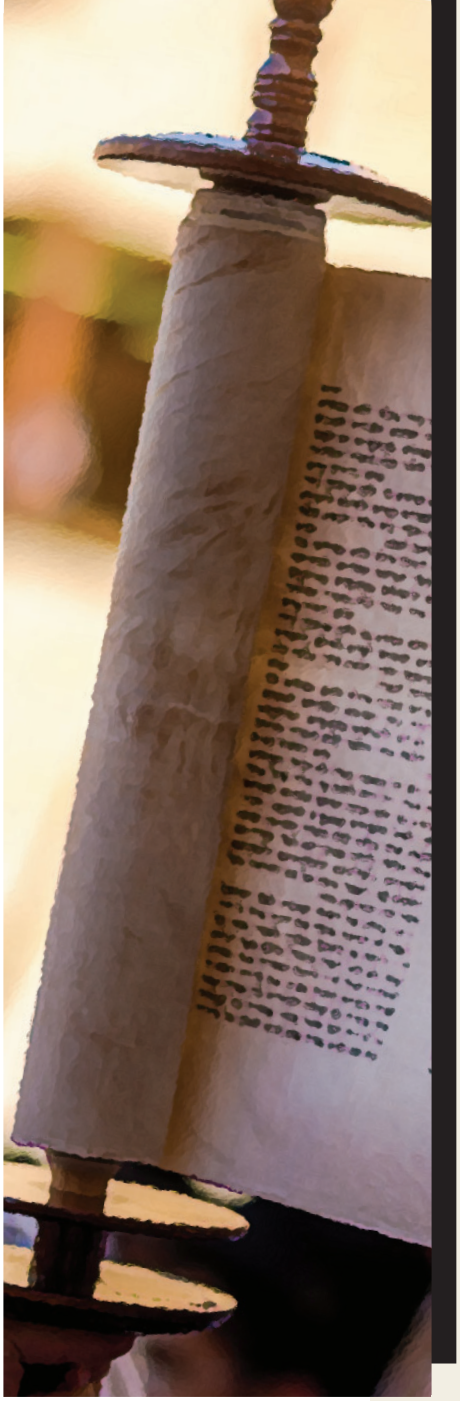


RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS ONE STEP AT A TIME

It is quoted in the name of the Baal Shem Tov that after reciting the Tikkun Leil Shavuos on the night of Yom Tov, one should be careful not to speak anything but words of kedushah, until after the recitation of Keser during the chazaras hashatz of Mussaf. This is based on a statement in the Zohar Hakadosh, which compares our limmud haTorah to the gifts of jewelry we prepare for the "kallah," Hashem's Shechinah. The presentation of those gifts occurs when we proclaim: "Keser: The crown to be given to Hashem..." Between preparing the gift and presenting it there should be no interruptions.

Parshas Naso is the longest parshah in the Torah, and it always follows Shavuos. The explanation given is that after being given the Torah, we take as much of it as possible, hence the bigger portion. This, too, contains the message that between accepting the Torah on Shavuos, and learning it, there should be no interruptions.

In fact, the lesson of consistency and continuity is something we experienced even before Shavuos, as each day of Sefiras Ha'omer builds upon the day before, teaching us how our avodas Hashem must be an uninterrupted, consistent, and continuous accumulation of mitzvos.

Just as our connection with Hashem must be uninterrupted, so too the relationship between husband and wife. The idea of consistency is key to shalom bayis. Ideally, the relationship should become stronger and closer as the years go by, with each act of kindness building on what came before.

While in the bigger picture, there is generally a gradual enhancement in our relationships over time, there are still those individual actions in our lives where we may notice "interruptions" to the building of a strong kesher. It might be a critical word offered after a word of praise, or a frown that followed a smile. Such interruptions don't — and shouldn't — cancel out the good that preceded or followed them, but they can still break the flow.

Sometimes, even while saying a kind word, people ruin it with an interruption that was uncalled for, one that disturbs the good energy that could have been well taken. When thanking someone ("Thanks so much for tidying up") make sure not to negate the positive vibe with any unnecessary critique ("The house looked dreadful before...") Likewise, when receiving a good word, we should overcome the temptation to cancel out the good deed: "Thanks so much for the compliment, but I still can't forget yesterday's nasty comment..."

None of us is perfect, and it's easy to focus on the mistakes. But just as we hope and daven that Hashem will overlook the things we sincerely regret and focus on what we got right, we should extend that courtesy to our spouses (and everyone else in our lives). Focus on the good, and allow the positive to mount.

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Parshas
Naso
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Introduction:

While this question was sent to me months ago, and may initially seem very off-topic for a post-Shavuos essay, the underlying issue applies all year round and hopefully the advice will be helpful in many other scenarios as well.

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

Thank you for all the help you have given me in the past. I have a question about a certain custom in my community. I don't know if it's the same in your circles, but I hope you'll understand.

Where I live, on Purim lots of women like to think up a theme and for the whole family to get involved in it, which includes dressing up, the Mishloach Manos, etc.. In fact, there are people who don't do this but my wife insists that "everyone does."

I really don't like dressing up. Still, I have gone along with what my wife wants in previous years. Sometimes it's just a hat, sometimes something else, but I really don't feel comfortable with it. But my wife is adamant that it's a family issue, and she gets the kids really into it and tells me how upset they'll all be if I don't go along with it.

This year, I decided that regardless, I'm just not dressing up, and I imagine that you'll agree with me taking this approach. What I'd like is advice on how exactly to tell my wife about my decision.

Thank you



As mentioned, we're nowhere near Purim right now, but the issue presented here is one that can surface all year round: one spouse insists that "this is the way it's done" while the other protests that "no, it isn't, and I don't want to do it." It could be Purim costumes or it could be the wife deciding that a certain shul is the "only appropriate place" for her husband to learn on Shavuos night.

That said, with regard to the example itself, there's nothing inherently wrong or inappropriate about a husband dressing up on Purim (and in fact, I do so myself). The minhag to do so isn't exclusive to children. Those who feel fine doing so are in good company — and so are those who don't feel comfortable with it. The same applies to women who enjoy creating themes for Purim, or for anything else, for that matter. It's common and normal

So, if a husband and wife have different ideas about what to do, and both are within the realm of "normal," let's examine why this is causing trouble and see what can be done about it.

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Most parents are familiar with the scenario where a child comes home from school and says, "All my friends have ____ ! Can you buy me one too?" Often, a little questioning reveals that "all" means around three classmates.

Adults sometimes do this as well, and while they may not exaggerate quite as much, the effect can be the same — the spouse wonders whether "everyone" really is doing whatever they're being asked (or told) to do.

Furthermore, even if "everyone" really is doing whatever it is, does that truly mean that they have to follow suit? Often, the problem is less about whether everyone is actually doing something and more about being dictated to on how to behave. In this case, the husband isn't objecting to dressing up because his wife is right (or wrong) about what everyone else does. What he really objects to is being told that he must comply.

Let's take another example. For some reason, a lot of wives believe that taking out the garbage is "the man's job." I don't happen to agree, but let's just assume for now that in a footnote to the kesubah, the husband signed his agreement that every time the garbage can is full, he takes it out. Does this mean that his wife may (or should) order him: "Mendel! Take out the garbage!"?

A wife would do better if, instead of ordering her husband to do his "duty," she asked nicely. It could simply be something like, "Oh, the garbage can is full again. Would you mind taking it out? I'd really appreciate it." He might just agree more willingly when his compliance isn't taken for granted, and this might even make their relationship smoother and more pleasant. And if she thanks him when he gets back, and adds a smile, she probably won't regret it.

Ordering one's spouse to do something, even if (you think that) the whole world instinctively knows that the thing must be done, is never the best option. Even with our children, there are much better ways of being mechanech them, than ordering them around.

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So, what is it that stops wives from trying this approach? Doesn't it make so much more sense to ask nicely and show appreciation? Why order someone to do something when so often, that's what causes them to instinctively resist? (Men often do the same when "asking" for something from their wives; the question is why.)

Some people find it very hard to ask for favors. They believe it makes them sound weak and vulnerable; they'd much rather be in the "strong" position of telling people what to do and not having to ask (and risk being turned down). But the truth is that people who derive their sense of strength from ordering people around are actually the weak ones, fearful that others don't respect them or want to make them happy.

If you're the one telling your spouse what to do, try to hold back when the issue is something that doesn't directly affect you. You shouldn't be insisting on compliance in areas that are within your spouse's personal boundaries. If it's something that bothers you very much nonetheless, ask and don't order. You're much more likely to see positive results when you don't frame the issue as an obligation.

Taking the example in the letter, the wife might try something like this: "I know not everyone dresses up on Purim, and you've mentioned in the past that you're not very comfortable with the idea. It means a lot to me and if you could do it for me, at least when the family gets together, I would really appreciate it. Thank you for taking my feelings into consideration."

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What if you're the spouse being told what to do? It's not pleasant being ordered around and you may feel not only entitled to resist but also that it's your duty to do so, given that allowing yourself to be trodden on isn't good for either spouse.

While it's understandable to feel that way, I would still advise you to take a step back and consider how things reached such a state of affairs. If this is simply your spouse's way of communicating, that's something you should openly discuss. But first, think about whether you have given your spouse the impression that you will do your own thing, given a chance, and that the only way to ensure that you take out the garbage, for instance, is to tell you to.

In this particular case, the writer mentions that he has complied with his wife's wishes in previous years, so quite probably he's not to blame for his wife's approach. However, others in a similar situation might want to consider this possibility.

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Based on the idea of healthy boundaries, and the right that people have to make their own decisions on how to behave and dress, the husband writing the letter may certainly refuse politely to go along with his wife's wishes (even if she asks nicely). He is within his rights to do so, and allowing his wife to control him isn't good for either of them.

But there may be a better option. He knows how much this means to his wife. And, he knows that Purim comes around every year, so he doesn't have to wait for her to raise the issue. He can raise it himself and let her know that he cares about her feelings as much as he cares about his own.

He could suggest a compromise: "I know how much you love to see everyone dressed up in matching costumes. I really don't feel comfortable dressed up, but I guess I can wear a hat of some kind. Is that okay?" He could suggest that he'll only dress up at home, or during the seudah, or for the family picture.

Even if the husband decides that this year, he simply can't bear the thought of even putting on a funny hat, he

can still communicate this in a way that is respectful of both of their feelings: "I know how much this means to you, and I've tried until now to go along with it. I just feel so shy and uncomfortable. I hope you won't mind that this year I'm opting out. Thanks for understanding."

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In his book, Me + You = We, my friend Yisroel Kleinman discusses the downside of aiming to be mevater, calling this one of the greatest disruptors in many relationships. While vatranus is most definitely an excellent attribute, there are times when it's better not to "give in."

This is because it can be very hard to honestly assess whether beneath the genuinely good intentions, there is some lingering resentment about "having to be the one to back down," for example. And even when we don't resent compromising or giving in, there is often a subconscious expectation of getting something in return. When the consideration and compromise don't earn a response, this too can result in resentment. Therefore, in some cases it could be better not to attempt being mevater in the first place.

When we gain awareness of this dynamic, it will help us to know when and how to be mevater correctly, and when a different way of addressing such problems is more appropriate. What I am referring to is simply being honest and open about what we would like to receive in return for compromising. In many cases, it's something as simple as appreciation.

To use the example of the husband in the letter, he could tell his wife, "I know how much it means to you that I wear the hat and vest, so I'll do it even though you know I don't like dressing up. It would mean a lot to me if you could recognize that I'm doing this for you and tell me that you appreciate it."

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Many of us need "educating" on how to appreciate what others do for us. To give a different, real-life example: A certain yungerman I know makes a siyum quite often. Each time, his chavrusa comes home to a freshly-baked cake or some other nice surprise from his wife. But when he gets home — nothing.

"Why doesn't she get it?" he asked me. "Isn't it obvious that a siyum is something that should be celebrated?"

The answer is that it's not obvious to everyone. His wife needs to be gently educated in this area, and this is no reflection on her overall character. What this means in practice is that he chooses a calm time (for example, two weeks before he knows he'll be making a siyum) to raise the subject. He doesn't wait until the day of the siyum, when he's already feeling upset.

Then, he introduces the subject gently: "You know, I'm hoping to make another siyum in a few weeks' time. I'd really appreciate it if you could bake a cake or something, so that we can celebrate together."

If possible, he shouldn't be too specific about what he would like her to do, as this makes it easier for her to comply and feel that she is sharing the simchah, not obeying her husband.

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Sometimes, the most challenging shalom bayis issues are those where both husband and wife are right. When we know that we're right, we may stop there and never consider the possibility that the other person might be right, too. But in all relationships, there's almost always a way to look at the situation from the other person's perspective and find a way to justify their position.

Learning how to do that is the work of years, made possible by an accumulation of small efforts, of little deeds, of constant giving and compromise, and of looking beyond the occasional missteps and allowing the good to build up into a strong and loving relationship.

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME: NASO 5785

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