Torah Lessons for the Home

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

| Parshas Shmini |

Good Intentions Aren't Everything

They Meant Well

In this week's *parsha*, we read of the tragic episode that occurred with Nadav and Avihu. They entered the holiest place to bring a *ketores*, and a fire consumed them. Of course, the commentators offer various explanations as to why these pious sons of Aharon were deserving of their untimely deaths, explaining the *aish zarah* that they brought. There is no question that Nadav and Avihu meant well. They had all good intentions. They were *tzaddikim*, after all. They obviously meant to bring an *aish kodesh*. They didn't enter the *kodesh* with the intention of bringing an *aish zarah*. They had good intentions, but the *passuk* calls it an *aish zarah*.

The *korban* Nadav and Avihu brought was special, but the fact that Hakadosh Baruch Hu didn't want it led to their tragic punishment.

When it comes to deeds between man and Hashem, Hashem does consider a good thought as if we carried it out in practice. There is a concept that if we have a noble intention, even if it's not the best thing, but because we meant well, it's already a reason for it to be taken well. But with Nadav and Avihu, this wasn't the case. For whatever reason, perhaps because of their greatness, despite having good intentions, their deed was considered an *aveirah*.

While Nadav and Avihu were the exception, between man and Hashem this concept usually holds true. He knows the intentions of man, after all. When He sees we mean well, he treats our deed as such. But when it comes to relationships between two human beings, good intentions are not everything. With all the good intentions in the world, if you want to have *shalom bayis*, you must do what's right. "The path to *gehinom* is paved with good intentions," the saying goes. A person's intentions are very important and it's good to have good intentions and it's good to understand someone else's good intentions, but at the end of the day, good intentions are definitely not enough. As well meaning as your intentions are, if what you're doing is not being taken right or being appreciated, the fact that you meant well may mean very little.

Friendly Fire is Still Fire

Thus, when you say something or do something, so much depends on what the other person perceives from it. If your spouse is not hearing the compliment or the good word the way you meant it and they're even getting insulted, saying, "I didn't mean that," won't help you much. It's always good to be sensitive, to invest thought in how our spouse will perceive the message: Is what I'm doing or saying coming across the way I want it or is that person hearing something totally different?

The same is true when you're trying to encourage another individual. You may be thinking it's encouragement, but if in that encouragement you're implying something about that person's shortcomings, chances are that

person will not appreciate it. Whether you see them as super sensitive or because they don't trust you enough to believe that you really have their benefit in mind, the reality is that with your "encouragement" you hurt someone. That could be friendly fire, *aish zarah*. You can be friendly fire, but you're hurting someone.

Rav Baruch Ber Leibowitz, the Rosh Yeshiva of Kaminetz, came to America before the Holocaust to raise funds for his yeshiva. When he came to New York City and the mayor, Jimmy Walker, arranged a respectable reception for him in City Hall. There, he gave him a symbolic key to the city and he gave a lot of respect to the great Rosh Yeshiva, the venerable Talmudic scholar who came all the way from Europe to inspire American Jewry. At the ceremony, Jimmy Walker got up to speak in honor of the Rosh Yeshiva. Since he was speaking in English and Rav Burech Ber didn't understand the language, a Volozhiner *talmid* who went on to study in university, Dr. Gordon, served as the translator. So while Jimmy Walker was saying his nonsense about how this big Talmudist came, Dr. Gordon kept adding in lots of phrases from *Chazal*, about the *koach* a *gadol b'Yisrael* has to inspire Yidden. In other words, he was delivering an amazing *drasha* in the name of the mayor of New York City.

When the mayor finished his speech, Rav Baruch Ber turned to Dr. Gordon and said, "I've already seen kind gentiles; I've never yet seen *gaonim* amongst them." He was impressed that the mayor of New York City was able to quote *Chazal* so fluently. Then, when Rav Baruch Ber got up to speak, in Yiddish, Dr. Gordon was at work again. This time, he kept adding phrases from different philosophers and scientists as if Rav Baruch Ber was citing them in his speech. When it was over, Jimmy Walker said to Dr. Gordon, "I heard that he's a Talmudist. I understood that he's well versed in Talmudic literature and Jewish studies, but to see a Rabbi from Europe with such knowledge in literature—that's amazing."

Sometimes, we don't pay attention to how much we do this every day. We say one thing and we don't realize that the other person hears something totally different. You can imagine that when the mayor or *lehavdil*, Rav Baruch Ber was giving his speech, he had no idea what the person sitting across from him was actually hearing. He thought he was hearing what he meant to say, but that was not the case.

No Mind Readers Around Here

An individual could be very well meaning even in the name of a *chumrah*, in the name of the Torah, in the name of whatever *frumkeit* it is and they don't realize that it's literally being *frum* on the other person's *cheshbon*. And they may even be thinking, "What I'm doing is so noble. Don't you appreciate it? Doesn't it mean something to you that I'm doing this holy thing?" And the answer is that sometimes not, either because it wasn't discussed or it wasn't agreed upon or it wasn't dealt with properly in a way that that person should actually appreciate what you're doing. So while the individual meant very well, what he's doing is coming across in a terrible way. It may not be their fault, but it's always good to ask ourselves, "What is it that my spouse is getting? Are they getting an *aish kodesh* or are they getting an *aish zarah*? Are they getting something that's encouraging and helpful or something that's hurtful?" And nobody is at fault for not being a mind reader. Don't expect your spouse to get what you had in mind if it's not clear from your words or actions.

So often, people complain, "Why doesn't my spouse realize? How could they not *chap*?" That's how it is. People are not mind readers. You're not a mind reader either so you can't know in advance what that person is going to hear from your message, but from experience you should start realizing what is coming across. Keep in mind that you will most often be judged by your actions and not by your intentions. So while it's good to explain yourself and justify yourself if you did mean well, "You know, that's really not what I meant. I'm sorry that it was taken the wrong way or that I wasn't clearer about it," it's also wise to be a step ahead.

The Well-Intended Gift

I've witnessed an example of this when a husband bought his wife a gift. There was no question that he was well meaning with the gift, but it implied a certain shortcoming of hers. I'm buying you this gift because you can't get it all together and I think you need help, so here's the gift that's going to help you. If you buy your wife a cookbook and she takes it the wrong way, as in, "Oh. So you don't like my cooking?", where did the good intention get you to? In the same vein, when a wife tells her husband, "You leave your

stuff all over the place and I can't stand the mess. I'm buying you a valet so you'll have where to hang your clothes," the fact that she meant well with her gift or that she thought the other person will take it well is not helpful here.

Here's the next level of where good intentions don't count. What if you wanted to buy a gift, but you didn't? Your spouse's birthday came up and you didn't buy a gift. "Well, I didn't want to buy something useless, so I was looking for the right thing and he got insulted that I missed the birthday." Again, you meant well, but if somebody's birthday's coming and you can't come up with something, write a card and say that you went to the store to buy something and you didn't come up with the right thing and within a week, you're going to get something. Don't assume that you'll be a few days late and the person will appreciate the fact that at the end you got him the right thing and "I'm sure you understood that I wanted to and it was very busy and hectic."

Sometimes, you decide that because you feel very close to your spouse, you tell yourself, "We're so close, I'm sure he'll understand me. I'm sure he'll judge me favorably." Perhaps it should be that way, but it isn't always that way. Sometimes the fact that you're close is what makes him expect more of you. When it comes to what someone else wants, you should be better at understanding that the person had good intentions, that he didn't mean anything, not to take it so personally, but on your end, always focus on doing what will be taken well.

Interestingly, the *sefarim* tell us that the *aish zarah* of Nadav and Avihu was also coming *meirov kirveh*, from great closeness. They were so close to Hashem that they figured, "You know what, we'll break the rules. Hashem will take it." That didn't happen. You could be well meaning and you could be close enough to assume that you could be well meaning and it will go over well and it may not be that way. You're best off thinking before you do or say something so you won't have to apologize for it later.

Parenting: What Does Your Child Feel About This?

When it comes to parenting, of course you're well meaning. Every parent is well meaning. Still, it's important to realize that not always will a child interpret your noble intentions in that way.

Children scoff at the *melamed* or teacher or parent who will give a punishment and say, "I'm only doing it for your benefit." Don't *potch* me for my benefit. This is not to say that punishment is wrong, but it's important to realize that not everything you're doing for your child, as much as it makes sense to you as an adult as a parent, will be interpreted well by the child.

Yes, there are things you don't have a choice about. For example, putting a child to sleep or making them eat, even if the child is screaming that you're not being nice to them, are things that you may have to do anyway. But, in general, helping the child understand why you're doing what you're doing can go a long way in the relationship. It's not about giving excuses and explanations to make sure that he's agreeing with your parenting skills, but when you're doing something that could be interpreted wrong or right, be clear about it. You don't always have to give a *din v'cheshbon* to your child, but sometimes it's so simple to give a small explanation that will make a child feel safe, to make him realize that, "Oh, you do mean my benefit. You're not just doing it to control me."

A parent may think to himself, "I don't have to explain myself to my child." Of course not. On the contrary, if it's coming as an accusation or your child is demanding an explanation, it may be wiser to say, "A parent doesn't have to *farentfer zich* to a child." But sometimes, when you could either avoid that or just with a small amount of clarity make a child feel safe and know that you mean his good, it could be very helpful. And sometimes a child could get it easily if it's explained briefly.

It's not realistic to assume or expect a child to understand and feel comfortable with everything a parent is doing. From the child's perspective, there are things you do that don't make sense. It's important to make sure he doesn't think that you're giving him an *aish zarah*. He may not like the explanation, but at least say something about why you're doing it. I'm not doing it because I don't care about you. I'm doing it because I feel that this will be better for you. It's fine; just say something that will make him feel that. Don't assume that just because you have good intentions he will understand that on his own.

*

-Q&A-

Please feel free to send any questions, on this topic or any topic to RabbiGruen@Lehair.org

Question: We had a disastrous *seder* night. The night we all look forward to to connect to our children, to give over *sippur yetzias Mitzrayim*, to connect with family, ended up being a terrible experience. I didn't really want to be home for Pesach, but my wife insisted on it. I really wanted to go to my parents, but we ended up being home and there was so much stress and the kids weren't behaving and it was disastrous. Should I talk about it with my wife or should I not mention it at all? If not saying something implies that I'm okay with it, that's really not the case. What should I do now?

Answer: It's always good to remember that the point of discussing anything negative—that you're unhappy about, that needs to be corrected—is for one purpose only: To make sure that it doesn't happen again. Always be focused towards the future. If you're going to look back and talk about something that happened already, regardless if it was yesterday or ten years ago, for the sake or rehashing what happened, it may be the wrong thing to do.

Of course, if something is bothering you and not talking about it will ruin your relationship because you're getting so tense and distant, then obviously you have to deal with it responsibly and share your feelings appropriately. That's not a question. There are times when it's wiser to share it with a therapist, other times with your wife, but in general the idea of talking about negativity and looking back at something that was no good should be done when your intention is to fix it in the future.

If it was a onetime thing that's not going to happen again, chances are the best you could do is let it go. So your wife will think that it was okay. What's the problem with that? First of all, chances are that she knew it wasn't okay. It's safe to assume your wife knows you weren't happy. My clients know this line well: "Everyone knows everything." If you weren't happy, you could be sure your wife knows it and chances are she wasn't happy either, so it may not be something you have to mention at all.

But, even if she doesn't know that you weren't happy, but if it's a onetime thing, why talk about it? To arouse negative feelings and make her feel inadequate? If you do so, you may feel like a winner that you got it off your chest and you even proved to her that she was wrong, but that's one of the worst things you could tell someone. "I told you so, so I'm right. You're wrong." Where will this lead you to?

But, if your focus is on the future, your message will come across very differently. You may even decide to wait until next year before Pesach to talk about it then. You have a year to think about how to say it, to find the right opportunity to say it, to let stressful feelings pass. You have so much time.

If you give it time, the outcome always ends up being better. The further away you are from what happened, the clearer it will be that your message is about the future. If you bring it up now, with the explanation that you have next year in mind, your spouse's reaction may very well be, "Next year? You're not saying it because of next year. You're telling it to me because you want to get back at me."

But, if you wait until next year and you say, "You know, last year, this and this happened. You meant well. There were so many good parts about it," of which the compliments you could start giving now, "And I think that going forward, we should do it this way, because I think it would be better," that's a healthy message. When you're focusing on the future, there will be less negativity in your tone, the time and place that you say it will be so much more healthy, and the focus will be on something that you both understand and it could be dealt with responsibly and maturely.

In summary, you don't have to ignore something negative that happened, but if your focus is on the future, it will not only come across better but chances are it will be taken better. Even if your wife won't like to hear it because she'll feel that it *was* good, that you're saying it for the wrong reason, you can always say, "Listen. I feel that going forward we should do it differently. Let's discuss it."

To contact Rabbi Gruen please call 718.841.6557 or e-mail rabbigruen@lehair.org
To subscribe to receive the weekly essay, please email parshalessons@lehair.org