RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

Parshas Eikev

Deeper than the Surface

In this week's Parsha, we find the *pesukim* that we say every day during Krias Shema, *"And you should place these things upon your hearts and your souls..."* The Kotzker Rebbe asks a very pertinent question. Why are we told to place them *onto* our hearts; why are we not told to place them *into* our hearts? He then goes on to explain that every person has a time when his heart opens up. And so, while one may not always have the ability to access the depth of his heart and get things "in there" he can put them on his heart: think about them, desire them, focus on them, and then when he does have a moment of inspiration and his heart opens these beliefs enter his heart, he will become a changed person.

When we perform acts of kindness to our family members, we don't always notice that it enters their hearts immediately. You compliment, do a favor, help out, and yet it doesn't seem as if it made much of a difference to them – yet. Be aware that these actions are placed upon their hearts and eventually, this action makes its way in and bears fruit. You might also want to try to pile so much goodness onto their hearts that the sheer volume causes it to penetrate. In either case, you can be sure that every small action makes an impact on your relationship, and it's always worthwhile to lay on the good as thick as you can.

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Question:

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

In a shiur I once heard from you, you mentioned codependency. I was wondering if you can address how much dependence is necessary in a marriage and how much is unhealthy. At which point is it considered codependent? I feel like there needs to be a certain amount of dependency of a wife on her husband.

Let me elaborate a bit so you understand where I'm coming from. There are many situations that have me wondering if I am too dependent. For example: we moved out of the city for better housing options. Since I live far away from my family and most shopping is not within walking distance, I depend a lot on my husband to drive me around and do my shopping for me. While he does this gladly, it becomes a problem when he is not available and I get upset, or when I feel like it's really hard for him and I feel guilty about it.

Another example is that on long summer Shabbos afternoons I am very lonely, so my husband stays around for most of the day. Sometimes, though, he likes going to shul early to learn before Mincha. Since his shul comes home very late on Motzei Shabbos, I end up being alone for many hours. I know that it isn't my place to mix into where and how he *davens*, but when this happens, I can't help but feel that if he would care enough about me, he would come home by the *zman*. I know he does care, but I can't help feeling this way.

Am I being codependent? Please give me some clarity in this area.

Answer:

Relationships can be confusing. Although you are very close to this person, you don't know how much you should be depending on each other, or if you should be depending on each other at all.

Before I go on, I'd like to clarify some terms so that readers won't be confused. First there's Dependency, which means when two people depend very much on one another. Then there's Codependency, where one person acts as if the other is, or should be, dependent on him. There's Independence, where one doesn't need the other at all. And finally there's Interdependence, where two healthy individuals don't NEED each other to survive, but share each other's strengths and benefit from the relationship. It's healthy for a couple to be interdependent and can benefit from one another, and share each other's strengths, qualities and abilities to enhance life and appreciate their relationship to the max!

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It's a common misconception that healthy people don't really need each other. They are perfectly capable grown-ups who can take care of themselves. They get married because it's nice to have children, and

maybe even have a companion to enjoy life with, but really, they can do just fine on their own.

That is not what a healthy relationship is.

Many who are mistaken about this, tend to think about marriage and relationships (and possibly about many other topics as well) in terms of black and white; all or nothing. This causes them to think that if dependency is not healthy, it's probably just better to not be dependent at all, and act as if essentially we don't need to be together in the first place. However, besides the fact that the Torah tells us "it is not good for man to be alone", people definitely do need each other on a practical level. Yes, even very capable and bright individuals need more than just a connection to other people.

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Furthermore, with all this misguided focus on independence, it can make those of us who do depend on each other feel guilty or inadequate. We might wonder, *"Why do I need my spouse's approval?" "Why can't I get this done myself?"* But the truth is, all of us need our spouse's approval and assistance! It is a completely normal, natural, and very necessary part of life.

Hashem designed a perfect world in which a person cannot do everything by his or herself. We must rely on each other to fill in where our abilities lack.

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Clearly, even when a couple marries, they should each still retain a sense of individuality and stand on their own two feet. We should not depend on each other completely. We have to be able to carry on even when our spouse isn't nearby or otherwise unavailable.

However, if we have a problem being at all dependent on our spouse, that is when we should be concerned. The need for complete independence is not natural and unhealthy. So many people fend off their spouse's offers for help, or reject them outright, for fear of appearing needy or dependent.

A young man related to me that he likes to cook the meat for Yom Tov in his house. He knows his wife appreciates it, but she has never indicated that she needs him to do this for her. One year, he decided to experiment and told her that he thinks he won't be doing the meat that year. She was shocked. "Why not?" She asked him. "Oh? You want me to make them?" He asked her, testing the waters. "Nah... no! I don't need you to make it. I just want to know how come you decided not to do it this year." And so, their conversation went in circles, with him offering to do it *if she needs him to*, and she refusing to admit that she very much did.

I am not trying to say that this type of underhanded play is something we should be engaging in, but this story illustrates how a person who refuses to admit to their needs can end up paying the price. Sometimes there are consequences for not being able to show vulnerability and admit that you do need, or maybe 'want', something someone else can offer them. If you have a fear of being vulnerable or needy, you are setting yourself up for a lot of difficulty.

I am a big proponent of not only asking for things when you need them, but even of creating a need just so that you can show your spouse that you appreciate when they help you. When you give your spouse the feeling that you are dependent on them, and then you thank them for their kind assistance afterwards, you have the opportunity to deepen your relationship on an entirely different level.

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I once gave a series of talks on business relationships, and explained how partnership will succeed only when each partner needs the other. The reason you take a partner should not be because you need someone to hold your hand in case you fall. It shouldn't even be because you need his money, and if the business fails, he will take the loss. In a business partnership, too, you should be in it together because you each have different strengths and you need each other and complement each other. If you enter the partnership for any other reason, it will only end in resentment and aggravation.

When you each bring your own individual strengths to the partnership, your business has a greater chance of succeeding. Relying on other people is nothing to be afraid of.

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Even though we know that we need each other, we have to be careful not to become controlling, overbearing or smothering. Just because your husband offered to bathe the kids one night when you were exhausted, it doesn't become his responsibility forever and ever. Or, just because you had a bad day, doesn't mean your wife needs to be in a

sour mood, too. You can each contribute whatever you are able, and communicate with each other in a healthy fashion, but you are still two separate people.

You don't have to both enjoy the same things, to the same degree, at the same time, all the time! Your love does not depend on you meshing into one being. It is about being aware that you each need each other, but you are not responsible for each other's happiness or well-being – even while being a great contributor to it.

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A lot depends on attitude and perspective. You can have two people doing the exact same thing, and one loves it while the other one hates it.

Two toddlers can be placed in a playpen. One is bawling hysterically. Why? He feels confined! Let me out of here! The other is playing contentedly. Why? He was told that he is going in there so that others won't bother him and take away his toys. It's a little bit like the mentally challenged person who was happy to be locked into the psych ward so that he won't become crazy like everyone else out there...

Some people enjoy relying on others, while others hate it. It depends a lot on how you do it, and not so much on what it is you're doing. If you feel like your spouse is totally dependent on you or vice versa, know that there is something wrong. You should not be hating or resenting helping each other out. it should not feel like a sacrifice; rather it is an investment in the relationship.

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Let's take your situation as an example. In many Chassidishe communities, women don't drive. For them, it is a completely normal part of life to rely on their husbands for transportation – especially when taking a car service isn't an option. Just like a woman waits for her husband to make *kiddush* on Shabbos – even though she can technically do it herself – she expects her husband to drive her to places, whenever possible. That isn't considered dependence, and most men do it happily and graciously.

However, if you would demand that your husband give you his every spare moment, or make him feel as if it's his fault that you don't get to drive, then he will obviously hate every minute and feel as if you're using and/or abusing him.

You need to find a way to ask for and accept his help in a way that does not take advantage of him, and remember to show your appreciation for it, too. Just don't make him feel like filling your needs are his sole responsibility.

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A great barrier to satisfaction in relationships is jealousy. When you choose to compare your level of dependence with others' level, or your spouse's availability for you versus others', that is when you will begin feeling less than. If you keep your gaze focused inward, and you keep your dependence healthy, then what others do or don't do should be of no concern to you.

Another thing to keep in mind is that it's okay to be upset. Just like you might dislike when it's raining, there's nothing wrong with being annoyed when your husband isn't available when you need him or stays late in shul on Motzei Shabbos. It only becomes a problem if you act out on that annoyance by being angry at your husband or grouchy with the kids.

If you can keep things in perspective in a mature fashion, and understand that while it is okay to rely on each other, you still get to live your lives as individuals, you will be able to move past that discontent and feel thankful for all the times you have come to each other's aid.

Wishing you all the best,
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