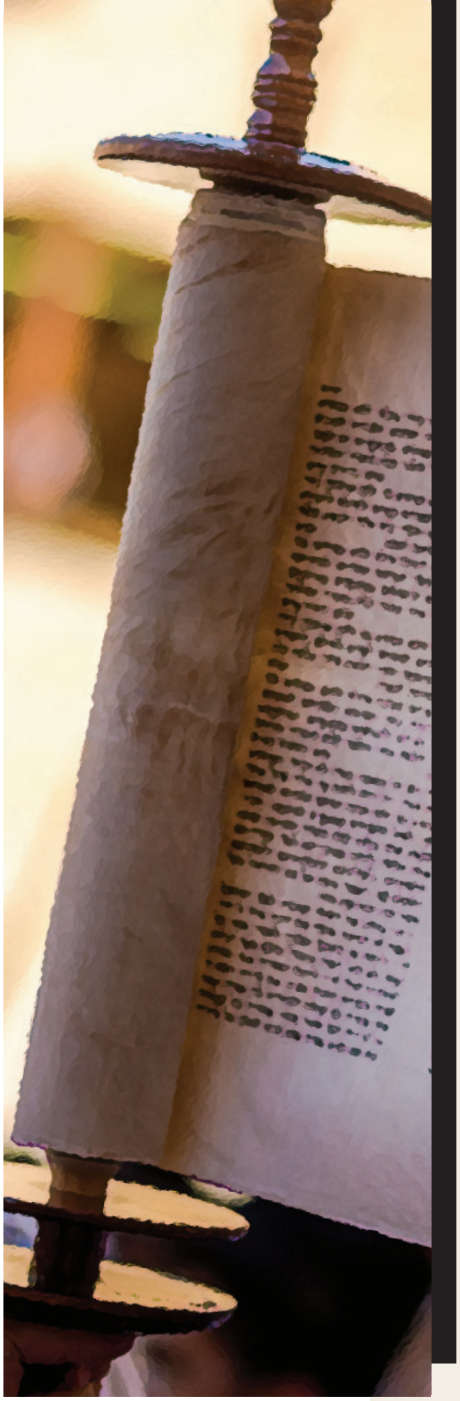


RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

WEIGHING ALL THE FACTORS

Many of the *brachos* of the Torah are ones that Hashem gave to all of Klal Yisrael. In this week's *parshah*, Hashem tells us that if we follow His commandments, He will circumcise our hearts and the hearts of our descendants. The Sfas Emes *ztz"l* asks why the *passuk* adds "and your descendants" to this *brachah,* given that our children are automatically included in the Torah's blessings.

The reason, he explains, is that what we as parents do affects our children, independently of anything they merit on their own. When parents do *teshuvah* and work hard to become closer to Hashem, this gives a natural boost to their children, making it easier for them, in turn, to do *teshuvah*. Everything parents do influences their children, in matters of both *ruchniyus* and *gashmiyus*.

The impact that our actions have on our children is something we need to be aware of at all times. Any responsible parent knows that there are issues we discuss in private, in order not to expose our children to them, as well as many things we say or do specifically because of the effect they have on our children.

Awareness isn't enough, however. It requires honesty to know when our intention is truly for the benefit of our children, and when we are tempted to use "the children" as an excuse for decisions we make.

Similarly, we need to be honest with ourselves when it comes to *shalom bayis* and recognize that there are times when we must know where to draw the line. Doing something for a spouse may seem worthwhile in the moment, but if its impact on the children is significant enough, the overall cost may simply be too high.

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Parshas
Nitzavim-Vayeilech
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Dear Rabbi Gruen,

Thank you so much for all the *shiurim* on TorahAnytime. I listen to them all the time and enjoy them and really gain a lot from them, both in *shalom bayis* and *chinuch*.

My question is probably not so common and I would love to hear your opinion.

Baruch Hashem I have a very easy time when it comes to sleep. I fall asleep within seconds of hitting the pillow and I can sleep through noise, light etc. I can also function relatively fine even after getting very little sleep.

Unfortunately my wife is the exact opposite. She is a very light sleeper, has an extremely hard time falling asleep, and if she wakes up in the middle of the night, it can take her hours to fall back asleep. Additionally, she does not function well the next day if she did not get enough sleep. It is a very difficult *nisayon* and very hard to relate to without ever experiencing it or living with someone going through it.

Throughout the years we have done everything possible to help the situation. She takes prescription sleeping medication, she doesn't drink any caffeine past ten in the morning, doesn't look at her phone or computer past eight at night, never takes naps during the day. We have special dark curtains on the windows, she sleeps with ear plugs, and has a fan blowing on her the whole night. She's also been to a special sleep therapist. I also use a vibrating alarm clock, and the kids know (to an extent) to be very quiet if they wake up early. *Baruch Hashem* with all this we are pretty much under control and my wife gets adequate sleep.

Understandably, the hardest times throughout our years of marriage were the postpartum stages, and as much as I got up 97% of the time to take care of the baby, we lived in a very small apartment and once the baby started to cry, if my wife woke up from it, she would be up for hours and sometimes not fall back asleep at all, even after both me and baby were back to sleep.

Baruch Hashem we were able to move to a much bigger apartment and recently had a new baby. This time I decided I would sleep with the baby in a completely separate room at the opposite end of the apartment. The baby was formula fed practically from birth and *baruch Hashem* it's been a win-win for everyone. My wife slept so well throughout this time and recovered from birth a lot faster than previous times, and she has a lot more energy during the day to take care of the newborn and the rest of the kids. And for me it's really not a big deal to get up once or twice during the night, feed the baby, and go right back to sleep.

My question is that it's already been three months since the baby was born, and I still "sleep out" with the baby. I never really intended it to be a long term thing and it bothers me AND my wife a lot that we don't sleep in the same room. But every time we discuss it she gets very anxious about her sleep. She has gotten used to a very quiet room and is very anxious about me coming back. I actually bought a vibrating baby monitor (they make them for deaf parents) so that the baby won't have to come into our room, but my wife thinks (and to an extent I agree) that the noise of me getting out of bed, going out of the room, and coming back possibly more than once a night is high risk for waking her up. And especially now that she's back at work, a night with interruptions will be catastrophic.

Throughout, both me and my wife are careful to refer to my bed in the master bedroom as my bed and the one I sleep on is just an extra bed in the baby room. But in practice, the kids already know it as "Mommy's room" and "Totty's room." My wife hates it too, but the potential to have disastrous nights overrides everything.

I would love to hear your opinion on this. How important is it for a couple to sleep in the same room and how much should we risk for it? Or maybe if this is what works best in a particular situation and life functions best by having separate rooms, that should be the ideal and we should disregard all the emotional aspects that come with it?

Thank you so much



Your question is indeed somewhat unusual, but the underlying issues you're facing are not unusual at all. I don't know whether your wife is suffering from a serious hyperarousal sleep disorder and needs professional help for it, but the part that may be more common is that your wife is facing a significant personal issue which has become a family problem. You make an excellent point when you note that people who haven't experienced such sleep problems can't relate to them.

You add that people who haven't lived with someone dealing with such problems can't relate to that, either. That's an important point because very often, people facing a problem don't pay enough attention to the fact that those around them are suffering, too.

You ask for my opinion, and I'll start by stressing that it really doesn't necessarily matter what my opinion is. Everyone is entitled to have an opinion — and opinions are often emotionally based and essentially just our feelings about things. And feelings are not something one argues with, or that are right or wrong. They should be respected and taken into consideration, but they also need to be kept in proper perspective. We certainly should not make important decisions based on feelings alone.

So, when you ask whether you should "disregard the emotional aspects," the answer is clearly not. Trying to ignore one's feelings about a specific, disturbing issue is usually a very bad idea and rarely works even in the short-term, let alone the long-term. Furthermore, neither you nor your wife is happy with the situation. Certainly something has to give.

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Getting enough sleep is important for everyone — growing children, mothers of young children, fathers... everyone. Many people struggle to get enough good sleep, and many people struggle with the consequences of not getting enough. Your wife's problem is a real one and anyone in such a situation deserves to have the issue acknowledged and taken seriously.

It's common in cases where one person's problem seems far-fetched or excessive to another, for the spouse to dismiss it, minimize it, or even ridicule it and claim that it's "all in your head." Taking such an approach is not helpful even if the problem truly *is* imaginary, as challenging an illusion almost always leads the person to defend it and reinforce their belief in it. It's also very hard to distinguish between a psychological/emotional problem and an illusory one. Very often, the distinction is far from clear or obvious.

You mention that your wife has been to see a sleep therapist and tried different things to help herself. It's hard for me to weigh in on that, as it's not my area of expertise and I don't have all the details. In other, similar cases, some people could do more and better, and others who seem stuck might be able to get help if they wanted it enough. Sometimes, people seem to actually enjoy their problems, especially if they "permit" them to act in certain ways that would otherwise be unacceptable. But suggesting that she could or should do anything different is a very sensitive point and not something that would be responsible for me to address here, so let's assume for now that your wife is doing all she can to help herself. If that's the case, it's great that she is taking a measure of responsibility for dealing with things. Your question seems now to be: My wife is already doing everything she can to address this problem — how much more am I expected to do, too?

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Let me illustrate your quandary by portraying an even more extreme situation. Suppose your wife is so sensitive to sound and light that when she goes to bed, the whole house needs to be dark and quiet. You've tried sleeping downstairs in the kitchen and the children in the living room, but your wife said that she still kept being woken up by little sounds — perhaps someone sneezed, or sat down on a chair that squeaked. So now she suggested that you and the children camp out in the backyard. She feels really bad about doing this to you, but what other option is there? After all, she needs to be able to function the next day, and so...

Would you sleep in the backyard for your wife? How would your kids feel about it? At what point do you take a cold, hard look at the situation and realize that things have gotten out of hand, and let her know that your accommodation abilities are running thin?

I'm not saying that you should be apathetic to your wife's plight. Certainly you should care about her and do your best to help her deal with things. That's what marriage is about. But how far are you willing to go — how far should you go, before the situation is seriously unhealthy and the negative repercussions start to outweigh the benefits?

I've dealt with many similar situations where one spouse protested that they "simply couldn't" deal with xyz and told the other spouse that doing things any other way than the way that works best for them "isn't an option." Sometimes it's a wife telling her husband that he "has to" be home between seven and eight in the morning, to help her get the children to school, as otherwise she'll have a nervous breakdown. Yes, that might mean that he has to get up at the crack of dawn if he wants to have time to daven before going to work, "but there's no other option." It could also be a husband telling his wife that he "has to" stay at work till nine

every night because his job demands it, and so unfortunately he's never going to be available to help out at home.

People who play the "it's not an option" card aren't usually trying to be difficult or manipulative. Often, they have simply become so locked into one particular view of a situation that the prospect of trying something different feels frightening or even impossible. That may explain their reaction, but it doesn't necessarily make it right. Part of being married and raising children means recognizing that our choices affect the people closest to us. Just as being part of a larger society requires us to consider how our actions impact those around us, so too must we take into account the impact our decisions have on our spouse and children.

They're also wrong because the choices they have are seldom as black-and-white as they think. It's very rare for there to be only two options in a given situation. Usually what people mean is that the other options are difficult, expensive, inconvenient, or involve sacrifices they would rather not make. That may be understandable, but it is different from there being no other options.

In your case, the choices aren't necessarily limited to your wife getting inadequate sleep or maintaining separate bedrooms. You asked for my opinion on how important it is for parents to sleep in the same room, and for what it's worth, I believe it is very important. Parents belong in the same room for many reasons, and over the years I have come to learn that the significance of this is not always appreciated.

This doesn't mean that sleeping separately for a short period of time is "not an option." In the circumstances you describe, it might have been the best of all options for that limited period. At this point, however, you've come to recognize the costs attached and they're becoming prohibitive. It seems to be time to ask whether there are other ways of protecting your wife's sleep, and there are.

For instance, you could hire a night nurse to take care of the baby. It's expensive... but so are many of the things people end up spending money on when a marriage suffers. As I often quip: it's cheaper than couple's therapy...



You could also swap places, with your wife temporarily moving out and you staying in your bedroom with the baby. Or, you could take turns sleeping out.

Even something as significant as your wife reducing her work hours or giving up her job belongs on the list of possible options. That may involve a meaningful financial sacrifice—and perhaps, in the end, it would be worth it. But if, as you describe it, one disrupted night of sleep is "catastrophic," and protecting her from every possible disturbance requires the two of you to maintain separate bedrooms, then the cost to the marriage must also be part of the equation. We shouldn't automatically view the financial sacrifice of your wife giving up her job as unthinkable while treating the strain placed on your marriage as unfortunate but unavoidable.

From your letter, it's clear that you are very unhappy and frustrated with the situation, and that's understandable. When you choose to discuss this with your wife, make it clear first of all that you are extremely sympathetic to her plight. Stress how much you understand what she's dealing with, and how much you want to find a solution. Only then add that you want to find a solution that works for both of you, one that leaves you both happy and functional.

Getting communication right is so important. I've known cases where the problem was far smaller than what you're dealing with but because it was handled so badly, a solution remained beyond reach. Conversely, I've seen couples dealing with far more significant challenges than yours, who managed to find workable solutions because they both recognized that they were in it together and wanted to make things work as a team.

Neither of you want your children to grow up in a home where there's a "Mommy's" and a "Tatty's" room. It's not healthy for them and not healthy for you or your wife. *B'ezras Hashem* you'll both find a way for your wife to get enough sleep without banishing you to the other end of the house, and start to see life in multicolored hues rather than stark black and white.

TORAHLESSONSFORTHEHOME:NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH5786

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