RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

Parshas Shelach

Golden Silence

The Noam Megadim, in his *peirush* on Tehillim, brings a *passuk* from this week's Parsha: *Ure'isem es ha'aretz*, and explains it as follows: Look at the earth and see what it is teaching you.

Man spends his entire life prancing over the earth, deluding himself into thinking that he is the one on top. But his final resting place is deep underneath the very surface he had so callously stepped upon. There is an important lesson to be learned here: See how the earth stays silent even as it is stepped upon thousands of times every day, and learn to be humble. After all, who prevails at the end? The one who remains soft and knows not to answer back.

We often find ourselves with a sharp retort or a stern reprimand and it would be so easy to just let it all out indiscriminately. It's often difficult to bite it back, especially when we are in our own homes! Somehow, when we are only with those nearest and dearest to us, we tend to let our guard down. But if we can think ahead and realize that by not saying everything that's on our mind we emerge the winner, it can help us overcome the temptation to run our mouths.

I often get to speak to people about their parents' relationship as they were growing up. So often, when they reflect back on their childhood, they see how what they thought was strength or confidence – the yelling, the shaming, the putting down – was in fact a sign of weakness and lack of self-control. Invariably, they will point to the parent who remained silent in the face of all that and say, "Wow! My father/mother was a saint!"

Don't think that by remaining silent you are exhibiting weakness. Quite the contrary! The ability to remain cool is the biggest sign of strength, and it won't be long before those around you will realize it, too.

Of course, it is not *always* advisable to remain silent. There are times when silence can exacerbate the problem! However, in most cases, when a person chooses not to reply – at least not right away – he does not regret it.

Question:

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

I have heard from you lately about the concept of "*yemin mekareves* **and** *s'mol docheh***" as it is applicable to marriage, and I wanted to know how a man can be tough with a wife who doesn't accept it.**

For example, until not long ago, my wife demanded at all times to know who I was speaking with and what I was talking to them about. Thanks to your speeches on TorahAnytime.com I realized that every person needs to realize that he is an individual, and only after that can he connect to others – even his own wife. The fact is, though, that my wife does not want to acknowledge this. I think this happened because I used to speak a lot to my parents and not share anything with her. I feel like I have now improved sufficiently in this regard. However, she still can't get used to the fact that I talk to whomever I want whenever I want, and I pay for it dearly.

Additionally, my wife blames me for the fact that she has declined spiritually since the wedding, and I tell her that so did I. I don't know what to answer to myself and to her about what the reason for this might be.

Please help us out.

Thank you very much.

Answer:

I don't normally combine two questions, but since both of these came from the same questioner in the same email and I do see a connection between the two, I will address both of them.

There might be some who might be wondering at the questioner's reference to my teachings of "being tough" with one's wife. Many believe that this dictum only pertains to children. But actually if you look up the source for this in the Gemara, Meseches Sotah, Daf *mem zayin*, you will see that the gemara explicitly says so regarding one's wife, as well.

You might argue that one should have no boundaries when it comes to a spouse, as everything is now shared and the couple becomes the imagined "one", which automatically dictates that nothing is kept private from one another, but I beg to differ. I know that this might sound unconventional and not-so-diplomatic or politically correct, but let me clarify.

Besides for it simply not being a practical arrangement, as sharing everything can sometimes mean sharing damaging or hurtful remarks, which would have definitely been better not being repeated, we actually find Chazal teaching us this idea in what seems to be less dangerous territory too.

The Mishna in Avos clearly teaches: Do not speak excessively with *the* woman. The *mishna* then clarifies, "*With one's wife*". There are several explanations for this. The major commentator on *mishna,* the Bartenura, explains that if your wife is aware of all your struggles, she might think less of you. It seems clear that excessive

sharing is NOT encouraged, and everything needs to be done with thought and in moderation.

This is not pop-psychology, this is Chazal teaching us the Torah way. The question remains, how do we apply this to our own relationships without becoming distant or disconnected?

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To understand this I think it's important to review a concept that's more general than just sharing information. Marriage definitely is about the unification of two souls, but that does not mean that you become one and the same. You still remain two separate individuals, with your own temperaments, tastes, and opinions, albeit you are now bound with an eternal bond. Marriage does not require or necessitate a complete obliteration of self or enmeshment with one's spouse. Just like the fact that one likes vanilla ice cream while the other likes chocolate ice cream isn't grounds for concern, so too it is understandable that the couple might not be in constant agreement with each other about everything all the time.

Clearly, we are not saying that marriage does not involve sharing of information, or of anything else for that matter. By all means, if there is something you feel should or could be shared, and that should hopefully include very much indeed, then by all means, do so! This will strengthen your connection and might diminish the need for your spouse to grill you about topics you'd rather not discuss.

The problem arises when you're feeling forced to share information that you would rather keep to yourself. Ideally, when there's a piece of information that you have a valid reason not to share with your spouse, it should not pose a problem for your marriage. However, this needs to be done in a sensible and caring fashion. Don't do it in a way that will cause your spouse to feel hurt. You actually don't even have to let on that there's information that you're not sharing.

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This generally becomes a problem and an issue of control only if you don't share anything, or if your spouse demands that you share everything. (Incidentally, it's also interesting to note that very often, the spouse who demands full disclosure usually does not reciprocate. They *do* withhold information, when they feel like doing so, sometimes without even realizing how hypocritical it is). It is when you intentionally withhold information on a constant basis, or when you are too open about something you are specifically NOT sharing, that it can cause lots of hurt and hard feelings.

I always like to add, that if you're hiding something because you're ashamed of it, and often you should be, that please make sure you're not using the idea of "privacy" to keep doing something you shouldn't. The fact that you don't have to - and shouldn't - share with your spouse every Aveira or wrongdoing you committed, should never be what's making it easier for you to continue on cha"v and do what's wrong!

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People often struggle with their marriages, simply because they haven't set healthy boundaries. While not the deciding factor of a viability of a marriage, setting proper boundaries plays a large role in the health of one. In fact, all interpersonal relationships rely on the setting of boundaries, not just marriage.

I recently came across two instances of the opposite extremes of this phenomenon. One person related to me that he felt that he got close with a friend until, one day, the friend suddenly told him that they cannot continue their friendship. He said that he had gotten burnt too many times by good friendships in the past. He claimed that whenever he got too close to someone, he ended up losing his individuality, feeling too dependent on his friend, and he does not want this to happen to him again.

This is not the way it should be. You are not only allowed to develop a close relationship with a friend, you should seek one out! Becoming close to a friend should not cause anyone to lose their identity. If you develop a fear like this, you need to deal with it professionally. This is not a healthy way to live. You might want to learn from your previous mistakes so that you don't become enmeshed anymore. But if you don't deal with this the right way, and you drop a friend because of your fear of not knowing the healthy balance, you might end up staying with an identity, but without friends.

On the flip side, someone told me that it's been years since he has spoken to his sister. Why? His wife doesn't like it when he talks to her. Besides for this indicating dysfunction and a control issue on the part of this fellow's wife, it shows a lack of individuation and boundaries on the part of the husband.

So what if his wife doesn't like when he talks to his sister? He doesn't have to talk to her when he's next to her, but he can do so when he's out of the house. I knew the situation and it was not one where it would be dangerous for him to talk to her, nor was the sister or his relationship with her causing any harm to his wife; she simply wasn't his wife's favorite person, and the wife seemed to feel challenged by the fact that they had a relationship.

You don't stop talking to someone - especially an immediate family member - or doing something that's important to you just because your spouse doesn't care for it. You need to assess on your own what it is that you think is right, and then act accordingly. This is not about aggressive defiance, and should NEVER come across in a confrontational or fighting manner. It's about maintain-

ing your sense of self, dignity, and personal boundaries, and should be done with respect and gentleness.

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I remember an interesting piece of guidance I got from a Gadol Beyisroel when I was a Chosson preparing for marriage. He said I should find a place where I can nap during the day outside the house. His message was, your wife does not need to know every time you feel the need to nap during the day. He didn't know who my wife was, nor did he know my sleeping habits, he was simply giving guidance for marriage.

A good rule of thumb is this: any extreme is unhealthy. You should not be afraid to connect to others, but you should also not be afraid to not connect. There needs to be a balance.

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Bear in mind that while sometimes the interrogation from your wife that you mention might come from a control issue, it might also happen when your spouse feels like you share absolutely nothing with them. They might feel that the only way they can hear about your day is if they ask you a million questions. The more you will share on your own, the less they will be compelled to do that. There is no *mitzvah* to keep things from your spouse. If you don't have a valid reason not to share, then why not? Be open, share, involve her, and let her feel like you couldn't wait for her to show interest in your day. And then go and do the same to her about her day.

However, there should also remain the option for you to say, "My dear, please understand that I am not comfortable sharing this (just yet). I enjoy sharing with you, and yet this is something that for now I'd rather not discuss. It's not about you, just my feelings for now. Thank you for understanding."

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You end off by saying that your wife says that because of you she has had a spiritual decline since you got married, and you say the same about yourself. The truth is that some *seforim* say that there is an inevitable spiritual decline to be expected when one gets married. It's not exactly a good thing, and something that could be avoided with awareness and work, but it certainly isn't unusual.

In any case, faulting one's spouse for one's own spiritual struggles is senseless, and again a challenge to a respect for individuality within a relationship, taking responsibility for yourselves and not mixing everything together. You each play a part in it. Both of you contributed to the problem. Even if that isn't the case, by one letting his or herself be led astray by a spouse, they are just as responsible. They could have said no.

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In this particular case, I think it's good that both the husband and wife are in agreement that they can use some Chizzuk. It would be a much bigger problem if only one of them would have felt this way. Healthy people take responsibility for their actions, and even healthier people find a way to solve their problem. Blaming others has never helped anyone – even if the other really is at fault. It is time for both of you to do some serious introspection.

I'm not saying this so you can now go and throw this back at her saying that it's not your fault, and that she should take responsibility for her own issues. I'm just helping you understand that taking or accepting responsibility for someone else's issues isn't helping anyone. Instead see how you can together get back on track in a healthy and unified way.

If you can sit down together, as a couple, and discuss what you can possibly do to improve your *ruchniyus* levels, that would be a healthy approach to this problem. This is your chance to grow together. Leave out any mention of blame and discuss the topic at hand, and if she tries bringing up the fault and the past, try and dodge it by expressing how you may have had a part in this, and yet you'd love to focus on the present and the goal, and not on the blame.

I'll add a short thought you might choose to share with your wife, something I once heard, that a "*cheshbon hanefesh*" doesn't mean taking stock of where you're up to, in order to assess yourself alone. It means thinking, "*Based on this Cheshbon, what do I need to do now?*" don't get stuck on who's to blame or why this even happened. Discuss the present and the future. Of course we need to learn from mistakes so that we don't repeat them, but even that can be discussed with the focus on the present and future as opposed to the past.

When you resolve to change for the better together, you have tremendous *kochos* at your disposal. There is no doubt that your entire relationship will thus be transformed for the better.

Wishing you much Hatzlacha,
Rabbi Shimon Gruen

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME: SHELACH 5781

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