RABBI
SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the home

PARSHAS SHEMINI

ACCEPT YOUR SPOUSE

When a person does something wrong, the Yetzer Hora seizes the opportunity to make him feel like he is no longer worthy of ever doing anything good again. The Yetzer Hora creates the impression that in order to serve Hashem, a person must achieve a certain level of greatness and perfection. The Tiferes Shlomo dispels this error by pointing out that Hashem is *"Shomeia tefillas kol peh* – He listens to the *tefillos* of *every* mouth." Hashem *doesn't* make greatness a prerequisite; He accepts the *tefillos* and *mitzvos* of every person, no matter what level he's on.

The Tiferes Shlomo quotes the *Gemara*, *"Ein maavirin al hamitzvos*," and teaches that a person shouldn't allow the *aveiros* – from the word *maavirin* – to overtake his *mitzvos*. Furthermore, it says *"Sur mei'ra ve'aseh tov*," put the bad aside and go do the right thing. Don't focus on the wrongdoings you committed, that will cool your enthusiasm for accomplishing good things in the future.

He continues explaining the Possuk in this week's Parsha*"Vayered me'asos hachatas*," which is talking about when Aharon Hakohen "came down" from the *Korban Chatas*. The Possuk is hinting that Aharon Hakohen "left" the sin offering when he came to *bentch* the Yidden. He didn't mix the good and the bad.

Besides for being an important *yesod* in *Avodas Hashem*, this is also a great lesson when it comes to relationships. Firstly, when you want to do a favor, don't be concerned that your past negative interactions will affect how that person will accept it from you. If you're up to doing something nice, do it. But even more importantly, when someone does something good to you, don't mix in past negativity. Accept it for what it is.

It's not easy, but it's so worthwhile. People have a hard time accepting a kind gesture after they've been hurt. They're afraid the person doesn't really mean it. But this makes it so hard to break out of a negative cycle. *Sur meira,* let's drop the negativity, *va'asei tov,* let us instead focus on the good!

Question:

This week, I want to present three separate questions that I received. Were I to answer each one separately, I'd go into more practical detail about each of these questions, as there is much more to say about each one of them, but I'd like to take the opportunity to address a more general principle.

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

I listen to your weekly classes and wanted to know if you can help me.

I am B"H happily married and have two children. There's one thing that bothers me though. My wife doesn't have any close friends. She recently had a workmate that she was good with, but when that person left the job, they lost contact. My wife actually tried keeping up with her but for some reason, it kept not working out for her.

I have two issues with this. First of all, whenever something bothers my wife or she has something to share, it always comes out to me. It's too much for me. She could really use a friend for the regular give and take. Also, the fact that she has no friends makes me wonder. Do people accept her? Is there something wrong with her? Why don't people like her? Is this a normal feeling for me to have?

Thank you.

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Dear Rabbi Gruen,

You recently spoke about a situation where the wife was very quiet. What if a husband is very quiet? Maybe it's his problem and not mine, as you suggested in a class on the topic, but it's very painful to live with a spouse that doesn't share anything. Not a nachas report about the children, not how his day was, nothing. He doesn't ask me about my day either. The only things he talks about are the bills or if he needs me to sign anything. Almost no other normal communication at all.

I once mentioned to him that I love flowers and he should buy some for Shabbos. He said it's stupid to do so now that I asked for it. I could tell him that my birthday is coming up but he has no patience to do anything about it. It may not be my problem, but it's very lonely and a bitter pill to swallow.

Thanks for your advice.

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Dear Rabbi Gruen,

I am a talkative person and my husband is quiet. He doesn't share much and I'm afraid to ask him questions because he doesn't like it. It bothers me to no end that I am not informed of things. The only way I find out is if I hear him talking to someone else or find them texting someone about it. This may be because of his upbringing or his nature. But how can I get him to share more without asking questions? I wish there would be easy flowing conversations at home. It would make things so much more comfortable and enjoyable.

Thank you.

Answer:

The common theme in all three questions is that one spouse doesn't like something about the other. This is very common. Most people can come up with things that bother them about their spouse.

Some actually assume that other people 'lucked out' and have spouses that are exactly what they wanted. Of course that's a big mistake. The truth is that for most people, if they would have a magic

button to change whatever they wanted in their spouse, they wouldn't have a hard time coming up with ten things to change.

So when we notice some people who seem happier than others, or more happily married than others, it's important to remember that it's not necessarily because they got more of what they wanted in their spouse. It may seem like it, but most often they are simply people who made peace with certain things, or perhaps the same issues didn't affect them in the same way. It's important for people to know in advance, and be okay with the fact that when getting married they won't be living with someone who is an exact copy of themselves. And for most people, that's a good thing. Without this acknowledgement and acceptance there's sure going to be a lot of heartache.

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Aside from typical acceptance of the details you weren't expecting in your spouse, there's another issue. Some people are faced with a personality clash. Much of a personality is inborn and will never change. A fun-loving person may always enjoy thriller rides even if their spouse's idea of a good time will always be sitting at the beach and looking at the sky, among other – more significant – differences. You may know about some of the different facets of your spouse's personality before you get married, but some of it will only come out afterwards. Also, some things may not bother you until you have to live with it for the rest of your life. This is normal.

And you may not be able to do anything about it. Some people are more talkative and others are less expressive. Some people are friendly and outgoing and some aren't. You may not be able to change it. It's hard. You can be disappointed about it and become resentful. Or you can learn to accept it because you may not be able to change it.

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Sometimes it's easier to accept something once you realize that you can't change it. Can you change your spouse's height? Some people are disappointed that they can't, and all their life wish they would have married someone taller or shorter. If you know in advance that there's something about this person that is hard for you to handle, you don't have to marry them. But if you did, the best thing you can do is learn to accept things that won't change. Personalities don't change. If you tried several times to get something to change, and it didn't, it may be time to recognize it as an inborn trait, and you can start to work on acceptance.

At times, people come up with explanations to prove that it's not a personality clash. "He's more talkative with others." "She used to have friends." There may be reasons and causes and explanations for exceptions, but the issue is there. Those explanations are not necessarily proof for the possibility that the situation will change.

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People often make another mistake assuming that if only their spouse would have XYZ, everything would be fine. "I have friends. If she would also have friends, we'd both be fine." It may be true. But many times, that solution comes along with a different set of problems. Look at the letters I got, where one is resentful to the friends and the other resentful about the lack of friends! One spouse is expressing her unhappiness with her husband's lack of sharing, while it's possible that his sharing would be an expression of his own unhappiness, which may be even more challenging. The fact that your spouse isn't just like you, or just like what you think you need or want, may just be a benefit.

In fact, I've seen many couples whose personalities were exactly the same, yet they perceived it as oh-so-different. That's because a person will excuse his own shortcomings but finds it difficult to do the same for shortcomings in others. You may rationalize that you don't share your day with your husband because he's not interested, but he should share his day with you because you are interested. It's not a matter of who's right and who's wrong. It's just that we don't realize how we come across to others.

As a matter of fact, if there was a personality clash and their personality makes you nervous, you can assume that your personality can very well be annoying them too. It bothers you that your spouse has no friends. It may bother her that you have so many friends. Not that this makes it that much easier for you, but the resentment can be relieved a bit when you realize it's not all about you feeling victimized.

A man came to see me because his wife "sent" him to work on his poor self-esteem. He didn't realize how silly he sounded when he tried rationalizing that she also has a low self-esteem, but because his low self-esteem bothered her more than her low self-esteem bothered him, she felt he had to work on his first. Instead of her appreciating his acceptance of her shortcomings and then mirroring that acceptance back onto him, she was using this very attribute against him, and now "sending" him for help, because his deficiencies are too much for her to handle. (Even if they were, that would be reason for her to go get her own help.)

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Acceptance doesn't mean you're happy about the situation. The change you want may be beneficial and you may never learn to *appreciate* the current situation, but you can learn to accept that this is what it is. You can stop having false hopes that it will change or that you can get them to change. Acceptance means coming to terms

with the fact that this is who you married. If you can't accept it, you may forever be unhappy and resentful about something you can't do much about.

And one of the ways to get to this point is by changing focus. Every person has good parts. We tend to focus on what isn't good and forget about those parts that are. We harp on the fact that we didn't get flowers instead of noticing all the good he does.

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Understanding that deficiencies are natural can help us realize that they're unintentional. Once you realize that a certain behavior is a result of someone's personality and won't change, you'll understand that your spouse isn't trying to hurt you with that behavior. On the other hand, when your spouse does something good for you, realize that they're being good to you intentionally. Don't rationalize that because he's a nice person and does it anyway so it's less meaningful. Even worse is the mistake of taking things for granted with the "but that's normal" attitude. It'll only work to your benefit to see the good things in an appreciative light and the negative as natural challenges and unintentional wrongdoings. You'll end up happier with such a perspective.

The Chassam Sofer explains this from a passuk in this week's Parshah. It says "*Vehiskadishtem viyisem kedoshim* – and you shall sanctify yourselves and be holy." He explains that if a person does something holy, even *shelo lishmah*, it will make him more *kadosh*. But it doesn't work this way in reverse. If a person does an *aveirah lishmah*, it can be greater than a *mitzvah shelo lishmah*.

Harp on the good you receive. Focus on your spouse's redeeming factors. People make the mistake of saying that the good they get isn't so valuable because they really wanted something else instead. What makes you say you don't need what you are getting? You have it so you don't feel like it's missing and you think you don't need it as much. The one you're missing is the one you crave. It may be hard to accept that a person has a natural deficiency that prevents them from doing that which you feel you need.

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With all that said, it's important to mention that if your spouse's "natural deficiency" directly affects you in some way – her lack of friendship makes her too dependent on you, or his closed nature makes it hard to connect – then it's important to see if you're enabling or worsening the problem in some way, or if there might be something you can do to relieve yourself of the excessive burden you're carrying because of this.

Sometimes being too tolerant of how someone else's challenge is demanding of you is actually making it harder for the person to overcome their struggle. Without getting someone else to do what you want, you can learn how to nicely resist doing exactly what *they* want, and focus on simply avoiding the parts that are affecting you directly and personally.

This is a delicate topic that can use more elaboration, I just wanted to mention that sometimes being assertive without being challenging, and consistently expressing what you can and cannot do, all while being understanding and truly accepting, can help stabilize and eliminate certain unhealthy patterns, and can actually be the beginning of someone else getting the help they need, or learning to slowly overcome that which they found so challenging. You may need to learn how to do this right, but it can be very worthwhile.

I want to finish off with what we started with. When your spouse does something good to you, don't let the difficulties detract from it. Accept it and realize that they're being good to you intentionally.

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