RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

Parshas Mishpatim

The Only Right Way

This week the parshah starts off with a lesson on the right way to live. *Eileh mishpatim* – these are the laws, *asher tasim lifneihem* – that you should place before the Jews. Rashi explains that when it comes to a question of law, it must always be brought before a Jewish court even if a secular court would issue the same ruling.

The *sefer* Siach Sarfei Kodesh brings a *vort* from the Chiddushei Harim. He says that one should not go to secular courts, because going to Din Torah is a *mitzvah* in and of itself. Therefore, even if a secular judge will end up giving an identical verdict to *l'havdil* the Bais Din, he will have forfeited the *mitzvah* of bringing his dispute in front of a Din Torah.

He brings the words of the Rabbeinu Tam that the "thinkers" believe that only if they can reconcile the laws and ideas of the Torah with their intellect, they will know that it is the truth. But we frum Yidden say just the opposite. When a person's intellect is in line with Torah thought, that's when he can be sure that he has a "*sechel hayashar*". Even if you glean insight about your relationship from a secular source, which is not contradictory to Torah, you already passed up an opportunity of attaining the same wisdom from a Torah source.

A Jewish home needs to be built around the principles of Torah, regardless of how they're looked upon in the rest of the world. For example, the notion that a wife should respect her husband and honor him, is the antithesis of what modern intellectuals believe. And yet we don't care. Even when secular professionals agree that a respectful wife is the cornerstone of a happy and healthy home, we still don't care.

A person might sometimes think that he is smarter than the Torah, that he has better ideas of how to make his life more pleasant and enjoyable. The fact is that if the Torah allows for something, then it is sure to bring you more pleasure; but if it doesn't, then there's no way that this is good for you.

It's interesting how over the years so many professionals finally realized this as well. Eventually it becomes obvious even to someone who initially didn't want to acknowledge it from Torah alone. Hashem designed the world in a way that so often af-

ter a while you're left with no choice but to see how nothing else will give everlasting benefit or pleasure other than the Torah which is *der-acheha darkei noam v'chol nesivoseha shalom.* It's a shame when people need to use the trial and error methods before realizing that they could've just built their home on Torah principles and be happiest all along.

Following Torah guidelines should be no different whether one is in public or in private. Someone once joked that if we would have eaten the *k'zayis marror* in *bais hamedrash* and done the *dalet minim* at home, we would've each had the most impressive looking horseradish root to chomp on, while our *esrogim* would've resembled a small lemon. People sometimes think that when they're at home, behind closed doors, they don't have to "*mehader*" in their *avodas Hashem* so much. But even when one is in the privacy of his home, he should not forget to do things the Torah way.

Without respect for the Torah, it is impossible to succeed.

Question:

Dear Rabbi Gruen

Thank you very much for your wonderfully insightful and practical *shiurim* every week. There is very little guidance available for marriage that is Torah true and focuses on obligations, rather than rights. That is why I find your *shiurim* so refreshing.

My husband is a wonderful *avreich*, a serious man who is considered one of the top in his Yeshiva. When he is around friends, he is confident, well-spoken and respected.

I happen to be a very intellectual person, and I find that this makes my husband feel very self-conscious. I am a reader and learner, and can quote a variety of sources on many topics. I sometimes have questions on his *divrei Torah* that stump him.

When we talk about it, he says that he is thrilled that my interests lie in these topics and that he does not want me to stop sharing them. He also knows how much I respect his Torah and dedication to learning. Even as I try to say things gently and matter-of-factly, and leave an "opening" for him, I find that my husband feels intimidated. I try not to disagree with him or correct him, and I never let this happen in public.

My question is twofold: First, my thoughts are who I am. Whenever we will be discussing something, my intellect is bound to come up. Do I need to shut it down? Should I refrain from sharing? If not, how should I go about it? Second, my husband's strengths lie in the social and intuitive realm. Since my husband doesn't feel "superior" with his intellect, can you give me some specific ideas on how to "drug him up" with honor in other areas of his life, so that he can feel respected?

Thanks in advance, for making yourself available to help the klal, may Hashem repay you for all your time and effort.

Answer:

Thanks for your letter, I find it very impressive that you are astute enough to notice such a subtle imbalance in your relationship, and that you are eager to correct the situation.

You mention that your husband has told you that he appreciates your intellect and doesn't mind your knowledge, but yet he seems put out when you showcase it. It is possible that it isn't your intelligence that he has an issue with; but the way you bring it to light. It's important to differentiate what it is that he does mind, and what it is that he doesn't, and actually appreciates.

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You might wonder why it is your responsibility to make sure your husband doesn't feel challenged by your knowledge. Chazal teach us (Shabbos 3b) that when you ask a question of someone you ought to respect, you should not intentionally ask them on a topic that they don't specialize in, lest they feel inadequate by their inability to answer. It's simply a matter of respect.

Learning Torah and Halacha is a man's domain, much like keeping house and caring for the children is a woman's. Of course, it is not exclusive to either of them and a couple's areas of expertise might overlap. But it is still very important to remain cognizant of the fact that you are in your spouse's territory. When you engage your husband in an intellectual discourse, that is fine. However, when you show your husband - albeit unintentionally - that you are *better* than him or stronger than him *in an area that is meant to be his,* it can be a bit disrespectful. The same rule applies when a man is a better cook than his wife, for example. If he uses his kitchen acumen to help her out, then that's wonderful. But if he makes her feel inadequate or incapable in her own kitchen, that can be seen as disrespectful.

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Usually, people like to be around someone who is intelligent. It only becomes uncomfortable or undesirable when they shove their brilliance into others' faces and make them feel inferior. It's not always easy to tone down on our smartness, but it is often very necessary. You sound like you mean well by trying not to come on too strong and by leaving him an "opening", but is it possible that the way you do that can be seen as patronizing?

You mention looking for a way to "drug your husband up" with acknowledgement of his strengths so that he feels respected all around. If you don't mind my saying so, the way you said this did not feel very genuine. Your husband deserves sincere respect and recognition constantly. It's not about filling up the coffers for three days so that for the rest of the week you can continue merrily disrespecting him or talking down to him. You need to genuinely appreciate his strengths, and demonstrate it constantly. When you do that, he won't feel intimidated by your strengths, no matter how much smarter you are.

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Women are praised for their wisdom. *Chochmas nashim bansah beisah*. Often, it is not how the woman showcases her wisdom that is so praiseworthy; rather, it is the things

she does *not* say that make her brilliance really shine.

A big businessman once gave his son advice for life. He said, "Success in business is built on honesty and wisdom. Honesty means that when you promise something to someone, you must deliver – no matter what. Wisdom is not promising anything."

Many times, staying silent or refraining from showing off, is the smartest thing a person can do. Chazal teach us an interesting thing about wisdom, and that is סייג לחכמה שתיקה. Often wisdom is about what you don't share. Maybe that's a big part of חכמת נשים בנתה ביתה, the wisdom of the woman builds her home. Not by sharing it necessarily, rather by knowing when it can be out of place and being "smart enough" to withhold sharing it.

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I'll add another small insight in this regard, and that is that the literal meaning of סייג לחכמה שתיקה is that silence is "the fence" to wisdom. It seems that silence is like a precautionary to the actual wisdom rather than wisdom itself. Maybe this alludes to the fact that you first need to be silent and only then does true wisdom come forth.

When you don't blurt out a piece of wisdom, in the form of a question, insight, advice or idea, rather you first take the minute to think about how to present it in a way that the listener feels smart and appreciated and not challenged by it, that's even "smarter" than remaining smarter.

Chazal teach us how to bring attention to a parent about something they are transgressing in a respectful way, such as: "Doesn't it say such and such?", or "Aren't we taught such and such?", instead of just remaining quiet, because if you're smart enough you can express your wisdom in a way that is not challenging, but in a way that makes someone else seem even smarter.

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We see this with children often. A smart teacher is the one who not only makes a child feel smart, rather someone who can actually bring forth and develop the wisdom of the child.

This is not to imply that your husband is like a child, or that you should be looking to educate him. After all you mention that he's a fine Avreich and a Ben Torah so I assume he has a lot to offer. I am merely suggesting that your "wisdom" doesn't need to be offered in a way that is even the slightest challenging, rather in a way that leaves you all feeling great, and him getting the credit for much of the conversation. I believe you are smart enough for that too.

Talk about topics your husband is knowledgeable about, or ask him about topics he feels good sharing. Use your intelectual inclination to appreciate the ideas he's good at sharing. It can be tough for an intellectual person to be as interested in hearing as in sharing, but as a wife, that might be the "smartest" move for a "smart" woman.

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

PLEASE FEEL FREE TO SEND ANY QUESTIONS, ON THIS TOPIC OR ANY TOPIC TO RABBIGRUEN@LEHAIR.ORG