areas of difference and accepting that there is generally more than one right way of doing so many things.

Very often, as much as spouses recognize that differences of opinion are inevitable in certain areas, they think that when it comes to *chinuch habanim*, a unified point of view is essential. While this is certainly true regarding the basic *hashkafah* of the family, there are still so many grey areas where couples can get stuck and clash.

Parents may agree, for instance, that a child of a certain age should generally get up to *daven*. What happens, however, if there was a *chasunah* the night before and the child is exhausted — should he be woken then, too? While asking a rav can be helpful in many cases (especially if the family has their own rav who knows them, which is as it should be), not all questions have a right-or-wrong answer, and it can also depend on who is asking and who is being asked.

There are also things that aren't "questions" per se, rather "differences" which are related to the parents' natures. If one parent is far stricter than the other, for instance, the children will often have a warmer relationship with the more lenient parent and perhaps also accord that parent more respect. The stricter parent may be tempted to blame this dynamic on the more lenient parent and even conclude that the children would be more respectful of both parents if both were equally strict. Rare is it for the stricter parent to draw the opposite conclusion and wonder whether they should ease up on their approach to *chinuch* for better results. People simply tend to assume that their own nature is the way things should be, and that any nature that differs from their own is by definition problematic.

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In general, differences of opinion and style or approach can still be very troubling due to the assumptions they lead people to make. It's not uncommon for a spouse to say, or think, "If you really cared, you'd do things my way," or, "If you really loved me, you wouldn't want to do things differently." Such a way of thinking can be so instinctive that it never occurs to the offended husband or wife that if their assumption is true, their spouse would be equally justified in drawing the identical conclusion.

Does wanting to do what you enjoy doing mean that you're selfish? It's only natural for people to want to do what they enjoy, what they believe in, what they think is right. Certainly a person should always be considerate of others, but why should that translate to always giving in? It's important to remember that we are wired differently and think and feel differently about things, and that most often none of this should ever be taken personally.

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Practically speaking, in many areas, a compromise can be found, which might mean meeting one another half-way, or even taking turns to do things a certain way. It's much easier to reach a compromise when each side recognizes that the other has a right to their own preferences and opinions, and that expecting another person to change their mind about something they believe in, simply to accommodate you, isn't realistic (or fair). It's also easier to reach a compromise if you approach the other person in a calm moment, not in the heat of an argument, and if you are the first to make a concession and hold back from "demanding" concessions from your spouse in return.

Is it fair for one spouse to feel obligated to make a concession if the other doesn't or won't reciprocate? It may not seem fair, but judging how much a concession means to a person is impossible. Perhaps, to use the example in the question here, the husband doesn't mind cleaning up after himself once a day, whereas his wife becomes extremely tense about even the smallest mess. Perhaps she is stressed not only by the mess itself, but also by being perceived as "obsessive" and therefore abnormal. At the end of the day, if you're the one asking for advice, make sure to be the first person to take it. Even if you only start with something small that doesn't challenge you too much, it's still a good move in the right direction, regardless of how distant things still are from how the other person would like them to look.

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Often, people in such a situation will already have received plenty of advice from all kinds of people. It's not unusual to hear suggestions ranging from "just give in already, if it means so much to her," to "if she's obsessive, that's her problem. Don't let it become yours." Both extremes reflect despair about finding a middle path as well as a fundamental lack of understanding of what it means for spouses to have conflicting natures or perspectives.

Sometimes, it gets more complicated than that, and in certain areas people may feel that they simply cannot do, or put up with, certain things, due to the nature that Hashem gave them. It should be obvious, but it bears stressing that threats will not work either. It's unlikely to help if one spouse tells the other, "If you don't ease up on your obsessive cleaning, the kids are going to become nervous wrecks!" Finding a genuine solution will depend a great deal on having mutual respect.

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Often this starts simply with having a conversation that includes a lot of reassurance, stressing that you understand and validate how hard the issue is for your wife, and acknowledging that her view of the situation is no less correct than yours.

Once she feels less defensive about her position, you can gently introduce the idea that you, too, are finding the issue a big challenge, and hopefully you'll also be able to provide a few examples of where you've been trying to accommodate her, even if you haven't had much success. You can also suggest another few areas where you are willing to try harder, as long as you feel that's realistic for you.

At that point, you can continue by saying how much you care about her and would love to be able to make her completely happy in this area — and simply feel that you're

limited and can't. It hurts you that you can't, and it hurts you to see her so stressed and nervous, and it still seems impossible for you to become that clean and orderly person she would like you to be, however much you try.

Then say, "What can *we* do next? Let's deal with this together."

Once your wife sees that you really do care about her and accept her nature as normal and her feelings as valid, she is far more likely to meet you half-way, and think of constructive solutions. There are always things that can be improved, even if the underlying conflict of natures never evaporates entirely.

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Another point to stress (both in your mind and in your conversation) is that this conflict isn't personal. This isn't husband vs. wife — it's husband vs. husband's nature, plus wife vs. wife's nature. But both of you are on the same team when it comes to wanting to improve your marriage.

When you start to see things this way, it's easier to find solutions. As long as you view the problem as your wife wanting *you* to be cleaner and tidier, when you know that you simply can't conform, you're coming up against a brick wall. Once you realize that the problem is the cleanliness and tidiness of the home, you're more likely to think of ideas, such as (for example) hiring a cleaning lady for an hour every day, to take some of the pressure off your wife and make things easier for everyone.

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The husband in this question writes, "Aside from this issue, everything is fine *baruch Hashem*," and in my experience, this is a common sentiment when people face challenges — mostly things are okay, even great, but there's just that one thing... What a shame that this one thing overshadows everything else. But why should it be that way?

Of course it's always the issues that get more attention than the non-issues. If something isn't a problem, why discuss it? But that in itself is a problem, because all it means is that we're not noticing all the hundreds and thousands of good things our spouses do for us, all the amazing aspects of our relationship that we never give a second thought to, because "there's no need."



In fact, there is a great need — to notice, to appreciate, to express gratitude. This can go a long way to restoring the sense of proportion in a relationship, and once the issue is seen in its wider context, it often becomes less frustrating, even if it doesn't actually go away at all.

A few years ago, during Chanukah, I played a cute game with my children which illustrated the importance of focusing on the good. Each family member, from age four or so, up to teenagers, plus parents, gets a bag and is equipped with a pen and paper. Everyone writes his name on the bag, and then the bags get passed around and stops at various points. When a bag stops in front of you, you read the name on it and write something nice about them and drop the note in the bag.

To be honest, I was a bit worried that certain siblings who often fight would use the opportunity to put all their complaints on record — but that's not what happened. Instead, I found that everyone, from young to old, enjoyed getting a chance to give everyone else a compliment and a good feeling. Everyone also very much enjoyed having written evidence of other people's good feelings toward them — and I still have my bag on my desk! (see photo>>)



Giving someone a compliment, showing them that you notice and value their good qualities, is something we can and should be doing so much more often. It's not even so hard to find something nice to say about another person; it just takes conscious thought, until it becomes more natural.

When we start to focus more on the positive, the entire picture changes, and we find that the problems that loomed so large aren't nearly as challenging as we thought. May Hashem help us all to see the good in others and ourselves, and to build happy, balanced homes full of genuine *simchah*.

## **TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME**: BESHALACH 5784

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