RABBI
SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the home

PARSHAS DEVORIM

A QUESTION OF WORDS

In this week's *parshah* the *possuk* relates, *"Re'eh nasati beyadcha es Sichon melech Cheshbon,"* where Hashem relates how Bnei Yisroel captured and conquered Sichon. The Rebbe of Stretin, Reb Yehuda Hersh *zt"l* explains the *possuk* as teaching a powerful lesson. "Sichon" can mean the power of speech, as in *"sichah."* The difference between a person and an animal is the ability to speak, an incredible power granted us by Hashem. With this power, however, comes a great responsibility to make a *cheshbon* on how we use it. The *possuk* in *Amos* (4:13) tells us, *"Maggid l'adam mah sicho."* After 120 years, your conversations will be repeated back to you. The Gemara in Chagigah explains that this applies *"afilu sichah kallah bein ish l'ishto"* – even to simple conversations between a husband and wife.

So much – and maybe most – of a relationship and *shalom bayis* depends on what (and how) you do or don't say. We're taught to be nice and understanding, but all too often, the words we use to accompany what we do matter more than the deeds themselves. The opposite is also true when the lasting impact of failing to do something you should have done depend more on what you have to say about it – be it an explanation or an apology – than the actual omission.

Anyone following my classes or essays may have noticed that of the many *shalom bayis* questions I address refer to what, when and how to say something, rather than what to do. The question may be about what you should "do" about going on vacation, buying a house, or making a *simchah*, but the result will depend more on how you communicate the answer than on the actual decision or technical move itself. That's why making a *cheshbon* for our speech is such a great *segulah* for *shalom bayis.*

The specific words used in this *possuk, "Re'eh nasati,"* are reminiscent of another *possuk, "Re'eah nasati lifneichem es hachaim v'es hatov..."* the famous *possuk* that talks about *bechirah*, about our power of choice in this world, which essentially is a choice between life and death. Another well-known *passuk* tells us something similar, *"Hachaim vehamaves beyad halashon."* Everything – good and bad, life and death – depends on speech. The *possuk* here teaches that there has to be a plan and purpose for every word we say. Do it right, use it right, and you'll see how much good will come out of it.

**We'd like to thank our sponsor R' Shloime Eckstein and family
for dedicating this week's essay
in honor of the birth & Bris of their son Yehuda Tzvi נ"י**

ויה"ר שיזכו הוריו לרוות ממנו רב נחת דקדושה לאורך ימים ושנים טובות

This week I want to address a few shorter questions that came in and instead of designating an essay to each one, I'll try to address each of them more briefly than I usually do, in order to cover them all.

Question:

I bought my wife something to wear, and for whatever reason she's not wearing it. Maybe she doesn't like it. Am I allowed to ask her to wear it? Can I tell her that it will make me feel good if she puts it on?

Answer:

You can definitely try to tell your wife that you would appreciate it, assuming she doesn't realize it of her own accord. As I often say, if you haven't tried something simple and straightforward, go ahead and do so instead of assuming that the simple approach won't work.

If your wife *does* know that you'd like her to wear the item, however, whether or not you've mentioned it, that's a different story and instead of repeating the same failed methods, it's a good idea to take a fresh look at the problem.

Can you think of a reason why she wouldn't want to wear it? Maybe she simply doesn't like it – and in that case, do you really want her to wear something she doesn't like, even if you bought it for her? In general, everyone (and especially women) should be permitted to wear whatever they want and feel comfortable in (assuming there are no *tznius* or other issues involved).

All the same, a woman should definitely take her husband's wishes into account, within normal bounds, and if she knows her husband would like her to wear a specific item, or stop wearing something he doesn't appreciate, she should certainly try to accommodate him. This is basic to the concept of a woman seeking to find favor in the eyes of her husband, even if she is not technically obligated to do so – and of course making one's spouse happy is something to aspire to. How sad when people are resistant to doing even something small to please their spouse simply because "I don't have to," or "I can do what I want," especially when this contradicts the fundamental principle of being an *ishah kesheirah*.

Please note that this is no contradiction to what I mentioned above, regarding a husband not being overly demanding of his wife and respecting her preferences. Of course, if either of you feel that this is stemming from or turning into a control issue, it should definitely be addressed (with proper guidance, and communicated correctly).

Let me just clarify to the questioner who seems to be hurt that if a husband wants to buy something for his wife, the smart thing to do is to buy something that he knows she will like. If you're not sure what that is, then maybe offer to let her buy something herself, unless she's likely to be upset that you're not being sufficiently involved. It's a matter of figuring out how to balance what will be taken best, appreciated most, and leave you both as happy as possible with the least resentment. In general, life and relationships are all about balance, flexibility, attitude, and showing understanding toward others. When people are willing to show consideration and learn from experience, getting it right doesn't have to be so much of a challenge iyH. Learning from the past and communicating gently are always a big help in achieving this.

Question:

Shouldn't my wife do what I want if she really loves me?

Answer:

That's such a basic question, and one that many people – not just husbands and wives – are bothered by. It's also a question that tends to answer itself as soon as we turn it around and apply it to ourselves instead of the other person. Sure, if the other person doesn't have any feelings, desires, or thoughts of their own, then there's no issue and we can easily expect them to conform to our wishes. But real people have real desires, opinions, feelings, interests, and cares of their own, and that's why their choices will not always be exactly what you want, even if they really do love you. When the Torah says, "*Ve'ahavta lerayacha komocha*," it seems to imply that loving someone else is not only not a contradiction but actually only a comparison to the love one has for himself. This is similar to what Chazal instruct regarding loving one's wife "*ohavoi kegufoi*," like your own self. So why would you expect your wife (or anyone else) to do exactly what *you* want?

Turn the table to see how simple this idea is. Do you do everything your wife wants? Don't you care for her? Two people are allowed to want what they want and like what they like, *while making space to care about the other person as well*. And if you claim that you really do everything exactly the way your wife wants, unless this is simply an exaggeration, it could be a sign of an unhealthy and codependent relationship.

People often don't realize how hypocritical they can be about this. It's important to be truthful and not use this complaint as a means of manipulation ("If you really loved me, you would do it...")especially when you do understand the idea and know that it's not a contradiction and all you're trying to do is make someone feel guilty.

That said, there are other simpler possibilities, similar to what I answered to the first question. Sometimes, the reason your wife isn't doing what you want is because you never told her that you wanted it. If that's the case, make sure to tell her. Don't expect your wife to be a mind reader. You're allowed to express your wishes, of course in a nice manner, as long as you avoid imposing on anyone or making it sound like you expect compliance as a given. You won't always get what you want, but you're certainly allowed to communicate your wishes, and when done right there's a chance that the other person will agree. And making sure you also take your wife's desires seriously might just make it easier for her to do the same!

Question:

You mentioned in a recent class about a husband trying to ease the tension he experiences at home. I'm wondering why you didn't consider that maybe he's simply coming home

too late? My husband comes and goes when he wants, and chooses to take time off whenever he feels the need. He tells me he needs to unwind, and can go to daven when he pleases, or a recent example was that he went to be *menachem avel* when it was really time to help out at home.

Answer:

In a nutshell, this sounds like a situation of a wife who feels that her husband is taking time to unwind when she needs him, and a husband who's likely stressed and feels that he needs time to unwind. I can imagine how stressful this can be for both of you, and it's worth discussing the two sides of the coin before suggesting anything.

I've noticed how sometimes, women feel that when a husband comes home from a day at work (or even *kollel* for that matter), he's returning from "his" time and now it's "her" time, when he's expected to help out. If instead he takes even more of "his" time for himself, they see him as inconsiderate and selfish.

This is an issue which really needs reframing, because it's not accurate to view a husband's time at work as "his own," any more than it's accurate to view a wife's time at home with the children and chores as "her own." Both have been busy all day, investing time and energy into making a living and supporting their families, and both are justified in feeling that they need time to unwind at the end of the day.

Comparing and debating about who worked harder is of course silly and pointless. It's important for a wife to realize how her husband feels at the end of his day; it's just as important for a husband to realize how exhausted his wife feels at the end of a day "just spent at home."

It's also true that running the home isn't necessarily all "her" duties, and a husband is not simply "helping" his wife raise "her" family. A father's help with the kids and home is not simply volunteer work to contribute when and as much as he pleases, or if he is interested in doing so. While the basic setup of a Yiddishe home is that there are responsibilities that are more for the wife than the father, but all within reason and flexibility.

Now, were the question to be from a husband who's wondering why his wife is resentful about this, I'd have a lot to say, starting with how to be more understanding and considerate. But being that the wife asked the question, let's give some suggestions to straighten this out from her end.

Once you understand a little more about your husband's feelings and perspective, you'll be better equipped to address your own feelings too. Knowing how to communicate them effectively will make a great deal of difference. So start by acknowledging your husband's needs and telling him how much you appreciate everything that he does throughout the day. Don't fall into the trap of thinking that downplaying his schedule and responsibilities will make him be more understanding of how hard you supposedly work in comparison. Once that's achieved, you can tell him how you feel by the time six o'clock comes around. Don't blame him for how you feel, nor for how the children behaved (or didn't!) but do stress how much you look forward to him coming home and how much you appreciate the help he offers – without making the mistake of telling him how he is obligated to help, or how *"everyone does this and so much more..."*. Make it clear that you don't expect him to jump in right away and help out for the next three hours as if he just returned from a day spent with his feet up. The aim is to discuss both of your needs and expectations, in order to avoid resentment, disappointment, and unfulfilled expectations.

Communication is key here, as well as a willingness to be flexible. You can discuss whether your husband will help first for a short while, or first unwind. Inviting him to offer his ideas is usually helpful in resolving issues. Without communication, you have a bigger and more basic problem of not understanding each other or being able to work out differences of opinion. Generally, once things are clear and your husband feels understood and secure in the knowledge that you're fine with giving him the time to unwind, he'll be more available than you imagine, once he realizes he no longer needs to seek an escape at his first opportunity. I understand this may not work it out on your terms or exactly how you would have liked, but chances are you'll get further this way, and have a husband who's happy to do what he can to accommodate you instead of one who's resentful and feeling forced to be there for his "grouchy, ungrateful" wife.

Question:

Sometimes I find that I don't have what to talk about with my spouse. With my sisters, I can talk about clothing and weddings and recipes, but with my husband, there's so little we can discuss. We can travel for an hour or two and have so little to talk about, and such settings and trips become uncomfortable. Often, I'd rather not discuss the children, which can become tricky, but what *should* we talk about?

Answer:

This is a good question, and depending on a person's nature, some people will relate to this very much. Women may find it easier to schmooze with women, and men may find it easier to schmooze with men. That's fine, as long as you know what to do about it. But it's important to remember that in any relationship, especially marriage, communication is vital. Once you appreciate that, you'll be on the lookout for ways to achieve it. If you think it's optional and don't bother to seek out ways to make it happen, over time you'll probably become resentful at the lack of communication without being motivated to do anything about it.

Listening to reading something in order to have what to talk about is a worthwhile investment of your time. I know it's easier and more pleasant when conversation flows naturally and spontaneously, but sometimes it takes time to build up that kind of connection. And once you search for topics to talk about, you might just find that your husband feels so good about being listened to and appreciated for what he shares that the conversation will flow much better than you imagined was possible.

Chochmas nashim bansah baysah. Use your wisdom to work on this. Figure out which topics interest him. Take note of what does or doesn't work and build on that. Sometimes, discussing the children isn't such a bad idea as you thought B'ezras Hashem you will find ways to address issues in a pleasant manner that brings about connection and builds good feelings.

Question:

My wife was upset at me. She sent me a message with my son at 1:30 AM, "When are you coming upstairs?" How do I respond to him?

Answer:

This is a typical example of spouses unintentionally using children as a go-between in uncomfortable situations. It's a problem when two people don't communicate. It's an even bigger problem to use a child to circumvent that problem.

Don't make the terrible mistake of telling your child: "Tell Mommy that if she wants to know she should come ask me herself." Now your child is stuck in the middle and doesn't know how to respond. That's a terrible thing. Even just using him as your messenger boyis often a mistake. And I hope it goes without saying that you should never shoot the messenger. It's not his fault. He shouldn't have to figure out what to do in such a situation.

Your child may very well realize that there's something going on. Comfort him. Say: "Thanks for letting me know. I'll go tell Mommy." Make sure he realizes that the two of you are still on speaking terms – even if you aren't, (which is a problem of its own), because it's important to have your child feel as safe as possible.

For the sake of the children, at least in their presence, don't rock the boat. Don't let them see this kind of friction. This is true even with an ex-spouse, and it's often in such cases that people make this mistake.

Your question was about how to respond to your son, but you seem to have a larger issue here than what to tell him. You may have a general communication or relationship problem that needs to be addressed. Don't just focus on not having it affect your children, especially if it's affecting them already.

Often people push issues under the rug until they can no longer do so, and even then they only deal with the parts that need to be addressed right away, as in this instance, answering the child's message. Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach *zt"l* once asked a *talmid* to speak to a certain person about his *shalom bayis*. It was erev Yom Kippur and the *talmid* figured he'd take care of it after Yom Tov, but Rav Shlomo Zalman told him to take care of it *immediately*. *Shalom bayis* issues should never be deferred. The effect that even one day's lack of *shalom* bayis can have on children is so great that it must always be dealt with at the earliest opportunity. "If you do this before *Kol Nidrei*, I promise you that you and your family will be *zakai badin*."

Always try to rectify a challenging situation as soon as you can, and may Hashem help us be Zoche to the rebuilding of His home, the Beis Hamikdash as soon as possible too!!

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

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