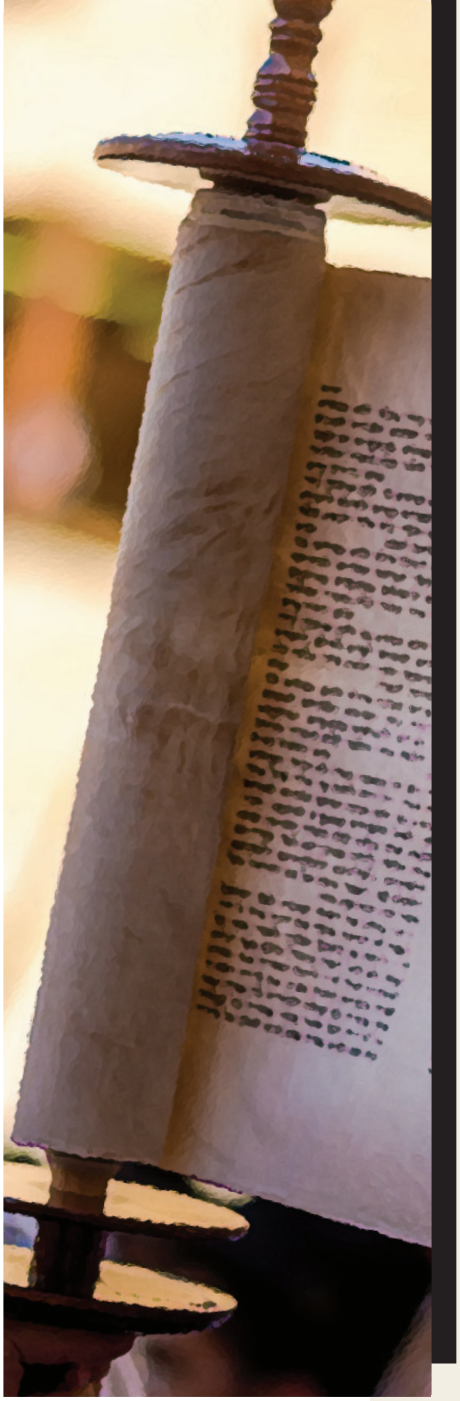


RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

TO EACH HIS OWN

In this week's *parshah*, the Torah describes the *tefillos* of Yitzchak Avinu and Rivka Imeinu for a child, after long years of waiting. The *passuk* states that Yitzchak davened "in the presence of" his wife. The Rebbe R' Yaakov David of Amshinov *ztz"l* explains that Yitzchak davened in Rivka's presence because he considered her to be greater than him, given that she had overcome the immense challenge of growing up surrounded by *reshaim* and remained a *tzaddekes*. Rivka, meanwhile, davened "in the presence of" her husband, considering him greater than her as not only was he a *tzaddik* but also the son of one.

Yitzchak and Rivka provide us here with an example of each spouse seeing the good in the other, even when they could have easily noticed and focused on their own righteousness and qualities instead.

If only we could all see the good in our spouses and in their actions, and even when there are difficulties, instead of noticing the other person's contribution to the problem, take note of what we can do to improve the situation and resolve any issues. It's not easy for us to emulate the Avos and Imahos, and it's so much easier to excuse our own failings than it is to excuse the failings of others and focus only on their strengths. However, when we attempt and even partially succeed in overcoming our innate biases and seek out the good points in others, we will *be'ezras Hashem* have so much more *siyatta diShmaya* and blessing in all our relationships.

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Parshas
Toldos
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Dear Rabbi Gruen,

I would be very grateful if you could address this issue that I'm having.

I got into a situation with my husband which I found to be extremely humiliating. I would like to know if it's just me being too sensitive, or whether there's really something there. I would also like to know how to forgive and move on.

I recently gave birth, so I've been feeling more overwhelmed and stressed than usual. Sometimes I lose it a bit and say things that I later regret, either because I was already upset in general, and what I said came out wrong, or because I felt hurt and misunderstood. In general, though, I do love my husband a lot and I don't want him to feel hurt. I admit that I do hurt him sometimes, unintentionally, but I always apologize afterward and try to make it up to him.

This week things were extra-stressful and we hardly found any time to spend together. One day was especially hard and I experienced a lot of humiliation and pain from something unrelated. I was really down, and I wanted space and time to myself, but my husband asked me to be with him.

I thought back to your *shiur* where you discussed how this is something that's major in a marriage and that a spouse shouldn't refuse just because they're not in the mood, so I agreed and tried to feel relaxed. But after a few minutes my husband just shut his eyes and seemed about to go to sleep. I asked him what was going on and he said he was feeling hurt about something I told him earlier in the week, and that he didn't feel like being close to me anymore.

I felt so hurt. There, in my most vulnerable state, in the closest part of our marriage, was where he was bringing up painful discussions? I felt even worse since I had overcome my own pain from the whole day in order to oblige him. And I'd even told him that whatever was going on in the outside world, with him I felt safe and secure.

I mentioned these things, and that he'd been the one to ask me to be close with him, and he said that he didn't want it anymore. I felt so burned and hurt and I left the room and the pain still hasn't gone away.

What can I do to fix the situation? Am I right that this was a line that should never have been crossed? I'd really appreciate your perspective.

I also have another question if that's okay...

Sometimes, I find it hard to trust my husband, because when things are hard for me (like after birth when I feel overwhelmed and emotional), he can't handle it. I thought that marriage meant that spouses were there for each other, no matter what the situation. Why do I have to be the perfect wife and mother for him to appreciate me?

And even when I do live up to his expectations, it's just what he expects and he doesn't really appreciate the effort it takes, especially as I get so tense feeling judged by him the whole time.

I listen to a lot of *shiurim* for women, and they all seem to stress that the woman has the power to influence the way her husband behaves toward her. She has to build him up and so forth. It feels unfair — why is it my fault if my husband does something that upsets me? Why do I have to take the blame for messing things up?

Thank you, and may you continue to have the *koichos* to help Klal Yisrael.



While the situations mentioned in this letter aren't all that uncommon, they certainly require specific ideas and tips to improve things. It's a shame when situations like these become a federal case with two people arguing over right and wrong in front of a third party, when perhaps all that's needed is a better understanding of one's spouse. This letter (like many others I receive) illustrates why it's so important for spouses to invest in improving their understanding of each other's personalities and mindsets.

So many misunderstandings and arguments are simply the result of not realizing how different the other person is from who we are, and what the right way to communicate with them is. Understanding one's spouse is the work of a lifetime; nonetheless, there are many things we can do to improve a situation and a relationship even before we fully "get" the other person.

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Whenever we find ourselves at odds with someone, it's crucial to acknowledge how we tend to view our own faults very differently from other people's. You mention, for example, that you don't intentionally hurt your husband and that if you do, you always apologize. Apologizing is amazing and not at all easy to do. It's commendable that you recognize where you went wrong and make amends. If, however, the same kind of mistakes are being made somewhat regularly, it's understandable if the person on the other end starts to wonder whether you are taking enough care to avoid them.

For example, if one spouse is always late and then apologizes, the other spouse may eventually snap and respond, "Enough of your apologies! Just stop being late all the time!" or even, "If you really cared, you'd stop being late and then you wouldn't need to say sorry." It's still correct to apologize, and sincere apologies should be accepted, but bear in mind how it looks from the other side.

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You may feel, with some justice, that being overly emotional shortly after having a baby is a partial excuse for "losing it" and saying things you later regret. It's important to recognize that while your husband can and should make allowances for the effects of fluctuating hormones and exhaustion, he does suffer from the results, which can affect his moods, too. When you find yourself in a situation where you're stressed out and feeling overwhelmed for reasons unrelated to anything your husband has done or failed to do, just be aware of the impact it may have on him.

You're entitled to vent to your husband and you should — it's usually better to express one's emotions than to allow them to build up into a mountain of resentment. But make it very clear to your husband that: a) you're not blaming him for the situation and b) you're not obligating or even expecting him to solve it. If you're clear that what you want is for him to hear you out (or give you the space to process things alone, if you prefer), and then you thank him for his time, patience, consideration, and understanding, I believe he'll get less defensive and you'll feel more understood — even if you're not completely satisfied with how he responds.

It's clear from your letter that you were very disappointed with the way your husband spoke to you and, reading between the lines, that you feel he should come forward to make amends. If he were to ask what he can do to make things better I'd probably have many nice ideas for him. But it's you asking. Furthermore, it is possible that he doesn't know what to say, or what you want him to say. Perhaps he sees things differently and wonders if you aren't making a mountain out of a molehill, and even thinks that he should be commended for holding himself back from dismissing your feelings. Try to notice any effort he may be making in addressing what happened or rectifying it, and thank him. It may not be exactly what you would like him to do, but it could be his way of doing his best.

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Now I'd like to address the central issue in your question which is, as you write, a major component of marriage, as well as a very sensitive area for both husband and wife.

Because it is so important, intimacy should be scheduled and not left "to chance." The word "schedule" can put people off because of its formality, but from experience, I can say that the alternative is far worse. Relying on the moods of two different people coinciding is far less reasonable and realistic.

Consecrating specific times that are inviolable goes such a long way to avoiding misunderstandings and putting people at ease. After all, we schedule all sorts of important things in our lives such as vacations, outings, and important meetings. When the item scheduled is a pleasurable one, the anticipation can be seen as part of the pleasure. It's also important for both spouses to

remember that this consecrated time is for one purpose only. No one should try to hijack the time for other purposes, taking advantage of having the other spouse's captive attention. Some misinterpret Chazal's instruction to be *mefayes* (placate) one's spouse beforehand and think that it's appropriate to raise all kinds of old disputes and "clear the air" first. Aside from arousing loving feelings, the obligation is to put problems to rest, not awaken sleeping bears.

If there are serious issues dividing husband from wife which affect their feelings for one another, they should surely be resolved, and not shoved under the rug. This should be done, however, at a different time, preferably a designated one. A weekly walk, a daily chat, or other such ideas can forestall situations where either spouse finds it very hard to enter into the right mindset for intimate closeness.

That said, the ultimate responsibility for being in the "right mood" is on the person himself. No one should expect someone else to "make" them feel anything. You may certainly ask for anything reasonable and tell your spouse how much you would appreciate it if he would do or say a certain thing. But it's generally unfair and unrealistic to expect another person to be responsible for your own emotions and moods.

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It's commendable that you're asking what you can do to move on from a painful experience, even though you feel that you've been wronged. See it as an opportunity to take the first step in fixing things. The best first step is almost always to take responsibility for one's own part in any difficult situation. This doesn't mean accepting the entire blame and pleading guilty. However, virtually every dispute involves mistakes on both sides, and being vulnerable and admitting your errors makes it so much easier for the other person to respond in kind.

Next, express how you feel — whether hurt, confused, embarrassed, etc. — without blaming the other person, or trying to prove how right you are. Apportioning blame almost always leads to defensiveness in the other person, which is counterproductive.

You can gently mention how you feel such situations can be avoided in the future, including both what you and your spouse can do differently. In your example, this can include setting aside time for resolving hard feelings (as mentioned above) so that they don't spill over into times set aside for closeness.

Don't demand an apology or a specific course of action. Just as you have your ideas about how things should be, so does your spouse. It could be that his ideas for improving things will be more helpful than yours, so try to be open to new ways of seeing things.

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Finally, I would like to address what you write about a wife's power to influence her husband's behavior. Of course any bad choices made by either spouse are their own responsibility and no husband or wife can blame anyone else for taking a wrong turn. However, Hashem has granted wives a very real power to affect their husbands.

You refer to this as "unfair," and perhaps it is, in the sense that it places husband and wife on an unequal footing. However, the ability to exert a positive influence on others shouldn't be seen as a burden or an unwanted responsibility; it's a privilege. A woman who has a positive influence on her husband, and her home in general, should see this as a blessing. Use this to benefit both of you.

Both husband and wife should always invest their utmost into their marriage, and if one spouse feels that he or she is putting much more in than the other, they should remember that investments pay dividends and they will only gain from all that they invested.



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