RABBI
SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the home

PARSHAS TOLDOS

WORK WITH WHAT YOU HAVE

Parshas Toldos begins by with "V'*eileh toldos Yitzchak ben Avraham* – and these are the children of Yitzchak the son of Avraham." The Torei Zahav on this *passuk* discusses an important lesson in interpersonal relationships.

The Gemara quotes Rav Zeira who said "*Miyamai lo hikpadeti besoch baisi* – I have never been angry in my house." The Baal Shem Tov points out that it is sometimes important to get angry, to defend Hashem's honor, or to teach students or children right from wrong, as delineated elsewhere in the gemara (masechta Shabbos 105b).

He explains: Certainly, there are times when a person needs to show someone that they're upset in order to teach them. But, as explained by the Rishonim, the anger has to be external only. *Kaas haponim v'lo kaas halev* - On their face, but not in their heart. One's heart must be calm and happy. That's what this *chazal* teaches us: "I was never angry *inside* my house"; in my heart.

The passuk in Koheles 7:3 says, "*Tov kaas misechok, ki beroa panim yaitiv lev* - Anger is better than laughter, because with an angry face the heart will be satisfied." The Torei Zahav explains: When is *kaas* good? When it's *mi*sechok – from happiness. *Beroa panim*, the anger is on the face, but *yaitiv lev*, the person's heart is serene and happy. In such a case, it's okay to express anger.

This connects back to the opening *passuk* of our *parshah*, "Yitzchak ben Avraham". Yitzchak represents *gevurah* – strength and zealousness. The power of that lies in *ben Avraham*. Avraham represents kindness and mercy. When the heart is filled with kindness, you can express anger on the outside.

This teaches us a beautiful lesson for *shalom bayis*, we should never be truly angry at heart. As much as you feel it's important to express your dissatisfaction, it's good as long as you're not really angry, or harboring resentment and a lack of understanding toward what someone else may have been thinking.

But there's another important lesson here. So often people tell me, "This issue bothers me very much but I don't say anything about it." Not saying something and being upset inside is a lot worse than showing that you're angry when you're really not. Even when you don't say anything about your true feelings, your spouse and children know when something really bothers you, as people tell me all the time: "I know it bothers her very much. She didn't say anything, but I know." Or, "My husband is really upset about this. He didn't tell me but I could feel it..." That's why keeping quiet is often not accomplishing all that much, other than getting you even more worked up not being able to express yourself.

No, it's not a good idea to express your feelings when you're really angry, but don't assume that when you don't say anything, the people around you are not aware of your true feelings. What matters more is trying to calm down, understanding the other party - possibly getting help with that - and communicating your feelings in a healthy way.

Question:

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

How can I encourage my husband and older sons to add more meaning to our Shabbos seudah? My husband used to bring a *sefer* to the table, look up a *devar Torah*, and read and translate as he was going along. To me, this felt like being served raw potato kugel! It was incomplete. There was no effort put in before, and since it wasn't given over smoothly, I couldn't follow along. My husband and sons are *bnei Torah* and learn many hours a day. I felt that someone like him should be more on top of the *divrei Torah* and told him so. I meant to encourage him, but he felt criticized and all *divrei Torah* stopped. This happened more than a year ago and I never brought it up again.

My family makes fun of me for being "spiritual". I appreciate more meaningful conversation at the table, a stimulating *vort* with a lesson, etc. Maybe they don't have this need. Still, is there any way I can encourage them, without being critical, to prepare something before the *seudah*, the same way that I prepare the food beforehand?

There's another thing. By my father, we didn't speak "*divrei chol*" on Shabbos. Conversation wasn't heavy but these topics were avoided. It bothers me that at our Shabbos table we discuss other people's finances, business, politics and the like. It might as well be a Thanksgiving dinner. To my husband's credit, all of the *zemiros* are sung, but I would really love to have a more *ruchniyusdige* Shabbos! At present, I gave up and for the sake of peace I keep my mouth closed. But it really bothers me. Is there anything that I can do?

Answer:

Before I begin, I'd like to clarify that I really feel that the Shabbos Seudah is a special opportunity of Chinuch and so much of a child's upbringing in a Torah home can be accomplished then. This essay is not about the wonderful opportunities a Shabbos *seudah* offers, or about the best way to run one. But I did want to mention that often when people ask me about how to be *mechanech* different things (especially when they're told NOT to say it too directly or critically, or openly), my answer is that the Shabbos Seudah is the opportunity to relay so much of what you want to instill in your children, the feelings, the education, the ideals and more. But this wasn't the question, and therefore let's try to address what the question was.

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There's a popular book, "Men are from Mars, Women are From Venus." The people who wrote the book don't know Mars from Venus, but it's meant to express how different men and women are. The actual differences are not as significant, as much as it's important to understand that they definitely

have different places in shul. They have different roles. Their places in culture, life and community are different. Even if the physiology is similar, and much of their personalities are similar, they still relate to different things. For example, the man may spend much of his time in front of a gemara, and the woman in front of a stove.

Let's assume men should be preoccupied with Torah learning and Yiddishkeit, bringing in *parnasah* and supporting their family. Let's further assume that women should be preoccupied with running a home, raising children, and female aspects of serving Hashem.

But people often fall into the trap of looking at the other person and saying, "that's not how it should be done. That's not what I wanted." How often does a man evaluate the level of his wife's *tznius*, and how she should be putting in more effort to please her husband. He can't understand why she doesn't realize what her role as a wife and mother should be. Essentially, he may be right.

And the opposite. How often does a woman have an opinion on her husband's *kevias itim,* getting up to *daven*, leading a Shabbos *seudah*? She may also be right.

Very often this comes from the fact that one does not have the challenges of the other. When it's not your obligation and doesn't pertain to you, it's easy to expect more. The solution is not just to accept the sad reality that you can't be your spouse's *mashgiach*, or surrendering and accepting your fate. It's about acknowledging and accepting that you can't necessarily understand or relate to their challenge.

To be clear, people *do* have to fulfill their obligations. But the reason it bothers us so much and we can't understand their difficulty in fulfilling it, is *because we don't have that challenge*. We each have to focus inward and see what we can do, men with their obligations and women with theirs.

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When the Torah talks about marriage for the first time, the passuk says, *"Al kein yaazov ish es aviv v'es imo vedavak beishto* – and so a person should forsake his father and mother and cleave to his wife." When one wants to connect to a spouse, they have to "leave go". Practically though, this is probably not entirely possible. In last week's parsha, Rashi comments that as long as a man's mother is still alive, some of his connection will be to her as opposed to his wife.

After marriage, many people find themselves in situations that are different than they expected, or different from the way they grew up, and their difficult feelings are certainly valid. Often, a person is brought up with certain values or comes to appreciate certain things, and when they get married, their spouse doesn't have or appreciate it.

A chassan teacher once told me that this problem often comes up after Pesach. People can observe differences in Shabbos meals or *minhagim* throughout the year. A *bachur* may *daven* in a different shul *sometimes*, and he may be exposed to different practices during his time overseas in Yeshiva. But Pesach is usually spent only at home and so the expectations of the "right way to do it" and the emphasis on the differences, along with the disappointments are greater. On a personal note, when I came to my father-in-law for the first Pesach, I was shocked that he didn't wear a *kittel* to the seder!

On a similar note, many years ago, I was privy to two conversations in the same week. In one, a man from a Hungarian background was describing how hard it is to go to his father-in-law for the seder, as he was a Vizhnitzer *chassid* and the *sedarim* were so sedate and quiet. A few days later, I heard a Vizhnitzer *chassid* complain about how his Karliner father-in-law hollered at the *seder* and how he missed the exalted calm of Vizhnitz. It's about what you're used to and being able to adapt.

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It's not only about the Shabbos *seuda* and the *seder*. In every marriage, there will be things that your parents did nicer and better than your spouse's parents. But if you look for it, you might very well find things that your spouse's parents do better than your parents. Choose what you will focus on. Focus on what your spouse *can* offer you. It's good to want to improve things, but don't get stuck on your preferences. Don't settle for less, but improve in a healthy way.

There's the joke about a *bachur* who needs a *shidduch* and says, "Bubby married Zaidy. Totty

married Mommy. When it comes to me, I have to go find some strange girl?"

Each marriage is a new entity. Your home is what you're used to, but it also started out as two people becoming one.

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Sometimes, though, people aren't disappointed about what they grew up with. It may be things they learnt about over the years that they want in their lives that they aren't getting. But it may be important to look away from that which you want and see that which you have. If, as in our letter, you only focus on missing the spirituality from the Shabbos *seudah*, you'll be disappointed every week. Try to see what your Shabbos *seudah* is. It's a time of bonding, spending time together and enjoying each other's company. It may not be what you *wanted* to get out of it, but it'll be what *you will* get out of it. Imagine how much more pleasant it will be.

In our other example of the different *sedarim*, one person may be used to a *seder* where personal miracles are discussed. The other person may be used to discussing the miracles of *yetzias Mitzrayim*. Imagine the disappointment of one by the *seder* of the other. Yet, if each will focus on what they *can* get out of the other type of *seder*, they will gain so much more. It's not easy, but it's very important.

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There's another point. While our goal isn't to change anyone, the best way to help someone change is not by showing disappointment, making them change, "encouraging" in a condescending or critical way, or expressing unhappiness. These are usually counterproductive. Being accepting and genuinely appreciative brings about change much faster.

People are afraid to do this. They think if the other person will think they're okay with it, they'll never feel the need to change. That's not true. Anyone married to you knows exactly what you want, especially if you already said it once in the past. Being accepting makes it easier for them to accommodate you and want to give you what you want. Recently, a woman mentioned to my wife that she overheard that her husband said he goes somewhere just because he knows she can't stand it. The longer and more vociferously she can't stand it, the longer he will go! When we "can't stand it," our spouses can subconsciously become defensive and feel the need to remain right. When we become more accepting, it's easier for them to please us.

And when your spouse does something that you appreciate, even if it's very small – a short *devar* Torah, lay it on thick. Don't be afraid that he'll think he did enough. He'll want to continue pleasing you.

Your relationship and atmosphere at home are usually way more important than that which feels "so important" to you. And it's especially a shame when you're left with neither... when you could've had both!

Wishing you all the best,

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME
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