RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME

PARSHAS
KI SEITZEI

SURRENDER AND RESPECT

In this week's *parshah*, the *passuk* states, *"Lo yumsu avos al banim ubanim lo yumsu al avos* — Fathers shall not be put to death because of sons, nor shall sons be put to death because of fathers." Rashi explains this as meaning that neither fathers nor sons shall be put to death due to the testimony of their relatives.

We know that the testimony of relatives is invalid — not only when they testify that the person being accused is innocent, but even when they testify to their relative's guilt. It's understandable that a person should have warm feelings toward his relatives and be blind to their faults, and so it makes sense that one shouldn't be able to exonerate a relative. But why shouldn't a relative be believed when he testifies *against* a family member?

The Chiddushei Harim answers that a relative is *always* supposed to judge his relatives favorably and see them in the best possible light. Just as a person invariably manages to justify his own actions, he should want and be able to justify his relatives' actions. If a person cannot find any justification for a relative's deeds, the Chiddushei Harim writes, then *"eino b'geder adam"* — he's not in the category of "mentch." There's something wrong with a person who can come to *beis din* and testify against his own family.

If only it were always that way in real life. If only we were unable to find fault with our relatives and all the people with whom we're close. If only we would see the good in the people close to us. Sometimes, it's actually easier to find the positives in people with whom we're not so close. When you live with a person, it can be easier to see their negative points, but that's not the way it's supposed to be.

All the same, there are times when we do naturally find ourselves sticking up for our relatives, usually when someone speaks negatively about them. How often does it happen that a parent complains about a difficult child, but defends that same child when the teacher calls to complain? Another common scenario is becoming defensive about a spouse and standing up for them when your parents complain about them — even if they're complaining about something that you sometimes complain about yourself!

When we start to find faults in our loved ones, we should remind ourselves that if it had been an outsider finding the same faults, we would have been the ones sticking up for them.

THIS WEEK'S ESSAY IS SPONSORED IN HONOR OF A WONDERFUL FRIEND
WHO OFFERS IMMEASURABLE HELP AND SUPPORT

YOELY BODEK שיחי'

HAPPY BIRTHDAY!

יה"ר שתזכה לאריכות ימים ושנים טובים בבריות גופא ונהורא מעליא

QUESTION

DEAR RABBI GRUEN,

I listen to your lectures and enjoy your perspective and insight on the many issues you address.

I've been dealing with many issues over the years, too lengthy to discuss in an email, but one of them that has been coming up a lot lately is respecting my husband. I know that respect is an essential need for a man to survive and thrive. I studied the science of this need for respect, yet I find it to be a stumbling block for me.

I have been married for more than 20 years. I am seeking your insight on how to persevere even in the wrenching circumstances I live with. My husband has a hard time regulating his emotions. (He's now taking medication for it.) He has many issues that make it very unnatural and difficult to work with him. I find myself questioning his *middos* and values in certain areas although some of them may just be ignorance and poor habits.

I have read *The Surrendered Wife* and understand the method. However, even when I use those methods, there are times when it seems like I'm hitting a brick wall…

I look forward to hearing from you.

ANSWER

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN RESPONDS

I can only imagine how difficult it must be to live with someone who has difficulty regulating their emotions. It's not simple. We can never judge a person who is in a relationship with someone who is unstable or difficult. I hope that nothing I say will feel judgmental, hurtful, or personally challenging.

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The book *The Surrendered Wife* has come up several times in questions people send me. I don't give book reviews, but I do want to highlight a few things, starting with the important point that this book is not a Jewish book and like any other book on relationships that isn't written from a Torah perspective, its ideas cannot be applied in their entirety.

Another thing that is important to bear in mind is that self-*help* books are not always as helpful as we'd like them to be. Often, the person who needs help cannot help themselves by reading a book. A book can raise awareness. It can provide understanding or point out areas that need intervention. Reading books *can* be helpful. And yet, when a person tries to assess their own situation, apply ideas, and figure out if they're applying the ideas correctly, it becomes very difficult. A person is too close and subjective to assess their situation accurately. Everything is evaluated through their own interpretation.

Another problem with self-help books is that although you can apply the ideas to yourself, you have no idea how the other person in the relationship feels about being on the receiving end. Even if you follow the book's instructions faithfully and, for instance, start expressing love the way you're told to, you still don't know how your spouse is experiencing things. People often tell me about how respectful or understanding they're being, especially when trying to implement the "surrendered" approach, but when they describe what they're doing, I don't see how they're being respectful at all.

One of the big attractions of self-help books is that you don't have to pay for a therapist. The problem with doing without the therapist is that you don't get any feedback — a book will never tell you if you've read it wrong or if you aren't applying the ideas correctly. At least asking a friend for advice can help you to see things with (more) objective eyes.

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At the risk of over-simplifying and over-condensing a long book with a clear methodology, the basic idea of *The Surrendered Wife* is that a wife shouldn't be controlling or dominating — instead, she should surrender completely to her husband. Sometimes, a woman may think she's surrendering. But feeling like a martyr, bottling up resentment, and brewing with upset feelings is not what surrendering is about, and generally won't accomplish much either. Becoming apathetic and deciding that nothing interests you isn't surrendering either — furthermore, it won't make a man feel respected. If your idea of surrendering is silencing yourself and letting the tension mount, things are unlikely to turn out well.

If that happens, it doesn't mean you should blame yourself for failing to surrender. While surrendering is a realistic and worthwhile goal for some personalities, it's not at all suited to others. If genuine surrender makes you feel choked or invisible or depressed, it may not be the right path for you.

Another common way people misuse this book is by surrendering for ulterior motives. The author of *The Surrendered Wife* genuinely surrendered after becoming convinced that it was the right thing for her to do. It turned out well for her, but that wasn't her goal. If someone reads this book and surrenders in order to manipulate her husband into doing (or becoming) what she wants, it's unlikely to work. Even if she starts out by genuinely surrendering but along the way, becomes impatient at the "lack of results," she's likely to give up in frustration instead of persisting — again, because she's focused on getting results in her spouse, rather than on becoming a wife who surrenders.

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I want to say very clearly that the initial idea of a wife surrendering to her husband is very Jewish. Husband and wife are not equal partners. The man is the king of the house and he is the one who should make most decisions. He is respected as a king because he *is* the king. That's not a secular idea, and it's unfortunate that some people have to look to a secular source to understand that.

The Rambam writes that a wife should respect her husband more than necessary, and should even be somewhat afraid of him. Everything she does should be based on his wishes. She should see him as her king and realize that this is the key to building a successful home. (Of course, there are many sources, including the Rambam, that require a husband to be extra-careful in how he treats his wife. The relationship is balanced, even if husbands and wives have different sets of advice to follow.)

However, no Torah source suggests that a wife should "surrender" to an extreme or tolerate abusive behavior. While the book mentioned above doesn't advocate surrendering to abuse, some of the advice the author suggests may fall into the category of enabling. Not everything should be tolerated even if it isn't technically abusive; sometimes, situations become damaging because the other party didn't say anything when they could or should have.

Knowing whether to surrender or to respectfully express your unhappiness is not always easy, but knowing how to communicate is an essential skill. Sometimes, you may find that the other person actually wants to change a difficult trait and welcomes your assistance — and that the last thing they want is you enabling them to carry on being difficult.

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Poor habits and difficult behavior are difficult to live with, and I'm not suggesting that they should be ignored or surrendered to. However, we need to know the right way to address them responsibly and with respect for the other person, and that means, among other things, trying not to judge people or to question their *middos*.

In general, we have to think long and hard before questioning the *middos* and values of people we're close to. It's natural to judge others, especially when it's difficult to live with them, but it may be better to look away from all those things that don't directly pertain to us. Some things affect us more, while others don't affect us at all. Wherever possible, we should accept our spouses for who they are instead of judging their *middos* and values. For the most part — regardless of whether the issue is emotional or spiritual struggles — it's not our place to judge

or want the person to change. What we should be doing is trying our best to live with them peacefully, respecting them, and doing whatever we can to ensure that our relationship and our home is as healthy as can be.

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You mention a man's need to be respected and note that you have "studied the science" of it. While it can be helpful to understand the "science," respecting a husband is an obligation. It's a wife's obligation to honor and respect her husband simply because he's her husband, whether or not he has a need for it. Furthermore, a man's need for respect is not a weakness. A woman's obligation to be respectful applies no matter how many years she is into their marriage; this has nothing to do with building his self-confidence to the point where he no longer needs her respect. Indeed, if a wife treats her husband with what she perceives as respect only because she sees him as needy, the husband may not experience her treatment as respectful at all.

Now, a husband should try to deserve respect from his wife, just as parents should behave in a way that doesn't make it hard for their children to respect them. The more a person respects himself, the easier it will be for others to give you respect. Nonetheless, a wife should never justify her failure to show respect with the excuse that her husband has yet to earn it.

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One more point, regarding the medication your husband is taking to help him regulate his emotions.

Personality and mood disorders and emotional dysregulation and instability are a very large topic, and such issues affect every aspect of a relationship. If medication was prescribed, it should be taken. That said, I've worked with many people who were diagnosed with personality disorders and have seen clearly how treating such people with an extra measure of respect and trying to understand how highly-sensitive such people are can help a lot of these emotional issues.

If you can give someone the impression that you genuinely respect and need them (not just because you're surrendering or giving up), this alone can stabilize many emotional irregularities. I have seen many situations where the dynamics changed completely when the healthier partner was able to provide the extra sensitivity, as hard as this is, while being firm and creating healthy boundaries. Often, this can achieve more than medication. This is true whether it's the husband or the wife who is struggling. It's not easy, and sometimes, you may need help implementing it.

If you surrender correctly for the right reasons, without waiting for the magic to happen, while continuing to be respectful and understanding when and how to assert yourself, even difficult situations can be improved. And if doing all that at once is too hard for you on your own, especially in a tough situation like yours, please reach out to someone who can help you. But please do also remember what you're looking to accomplish, and don't get sidetracked by pursuing unrealistic or unreasonable goals.

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

TORAH LESSONS
FOR THE HOME

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Thank You & Tizku Lmitzvos!