RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME

PARSHAS VAYEIRA

BE HAPPY AND LET OTHERS BE HAPPY

The *parshah* begins with the well-known story of the Malachim who visited Avraham Avinu, yet the *passuk* first tells us: "*Vayeira eilav Hashem b'elonei Mamrei* – And Hashem appeared to Avraham in the plains of Mamrei." The Chasam Sofer questions the connection between Hashem's appearance to Avraham and the *mitzvah* of *hachnasas orchim* he was about to fulfill and explains the order of events.

As we know, Hashem's presence only rests on us when we are in a state of *simchah*. Prior to the arrival of the Malachim, Avraham was in pain from his *bris milah*, and because of the intense heat, no guests arrived for him to welcome, which removed another source of *simchah*. Therefore, when Hashem wanted to appear to Avraham, He first brought him into a state of joy by sending the three angels to pass by. The opportunity to perform the *mitzvah* of *hachnasas orchim* caused Avraham such happiness that Hashem was able to appear to him.

We all want Hashem's presence to rest in our homes. *Ish v'ishah zachu, Shechinah sheruya beineihem*. But the home has to be a happy one for that to occur. We often assume that where there is *shalom bayis*, the home will be happy. Indeed, it's often true that when a relationship isn't doing so well, it affects the atmosphere at home. But sometimes it's the other way around. A person's mood and attitude can affect the whole household and impact the *shalom bayis* too. While we have a tendency to feel entitled to our own moods ("I'm allowed to be in a bad mood – leave me alone, it has nothing to do with you") it's important to be aware of the effect this has on those around us. No, you don't *have* to smile all the time; but you should know how powerful your smile can be. You can easily influence everything around you for the better with a smile and a positive frame of mind, and you can bring the *Shechinah* into your home.

People often resist acknowledging this, even when it's quite obvious that if someone's grumpy or at the end of his rope, everyone in the near vicinity is affected. Husbands often tell me that they come home full of trepidation at the end of the day, hoping their wife will be in a good mood – because the whole evening depends on it. Some have learned the trick of first "testing the waters" to determine if the wife is in a good mood after a pleasant time chatting with a friend, or whether she's been exceptionally busy and is now tense and strained, when things may not go well as a result.

There's a famous expression that a person's face is a *reshus harabbim*, meaning that we shouldn't take the attitude of "it's my face and I can grimace as much as I like." Rather, we should be aware of and take responsibility for the impact our moods and expressions have on others.

Both bringing Hashem into our homes and creating a happy and peaceful atmosphere for everyone living there depend largely on the happiness we create within ourselves. We can choose to blame others for our feelings, or we can work on becoming happier, less stressed, and less overwhelmed, simply by doing things we know will have a positive impact on ourselves and others. It's true that it's easier said than done, yet it's definitely worth the investment.

THIS WEEK'S ESSAY IS DEDICATED BY
THE SCHLESINGER FAMILY
MAY IT BE A ZCHUS FOR THE FAMILY AND KLAL YISROEL!

QUESTION

DEAR RABBI GRUEN

Firstly, thank you very much for your classes. I live in Eretz Yisroel and I really gain a lot from them – the clarity in *hashkafah* as well as the practical advice. Thank you.

I'm married a little more than a year and we have a baby, B"H. I was wondering how I can develop trust in our relationship. My husband is a very easy-going person. Nothing seems to bother him (at least, that's what he says) and he doesn't make a big deal about anything. But I know that some things must bother him, simply because he's human. He only shares things with me if and when I notice something specific that's wrong and ask him about it. I wish he would just share things with me openly. Is there a way to develop that? Should I just wait?

Thank you so much.

ANSWER

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN RESPONDS

When I was younger, I didn't like being told that I'm too young to understand, or that when I get older things will seem different, so please forgive me if this is not what you wanted to hear. (Then again, when it's addressed to the general public and not to a specific person, it's easier to accept.)

By the time someone has been married for three months, he thinks he's an expert in everything about marriage, especially compared to those "newbies" who have only been married for a few weeks. I remember the feeling. Then, by the time you've been married for a year, you're convinced that you know it all; you're even ready to share all your insightful experience with the rooky who feels comfortable learning from you. Looking back a few years down the line, you realize that things really have changed since that first year of marriage. Sometimes, when people mention that they've only been married for a short period of time, they don't realize that that's half the answer. A good relationship takes time to develop and we need to have the patience to let things evolve.

This is not to imply that you should ignore a genuine concern and count on it taking care of itself. Don't leave problems or concerns unaddressed, as if they are left to linger, it can become harder to solve them, especially if they actually get worse over time. Just be aware that change will occur naturally if you have patience and that one year into marriage is still early days.

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Now to your question. In a recent article, I addressed the situation of a woman married to a very withdrawn husband. My suggestion was that one of the best ways for her to help him open up and become more forthcoming was to model that type of communication herself. She should share details about her day along with her feelings about events, aiming to build an emotional connection from her end. This would hopefully encourage him to follow suit.

In your case, your husband is not a complainer. Everything's always fine. Supper's always good. The

weather's always nice. The baby's always sweet. This really can bother the person on the other end and give the impression that there are things he's not sharing, especially as there have been occasions when he did admit that something upset him. It can sound wonderful to live with a person who has zero complaints, but when you feel that it's not genuine it's not always pleasant. As you write, after all, he's human.

But much as your husband *is* human, there really are people who don't complain because things genuinely bother them less. Often we fall into the trap of thinking that everyone sees the world as we do, but the truth is that there's a huge variety in the way people experience things. It really could be that your husband isn't hiding anything from you, and that the few times he's mentioned being upset about something really are the exceptions.

You mentioned that you married a positive and easy-going person. Part of being easy-going is being happy with the way things are. That doesn't mean things are going better for him than for others. Nor does it mean that there's something wrong with you if you're bothered by more things than others. Neither do you have to try not to be bothered just because he isn't. But you can allow him simply to be happier, which is actually something to be grateful for and to learn from.

I once gave a class called "The Victim and the Perpetrator" in which I discussed the common scenario in which one party complains a lot and the other party rarely complains. It can appear that the complainer is more of the victim because they have so much they're not happy with. (In fact, many therapists and counselors fall into the trap of assuming that the spouse who lists the most issues is the one who is being treated worse. I devoted an entire chapter to this in my recently published book in Yiddish, but then omitted most of it…) In reality, this is often not at all the case. People refrain from complaining for all sorts of reasons, and not necessarily because they have nothing to complain about. They may simply be more tolerant, easier to please, handling things better, or so resigned or despairing of the situation that they see no point in raising issues in the first place.

You may have heard the joke about the guy who was on his deathbed and everyone was marveling at his positive attitude even though he was about to die because he needed a blood transfusion and they didn't know his blood type. "B-positive, B-positive," he kept saying, until he finally passed away. It's a cute joke, but it is true that there are people who can be positive even on their deathbed. In the most stressful situations, they'll keep saying (even if only to themselves) "Be positive!" Don't misinterpret your husband's easy-going nature. Be thankful that you're dealing with someone who can be happy and positive even in difficult times.

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Something else to note is the importance of not using the fact that your husband is bothered less about things against him. For example, if a wife complains about the noise the neighbor makes and her husband claims it's not so bad, she shouldn't jump at him and complain that he must not love her or care about her because he's not *as bothered as she is* about the noise. Different people perceive things differently and as long as they're not belittling you for being "over-sensitive," there's no reason to assume that their different perspective has any bearing on their feelings toward you.

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That said, it really can be hard to understand that things that trouble you truly don't bother your spouse. Accepting that this is just the way he is will make things easier for both of you. But it's also important to be aware of the downsides of assuming problems must exist. While unrealistic expectations can be a real killer in relationships, it troubles me when *chassanim* tell me that they've heard classes from other people and now they feel prepared to deal with "all the difficulties marriage brings." Of course it's essential to realize that life isn't perfect, but going around waiting for the other shoe to drop is not helpful for any relationship. This reminds me of the story of a man who wanted to borrow his neighbor's lawn mower. On the way over, he thinks of all the reasons why the neighbor may not want to lend it to him. By the time he knocks on the door, he says, "I know you don't want to lend me your lawn mower! But I didn't do it on purpose…"

There are times when our anticipation of a problem actually invites that problem to occur, either because we're looking at life through a microscope, ready to pick up on the slightest hint of an issue, or because (like the lawn mower example) our anticipatory behavior triggers what we were expecting to happen. In your case, you're assuming

that your husband really is bothered by all kinds of things that he's not sharing with you – but maybe all those things (or at least most of them) just don't exist?

Unfortunately, people sometimes are taught that "being open about everything" is the solution and that "holding things in" or not "dealing with emotions" is inherently unhealthy. They find it simply impossible to believe that a person can genuinely be at peace with his life and his wife and may even berate such a person and accuse him of "sweeping issues under the carpet." No amount of picking up that carpet and showing them that "there's nothing there underneath" will help. Don't fall into that trap!

Instead of trying to guess what's wrong, you could choose to enjoy the fact that you're living with someone who isn't bothered by things that would upset other people, and appreciate not having to deal with sour moods and complaints.

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Another problem with insisting that "everything should be shared" is that it's not always wise to be so open. It can be very hurtful to be frank. There are times when it's important to vent and not let things brew inside; there are also times when it's better to let things pass in silence. Maybe that's what your husband does much of the time – and it doesn't necessarily mean that he's stewing inside or hiding something. He just thinks it's not worth making a big deal about.

It's so important to know if, when, and how to say things. Of course you shouldn't allow things to build up for months until you explode. You can and should say things, in a nice way, making sure not to blame or accuse the other person of intending to hurt you. But it's okay to share. And by the same token, if you know your spouse really is bothered by something and they're not sharing it, you can try to guide them through it. "I know it's not easy to talk about it, but maybe we can sit down later and work something out. It would mean a lot to me if we can discuss it."

I'll add another possibility that might be irking you. If there's an area where you slipped up, you may have a guilty conscience and feel certain that your husband is upset with you. But maybe, as we mentioned before, he decided to overlook it? If you want to apologize, go for it, but don't use your husband's silence against him to cover up your own bad feelings.

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I would like to mention one more point, one which I don't have reason to assume is relevant to the writer, but is nonetheless important to note. Sometimes, a relationship begins with both spouses being open with one another, but things stall when one spouse gets hurt at the way the other responds to the openness. It could be an insensitive comment: "How could you say something like that!" or something (not obviously hurtful but) which still rankles enough to make the spouse think twice before opening up again in the future. When someone shares his feelings with you, do your best to react in a way that will encourage them to share their feelings with you again.

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

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To contact Rabbi Gruen please call **718.841.6557**
or e-mail **rabbigruen@lehair.org**

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