RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

Parshas Vayikra

The Heart of the Matter

Parshas Vayikra begins with Hashem instructing Bnei Yisrael to bring Korbanos. The *passuk* tells us "*Adam ki yakriv mikem*", when a person brings a sacrifice "from them". The Bnei Yissaschar in his *sefer* Agra D'Kallah asks, what does the *passuk* mean when it says "*mikem* – from them"? He then goes on to explain: Truthfully, after a person committed a sin, he should have offered up his very soul as a sacrifice of atonement. Instead of doing that, he was instructed to bring a *korban*. But the *korban* was not meant as a material offering to Hakadosh Baruch Hu. Hashem does not need our cattle or grain. A *korban* isn't meant to serve as a bribe to "soften up Hashem" so to speak. What Hakadosh Baruch Hu wants is our sincere repentance, our broken heart, and we bring our sacrificial offering as a testament to the fact that we are seeking to return to Him.

We can often hear people list a whole roster of favors they have done for others – not just for their spouses or family members – and their recipients don't seem all that grateful for it. The giver should instead keep in mind that it isn't always about the gift or the favor, and not always is what they contributed something that their recipient necessarily needed. Very often, it might be easier for you to give a "thing", but the person you're giving to would much prefer your "heart" or your time, more than any tangible object or action that you could give them. As a matter of fact, it's often worth more and appreciated more just to show them how much you would have *wanted* to give them something, doing so and expressing this with feeling and love, and that alone will make them happier than had they gotten a "gift" without feeling or affection.

This is of course in no way a justification for any recipients of others' kindness – well intentioned or otherwise – to neglect showing appreciation to their benefactors. No matter how you feel about it, it is always correct to thank anyone who is of service to you in any way.

But the message remains, it is not about the what or the when, it is usually about the how. If you can manage to do both, the favor and the feeling, that would certainly be amazing.

Question:

Dear Rabbi Gruen

I really enjoy your weekly essays, as well as your speeches on Torah Anytime.

We've been married for over 15 years and have struggled a lot with our *shalom bayis*. Taking your course (although it was about understanding children's personalities, and not necessarily adult relationships or marriage) has helped us a lot. These past three years, I have also been working with a life coach who has helped me tune in to my husband's needs and do my part to improve our relationship. We are BH in a much better place now.

My husband would like me to go down a specific step with regard to my *tzniyus*, even though I have made some concessions in that regard already.

When my life coach asked me why I didn't want to comply, I told her that I don't think this will satisfy him. She countered that if I do it, he will have no choice but to see that he isn't any happier, and then take responsibility in finding his own satisfaction.

I know that I need to look attractive to my husband and I'm doing that, but I feel that what he's asking of me – something specific that will make me uncomfortable – is crossing a boundary.

I would greatly appreciate your insights into this issue.

Answer:

In regard to sensitive situations and topics it's always important to get all the information and background before giving guidance. There are also a few points that I will suggest you talk over with Daas Torah, so please keep that in mind regardless of whatever insight I can offer you.

There are a few important points and ideas that I feel are necessary to clarify in order to address your basic question. Being that you mentioned the word boundary, I'll start with one of the basics of healthy relationships, which is the topic of boundaries. Sometimes we trespass others' boundaries unknowingly and this is something that is central to relationships, we must learn to ask ourselves: What's mine? What's yours? And what's ours? This is something I elaborate on in my book Get Along With Everyone, but I'll try to touch upon the idea briefly here.

In my lectures, I will often use 'lectures' as an example: I as the speaker and you as the audience, are in a relationship, however short-lived and maybe even insignificant. But for the time being I'm conveying my ideas to you. Even in such a relationship there's the "Mine, Yours and Ours".

If *I'm* speaking, I get to decide how to hold the mic, which motions I make, and which expressions to use. While it might sometimes be appropriate for someone in the audience to request that I do something specific, the de-

cision is still mine. On the other hand, the people in the audience get to decide how they want to sit, and how much attention they need to pay, and if they'd like to actively participate. I can ask of them whatever I'd like and share my ideas of what I think is best, but it's important for me to respect that they get to decide that. It's important for both parties to be respectful and mindful both of what "belongs" to them, as well as what belongs to the other.

And then there's the Ours, which "belongs" to both of us, like the temperature or lighting in the room for example, or anything else that directly pertains to and affects us all. It's important that we take each other seriously when deciding how to go about that, without either one taking control. Maybe we can make it a bit warmer, maybe we can rearrange seating to make everyone comfortable, but because it is something that pertains to all of us, we need to find a way to make it work.

In some situations one party or the other will allow the other to dictate what should be done even when it's "theirs" to decide. They may do this to keep the peace, to not rock the boat, or because they're afraid to "stick up" for themselves. While this may not be a problem when done willingly, and at the moment it can look like the better choice, it can lead to problems if it continues without being addressed.

People who are often told what to do, and whose opinions aren't taken into account, often find themselves in such a position simply because they allowed things like this to happen over time, slowly teaching the other that it's fine to dictate what they should do, even if they should have been the one deciding how they'd like to do it.

If one of us would try to control something that belongs specifically to the other, or something that should be shared, that would be unhealthy and cause aggravation. Very many problems in relationships stem from a violation of at least one boundary. One person may try to order the other one around or doesn't care about the other's preferences or choices. He or she might try to control what the other does or doesn't do, usually without realizing how wrong it is, or how much damage this caused or will cause.

This outline of boundaries may not always be easy to apply, but it's applicable in every relationship. Of course in the closer relationships, there can be more that falls under the category of "Ours", but you'd be surprised to learn how much is actually NOT in that category, as each spouse in a marriage definitely remains with their individuality and identity, even after entering a relationship.

There are people who are more prone to making mistakes in this area than others, and some of them tend to use various forms of manipulation to get their way. Trying to make your partner think that not doing what you want them to do will hinder your ability to function/make you unhappy/cause you to do certain things is a form of manipulation.

You might sometimes encounter a couple in a clothing store buying an article of clothing together. If the wife will force her husband to buy a style she prefers - without regard to her husband's choices - claiming that otherwise she would be embarrassed to walk on the street with him, that is manipulating what's "his" and making it look like it's "hers". It's perfectly acceptable to give voice to your preferences and say which one of his choices you like better, but it is not okay to take the choice away from him. Ultimately, it is his suit and he will be the one wearing it.

If you feel that your spouse does not respect your boundary, it is up to you to say, "This is something that I feel really pertains to me, and I would appreciate it if you can understand that and let me make my own decision."

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When doing so, and communicating a message like this it's so important to be understanding of your husband's feelings. Never say that you don't care about what he likes or dislikes; it doesn't even mean accusing him of trying to control you. It means acknowledging that he would like this better, but it is making you feel uncomfortable. You can assure him that while you are open to trying to satisfy his desires, this particular thing is not something that you are willing to do.

Without getting into a discussion about the ins and the outs of whatever the topic,you can explain to him how difficult this is for you. Reiterate that you understand how much he wants it and that you'd actually wish to please him in this regard, and yet keep calm and maintain that you do not feel up to it. Because he is acting on emotion, logical arguments will not work. Keep the conversation about yourself and your feelings, rather than about him.

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Now let's get to the issue at hand. A woman certainly should and is obligated to please, respect, and even honor a husband. And it seems that you want to. Yet I agree that you are quite right in assuming that making this change will not satisfy him. Furthermore, complying as a way to demonstrate that, is probably not going to be effective, either. He will just move on to the next thing he thinks will make him happy, because as these things go, it's a moving target.

The question you are asking is also not whether you can *change* to something "frummer" than that which you got married in and your husband doesn't agree. Even while it does pertain to you, and technically your husband does not really have a say in it, it might not be wise to do so if it would cause others to be unhappy or upset. But in any case, that would be a different discussion.

Your question is about changing something that you got married in and which was initially agreed upon by both of you. That is why this indeed seems to be a violation of boundaries. Even in the event that this will make your husband happy – which we already said that it most probably won't – the fact that it makes you uncomfortable plays a very big role. You do not have to throw your needs to the side and ignore your discomfort in order to please others, especially since it will most likely not make a difference anyway.

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Having said that, it might be beneficial for you to think if there is something that you might do to show him that you want to please him which does not involve changing your appearance. Maybe he needs more respect from you, or perhaps little gestures such as a nicely set table when he gets home. Maybe you can involve a third party who can help you see if there is a way for you to contribute to his happiness without forfeiting any of your own.

As an added benefit, when you offer something yourself, even when it is something that belongs to you, it isn't considered control, since he didn't demand it of you. By staying one step ahead of him, you can make him happy without him feeling the need to control you. Additionally, it's possible that the reason he is making these demands is because that's the only way he can get your attention. If you preempt his desires, he might not feel the need to force them onto you.

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It's important to keep in mind that as much as you should try to make your husband happy, *it is never your responsibility.* When you see that he's unhappy, it is very likely not your fault. It is quite possible that his unhappiness has nothing to do with you. When you take ownership of his happiness and make it your business to "keep him happy", that only feeds into his delusion that he's unhappy because of you. Ultimately, it is up to him to find his own happiness and satisfaction.

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I can't conclude without clarifying that as with anything that can involve *halacha*, it's important to consult daas Torah. This is both in regard to clarifying if and how a wife is obligated to give in to the request of a husband, as well as to know if what is being requested is not breaching *halacha*. This might also come in handy when explaining to your husband why you can or can't comply with his wishes, i.e. the *rav* explained to you why it isn't allowed. This is often enough to close the discussion, or to keep the issue isolated and not become a bigger conflict.

A parting word to those on the other side: It is okay to express your needs and wants to your spouse, but you shouldn't impose on them or make them feel like your happiness depends on their actions. Respect each other's boundaries, find fulfillment and happiness in your lives and relationships, and with Hashem's help peace and harmony will reign in your homes.

All the best, Rabbi Shimon Gruen

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