RABBI
SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the home

PARSHAS LECH LECHA

BUILDING THROUGH BETRAYAL

Parshas Lech Lecha begins with Hashem's command to Avraham to leave his homeland and go to Canaan. "*Lech lecha meartzecha umimoladetecha umibais avicha* – go forth from your land, from your birthplace and from your father's house."

In the literal sense this *passuk* seems to be out of order. A person first leaves his house, then he leaves his city, and only after that can he leave his country. The Bnei Yissaschar explains, based on the Zohar Hakadosh, that this *passuk* refers to the journey of a *neshama*.

A *neshama* is intrinsically pure, but can be sullied in three ways. The deepest grime on the *neshama* comes from our involvement in earthly matters. The *gashmiyus* we live in is the biggest veil covering the *neshama's* purity. Thus the *passuk* begins "Go forth from your 'earthliness', forsake your connection to the physical world!".

Additionally, the *neshama* is inhibited by being born to parents who aren't perfect spiritually, this also affects the *neshama* (albeit to somewhat of a lesser degree). And so the *possuk continues, umimoladetecha* - go forth from the nature ingrained in you by your parents. And finally there are other, stains that one is not born with but are acquired by associating with people, which is hinted by the words *Bais Avicha* - your father's house.

If a person is able to work on these parts of himself, he can reach *"ha'aretz asher areka*- the land that I will show you," the peak of spirituality his *neshama* can reach. This *passuk* then, can be regarded as the blueprint for working one's character and refining one's nature.

The *seforim* teach that refining our character is the very reason we're alive, yet as long as a person only has to get along with himself, he has the leeway to say, "This is who I am" I won't invest the effort into changing. Every person has areas he needs to work on, but as long as they don't affect others, he can push off the work for "later". But in a relationship, when we want another person to get along with and tolerate us, such an attitude causes problems.

By default, being married makes a person work on their *middos*. If we want a happy marriage, we must sometimes be ready to step out of our tendencies, behaviors, patterns and mindsets, in order to get along with the other person.

People can get stuck when they feel that their spouse should just accept them the way they are. This is a wrong attitude. We don't necessarily *always* have to accommodate the other person. But it's important to be able to compromise, be flexible, and overcome things that are naturally ingrained and important to us. This can be our personality, acquired habits, or beliefs and behaviors we learn from the people and community we're part of.

Often, until a person is ready to work on and overcome these ingrained tendencies, it can cause difficulty in a marriage. Asking the other person to close their eyes and accept that this is who you are and how you grew up, may be too hard for them.

This lesson from the *parsha* can help us navigate the question that was sent in...

Question:

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

What should a newlywed do if she married someone with the understanding that he would stop smoking, and yet he does smoke after they're married. She would not have agreed to the marriage had she known that he would continue to smoke. Now she feels stuck. She is bothered by the danger to his health, the stench, and she feels betrayed.

This is the situation I find myself in, only that by now I've been married for several years and my husband is still smoking. The health issues compound; the stench is still there, and I just feel betrayed. I would appreciate if you can guide me on this issue which is making life very difficult for us.

Answer:

This is a great question, because it's relevant in so many areas of couples' lives. There are things we learn about our spouses only after we're married. Sometimes people think that had they known before, they wouldn't have gone into the marriage and want to figure out what to do now that they're already married. Our discussion here is about the issue of smoking, but it can apply to other issues as well. It is also not necessarily only about a wife feeling betrayed by her husband; the concepts also apply when a husband feels betrayed by his wife.

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You don't specify if your husband actually committed not to smoke or if you were simply under the impression that he would stop smoking. In *shidduchim*, things are often mentioned in passing, but then taken as a commitment even if that wasn't explicit. Here's what may have happened: "Does the boy smoke?" "Maybe sometimes, but I don't think he will once he's married." If this was the case then there was no commitment here. Even if a boy is asked directly, he might say "I only smoke with the guys in yeshiva." This isn't either a promise that he won't smoke later on. He's not breaking his word. He may have been fooling himself, or not being fully truthful, but he isn't "breaking a commitment".

And what if he did promise? Whether it was assumed or promised that he wouldn't smoke, it's important to understand that quitting smoking is a very difficult thing to do.

What if a person didn't smoke when he got married and picked up this bad habit later? You (unfortunately) can't assume or expect that the person you married will be exactly the same in 60 years from now. You can't even assume that you'll be the same then. People change. Situations change. Habits change. These are important perspectives to consider.

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With all that, I understand your feelings of betrayal and pain. You were under the

impression that your husband wouldn't smoke, and yet he does. Feeling let down is very painful and very disturbing indeed. Most women would have an issue with something like this.

I would clarify the nature of betrayal, though. Betrayal is usually the act of hurting someone, going behind their back, not being honest, or violating the trust that was built up in the relationship. In this case, from your husband's perspective, there is no betrayal. This is an issue *he* is dealing with. He likes to smoke and it's hard for him to quit. He may understand that you don't like it but he has no intention to hurt you. I'm not just correcting the usage of the term. I'm trying to help you understand the issue for what it is - a really disturbing one indeed - but not for what it isn't, a wholesale betrayal of marital trust, and it shouldn't be turned into that!

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In addition to your perspective and very real feelings about this issue, there's something critically important I'd like to point out. Be careful that this problem doesn't become "the issue," and the rest of your relationship shouldn't be filtered through this one thing. You asked him countless times to stop smoking. He didn't. Suddenly, this becomes the relationship of a smoker and non-smoker. "I married someone I can't trust, who doesn't care how I feel and isn't taking me seriously. Proof? He's not stopping to smoke."

If this becomes the prism through which you view every aspect of your relationship, then if and when he's ever five minutes late, you might link it to the fact that you can't trust him because he 'betrayed' you by smoking when you thought he wouldn't. It's important to compartmentalize issues. If you have an issue with your husband smoking, it's good to ask for advice and deal with it, but don't link everything to it.

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In my classes on *shalom bayis*, I discuss that every relationship requires healthy boundaries. In relationships, everything can fall into one of three categories: mine, yours and ours. What I choose to eat, wear or do is *mine*. You can care about it and it can make a difference to you - you can even respectfully *ask* me to do things differently - but ultimately, they belong to me. Where *you* like to go, what *you* like to do, even your schedule to a large degree, is *yours*. But if we confuse *mine* and *yours,* and control these aspects of each other's lives, it will cause difficulty in a relationship.

Then there's *ours*. Things that belong to both. In marriage, that would be the home, the children, etc. If one party controls that which belongs to both, and doesn't understand that this requires discussion and coming to a joint agreement, something is wrong. I discuss this extensively in many classes, as well as in my book "Get Along with Everyone." This is fundamental in relationships.

Smoking, our example here, belongs to the smoker. You can say that you want your husband to be healthy. Fair argument. But there are many things that are unhealthy. What will you do if your spouse eats too much sugar or is out in the sun too much? There are people who are health-conscious to an extreme and try to control other people's health. One shouldn't control what other people are doing.

Yet the smell is unpleasant and you can't handle it. This can be considered *ours* and should be taken more seriously. Once you understand which parts are *mine* and which are *yours*, you can have a more successful conversation about this. You have a better position and stronger argument when you discuss the parts that affect you directly, and see how they can be dealt with. Sometimes those points will help the other parts as well, simply because it was brought up in a more credible, balanced and respectful way.

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When it comes to smoking, it's good to understand that as hard as it is for you to tolerate it, it's just as hard for your spouse to tolerate not smoking. It's not that he doesn't care that you can't handle it, but he can't handle not having the cigarette.

This is true for other situations as well but smoking is a good example. Other addictions, whether overspending or overeating are also difficult to overcome. When someone is addicted or doing something compulsively, no amount of logic and explaining and "Don't you care about me?" will help.

There's the story about a woman who nags her husband, "Can't you quit smoking? Can't you quit smoking? Can't you quit smoking?" and each time

he says, "No, I can't". Finally he says to her, "Can't you quit nagging?"! It's hard.

Anyone who has tried to stop smoking knows how difficult it is. In fact, most people have tried overcoming things and found it difficult. Understand that it's just as difficult for others.

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But perhaps the most important part of this question is how to address it. Sometimes, people become condescending, judgmental, critical, show unhappiness, or debate. "Why can't you? What's with you? How can you do this to me?" This method often makes people resist changing. When you criticize or blame someone, aside from the negativity and damage to the relationship, it makes people defensive and they feel a need to justify their behavior. When you feel stuck, you may express yourself in a way that's counterproductive. But the way you say it can cause him to feel as stuck as you and resist even more.

Encouragement, appreciation, and noticing the little things that are better, can get you much further. He'll feel good about making changes that are difficult. Discuss it. Tell him that you understand that quitting smoking is hard and that as much as you didn't expect to deal with it, you want to make it work. Maybe ask him to smoke out of the house, or not when you're together, etc. Say it in a nice way without judgement. Maybe he'll try and won't be successful. But pick up on that and compliment it. "I noticed that you didn't smoke throughout the trip. It meant so much to me."

When your spouse sees that you're being kind and understanding even though it bothers you very much, you'll be successful much quicker, even if not immediately, because they'll want to make you feel good as well.

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One more point. If *you* - the reader - are "the smoker" or doing something your spouse can't handle, especially if you understand that it's not good, then instead of defending yourself and mocking them for being bothered by it, show empathy. Explain that you wish you can overcome the issue and that you'll work on it, because her happiness is important to you.

It's important to mention that there are situations that are more serious (such as drug abuse,) or things that you can't tolerate at all. There are ways to deal with it, but they're not always easy and may need one-on-one guidance.

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With encouragement and appreciation for the small steps, your relationship can really blossom.

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TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME

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