Rabbi Shimon Gruen

Torah Lessons for the Home

{ Vaeschanan 5780 }

Accepting an Apology

Moshe as The Middleman

In this week's Parsha Moshe Rabbeinu tells us that Hashem spoke to us directly, "face to face", from among the flames and he was standing between Hashem and us at the time in order to tell us what Hashem was saying.

We can learn a very important concept from these *pessukim*.

At times, we can speak to someone face to face and still fail to understand what it is that they're trying to tell us. Sometimes it is necessary to read between the lines or pick up on certain cues or body language, so that we may hear what that person is really trying to tell us.

Often, as was the case with the Yidden in the Midbar, it is necessary to find an intermediary – a third party who has the ability to hear out both of us without the emotional blockages or preexisting beliefs that we bring to the table.

Sorry Struggles

We have mentioned in the past how important it is, when you do something wrong or unintentionally hurt someone, to go up to that person and sincerely and clearly apologize.

However, apologizing, owning up to your own wrongdoing, and saying the words "I'm sorry" are not easy. In fact, to some people it is exceedingly difficult – so much so that they have an extremely hard time saying it at all. It doesn't mean they don't feel remorse or that they don't regret their actions. It is just unimaginably difficult for them to admit it.

So instead of saying it outright, they will resort to subtle hints. A word here, an action there, a gesture, a message, a gift. It is very important that we pick up on those cues and show them that we understand what they're trying to tell us and accept their apology.

The Awareness is There

Often you don't even need the apology! You just want them to know how much they hurt you. Well then, you can rest assured. Most normal thinking people realize when they wrong someone – especially someone dear to them, like a spouse – and feel terrible about it.

You might try to extract an apology by saying, "I know you must feel bad about yesterday, and I'm sure you're really sorry". But this might be met with, "No, I'm not! I did it because this, that, or the other."

Even such a response does not mean that they don't feel bad. They might simply be the type that resists being forced into anything. They cannot bring themselves to apologize, precisely because you're demanding it. Yet in no way does it prove that they don't regret their actions.

If, instead of apologizing, your spouse starts justifying

themselves with words like "Maybe I shouldn't have said that, but.." or "What's the big deal? I'm also allowed to make a mistake!", it still does not mean that they don't feel bad. Quite the contrary! The fact that they're justifying themselves or saying they made a mistake, clearly tells you that they know they did something wrong! You're often better off taking the hint and accepting the veiled apology.

Even When You Don't Have To

It's true that if your spouse - or anyone, for that matter - does not ask you for forgiveness after hurting you, you have no halachic obligation to forgive them. But that does not mean that you have to stay stuck in a dark place and hold onto the wrongdoing forever. You don't need to ditch the whole relationship because of it. You can still get along with them, go to places with them, talk to them, while not necessarily forgiving that particular incident.

Bear in mind, though, that you are probably going to hurt yourself more by not forgiving. Holding onto past misdeeds is likely to hurt *you* in the long run. It's true that you don't *have* to forgive, but if you choose the high road and grant them that forgiveness – even if only in your heart – you surely stand to benefit from it.

What Might be the Reason?

If we see a consistent pattern of someone refusing to apologize to us, it might be a good idea to truthfully consider whether we might be the cause of that problem. Maybe your wife already asked you to forgive her on more than one occasion, but you refused to accept it and kept bringing it up? Maybe your husband issued an apology, and instead of saying thank you and moving on you told him that he isn't *really* sorry? In many cases - although clearly not all - the reason an apology isn't forthcoming is because we are just too difficult to appease!

Once you establish with certainty that this is not the case, and the reason is definitely not you, take a moment to feel compassion towards your spouse for having such a hard time apologizing. It must be weighing so heavily on their heart, and yet they can't bring themselves to utter those magic words.

Sometimes the apology is said, but it is not worded exactly as you had pictured. Many times, the person clearly demonstrates that they're sorry, but they just won't say it in so many words. Don't sit around and wait for them to word the perfect, poetic apology. If you notice that it is exceedingly difficult for them, try to read between the lines. Be smart, and notice other ways in which they're demonstrating their sentiments.

Listen to Unsaid Words

When things get really challenging, it's sometimes even more difficult to gather up the courage and humility to issue an apology. It's highly unlikely, though, that both of you don't feel terrible about it. That is why, after a major falling-out, it is doubly important to notice those tentative olive branches and accept them.

Shmuli* told me that he got into a dramatic spat with his wife, and she vowed never to be seen on the streets with him again. Obviously, she must have felt really bad about it afterwards, because a couple of days later she offered to go out with him. Shmuli was indignant, "No! I'm not going anywhere with you! You yourself told me you don't want to be seen out with me!" He failed to realize that she had indeed uttered those hurtful words, but here she was, initiating the very action she vowed not to do! She was clearly begging for forgiveness!

In a similar incident, the Berkowitzes* bitterly disagreed about their teenage son. The father felt that Mrs. Berkowitz was being too harsh with him. The next day, Mrs. Berkowitz told her husband that she ordered something really special for that son. Instead of saying, "What?! You think you can ask for his forgiveness by buying him off?", the father should have realized that by telling him about it, the mother was admitting

that she thought he was right and regretted her actions of the previous day.

Adjusting the Expectations

You are entitled to expect an apology and you don't have to let go of that. However, you might have to let go of your expectations of exactly how the apology will sound.

When your spouse does finally come around and apologizes to you, don't give them a hard time. You will only discourage them from trying to do it again in the future. Certainly, under no circumstances, should you contradict them or prove to them that their apology isn't sincere. Thank them for taking the courage to make it up to you and move on.

If you absolutely can't take anything less than your perfect apology, you can try – in a calm moment – to tell your spouse how you would like them to show you that they really feel bad about what they did. But don't demand it, and don't make it so hard for them that they would rather not apologize to you again.

Chinuch: Teaching and Forgiving

It's very important to teach your children the art of saying "I'm sorry". But at the same time, it is also crucial to realize when they feel apologetic and accept their remorse. Don't make apologizing a drag for them. Don't make them list all their wrongdoings to you and tell you how they're planning to improve. When they tell you they're sorry, believe them and move on. Don't bring up the incident again.



Q&A



Please feel free to send any questions, on this topic or any topic to RabbiGruen@Lehair.org

Question:

I would like to quit my job, from which I earn a dependable, respectable salary, and try to go out on my own. However, I am afraid that my wife won't be happy to lose her financial security and she won't support my new business venture.

Answer:

First of all, there is no such a thing as financial security. Our finances are all controlled by the One Above, and in the blink of an eye He can make us rich or poor, however He sees fit.

Having said that, this needs to be evaluated on a case by case basis. Does the husband have a history of recklessly starting businesses and driving the family into debt? Does the family have unhealthy spending habits, and a bump in the road will be too much for them to handle? Is there a boundary issue where one person gets to dictate what the other person can or cannot do?

If the answer to these questions is in the negative, then it's important for you to make time to sit down with your wife and listen to her concerns and show her that you take her opinion seriously. You might also explain to her why you feel this is the right move for your family at this time.

Once you show her that you hear her out and validate her concerns, it will be much easier for you to come to a mutual agreement where you each can support each other in all your endeavors. Alternatively, you can agree to hear an objective third party's opinion, which can give everyone a feeling of being heard and considered while not being given full control of a decision.

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