RABBI
SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the home

PARSHAS SHOFTIM

GOOD OR GOOD ENOUGH?

This week's *parshah* includes the well-known *passuk*, *"Tamim tihyeh im Hashem Elokecha – you shall be wholehearted with Hashem."* Immediately following this, Hashem tells us, *"Ve'ata lo chein nassan lecha Hashem Elokecha* – but as for you [Bnei Yisrael], Hashem did not give you [what He gave to the nations]." The Imrei Chaim of Vizhnitz uses the wording of this *passuk* to teach an important lesson regarding how we should view our *avodas Hashem*. When a person does a *mitzvah*, no matter how well he did it, he should know that he did not achieve one-hundred-percent perfection. A *mitzvah* can always be done better, with more *hiddur*. This is hinted at in the words "*lo chein*," meaning, "it wasn't as it should have been." Hashem granted us a special ability to recognize and acknowledge that we can and should always strive to do better, in all areas of life.

With *mitzvos bein adam l'Makom* – between us and Hashem – it's fairly obvious that our *avodas Hashem* can always be improved upon. However, when it comes to our relationships with others, there's often a temptation to rationalize that "I've done my best, and that's that," or even, "I probably could have handled things better, but it's really their fault, not mine..." It may even be true that the other person is more to blame. But it doesn't matter, because Hashem gave us the gift of knowing that there's always something more that *we* can do, regardless of how the other person behaves.

I would like to share an email I recently received which brings this idea to life.

> *I contacted you last summer about possible counseling after almost seven years of being separated from my husband. Unfortunately, it was too late, and we got divorced. I see* yad Hashem *in this as the situation has led to much growth.*
>
> *I've been listening to your* shiurim *for a while now and I often regret that I didn't have your* hadrachah *years ago. Of course, this is part of Hashem's plan. It is always up to Hashem when He will send the right* shaliach. *Your insights are so basic, clear, and logical. I used to think "If only my husband had known..." but now, because of your* shiurim, *I end up thinking, "If only I had realized..."*
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> *For example, my husband never understood how difficult pregnancy and birth are and this led to resentment. When I started listening to a* shiur *on this topic, it was with the assumption that you would have been able to get him to understand, and that the* shiur *would explain how. By the time the* shiur *ended, I realized that 1) you would have been able to explain to me how to ask for the help nicely; 2) you would have helped me not be resentful; 3) you would have explained how I should have appreciated him more for what he was already doing.*
>
> *I hope your* shiurim *become widespread enough so that divorce in the Yiddishe community becomes a thing of the past. I have recommended to my children that they listen, and I hope it helps them avoid* shalom bayis *issues.*
>
> *Thank you so much.*

It's commendable that someone who has been through difficult and painful years of a challenging relationship (ending with separation and divorce) can express herself in such a way. That's not to say that both parties are *always* to blame when it comes to divorce. Maybe this lady's husband really *did* lack understanding, and maybe she *was* limited in what she could have done differently. Nevertheless, there's almost always room to say, "What can *I* do to make things better?" Maybe there's a nicer way to ask for help. Maybe more appreciation will do the trick. In all situations, it's important to be able to look inward and say, "*lo chein*" – maybe I haven't done everything I could. Maybe there's something else I can try that will improve the situation.

ברכת מזל טוב לידידנו הנחמד מוה"ר **שלמה זלמן קאלאדני וב"ב** שיחיו
לרגל נישואי בנו החתן היקר המופלג בתוי"ש כמר **ברוך דוד** נ"י
ויה"ר שיזכו לבנות בית נאמן בישראל ולדורות ישרים ומבורכים עבג"צ

Question:

Dear Rabbi Gruen

I've been listening to your lectures for a long time and I suggested to some of my friends that they listen as well. We're all so impressed by the way you analyze a question and the insightful answers and advice you give. May Hashem grant you everything you need in the merit of helping so many listeners.

My question is a very important one and I'm sure others can benefit as well. It's about a child's relationship with parents who are divorced.

I recently got engaged to a wonderful *kallah* B"H. She hasn't been living with her mother for many years and has no relationship with her. From what I understand, there's good reason for this, although I don't know anything firsthand. When we spoke after our *vort*, she asked me if anyone from her mother's family had tried to call me. She asked me not to have any contact with them.

This alone shows how deeply hurt she is. Later, I found out that she was forced to make certain choices because of this as well. How am I supposed to handle this situation? Should I follow her blindly in this as per her request, or maybe I'm the person who will help her iron this out and move on in life in a healthier way *iyH*?

Thanks again for your wonderful work.

Answer:

This topic is extremely sensitive and no one should rely on general advice given in a class or article when dealing with such complex issues; furthermore, there are probably halachic questions involved here for both you and your *kallah* that should be discussed with a Rav. While *halachah* takes feelings and personal limitations into account, that doesn't mean that a person can make independent decisions based solely on how they feel. This is relevant to you as well, and you should not assume otherwise just because the question relates to your *kallah's* mother and not your own.

I also want to stress that I am avoiding the topic of what your *kallah's* relationship with her mother should be. There are many different approaches to this very sensitive topic which should be addressed by the proper experts in this field – and only if they can be relied upon to give true Torah guidance. Therefore, all I will attempt to do here is provide general pointers that I hope will benefit the questioner and others who find themselves in similar situations.

Let me start with something relevant right now, even before you get married. Your *kallah* asked you for something that's very meaningful to her, related to a very personal and sensitive topic. Don't take that lightly. Violating a clear and

direct personal request like that can cause a great deal of pain to her, and therefore to your future relationship as well. Even if you mean well, don't assume that you'll be doing anyone a favor by trying to achieve a reconciliation, especially if it means going behind people's backs to do so. Such tactics don't usually work and very often backfire, in which case you risk breaching the trust between yourself and your *kallah* and hurting her feelings very deeply. Whenever people assume certain unrealistic outcomes and base their decisions and actions on them, I'm reminded of what my head counselor in camp used to say: "Not everything can be spelled out in detail, but remember the Eleventh Commandment – 'Don't be stupid.'"

What if your *kallah's* fears are justified, and her mother's family does reach out to you? If that happens, take care not to step into the role of "superhero" and try to wage war on your *kallah's* behalf: "Why are you mixing in? It's enough what my *kallah* went through with you people. I don't want to hear from you ever again..." People often try to prove their loyalty by behaving this way, but aside from being unnecessarily rude, it can end up working against you. In a few years' time, your wife might be ready to make up with her mother, and you'll be stuck with the damaged relationship you created. Instead, remain respectful to both sides even while responding clearly and firmly. "Thanks for reaching out. I'm sorry. This is not something I can discuss now. I'll reach out to you if and when it becomes relevant."

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Let's move on to when you get married. You might be tempted to come in as the savior who will either fight her battles or solve her problems and help her get over this once and for all. I'd like to echo the advice given by an *adam gadol* to a Rav whom I know personally who had just accepted a new position in a *kehillah*. The Rav wanted to know which issues he should address first, and he was shocked to be told: "For the first two years, don't say anything."

Instead, the *gadol* advised the Rav to focus on becoming part of his new community and being accepted by them – via nice *derashos*, compliments, and generally getting to know people and building connections. This is good advice for the early days of a relationship, too. You may start out with the best of intentions, hoping to fix things and deal with issues you think your wife is handling badly. But it's too soon. First focus on building the relationship, creating trust, and establishing the foundations of a home where what you (and your wife) say will be understood in the way you mean it and responded to appropriately.

This is true across the board, and especially so with a sensitive situation like the one you describe. Don't introduce the topic and don't try to fix it. If your *kallah* brings it up, be understanding and respectful. It will take time for you to even begin to appreciate how complex it is, so meanwhile, just accept the situation and offer your support.

Another important point which is applicable to anyone who is married to someone struggling with intense emotional challenges: Don't try to be your wife's therapist – even if you are actually a therapist yourself! I was once at a training session for professionals where a veteran therapist related how he had tried to help his own wife in his area of expertise. He was sure he'd see success, given that he was so aware of how, why, and what she was feeling, far more than with his average client. It took him a while to realize that his own feelings were getting in the way, as he didn't have the patience he normally had for a struggling client. More critically, he wasn't nearly as objective as he thought he would be, as his personal involvement affected the way he saw his wife's issues.

This advice applies even if your wife doesn't want to get professional help. And if she would like to see a therapist — provided it's someone who is understanding, strictly dedicated to Torah values with a clear backing of Daas Torah, and who doesn't specialize in "discovering" problems to be addressed – don't resent it, thinking that you could provide even more help and empathy. What a therapist provides is quite different from what a loving spouse gives, so while you want to be there for her, don't expect her to allow you to help her with the pain and resolving the issues. Leave that for someone with less emotional involvement.

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From what you write it seems that your *kallah* might be quite a sensitive person. I can't know for sure if she is naturally sensitive, which caused her to take this situation so much to heart, or if what happened has turned her into such a person. Either way, by now, it's important to be aware that she may be hypersensitive, in order to avoid saying or doing something, albeit unintentionally, that might be taken the wrong way. Even if the issue with her family seems to be resolved one way or another, the sensitivity will likely remain, even if the trauma is addressed. When the inevitable bumps in the road appear, don't assume that it's all

rooted in the past and that your wife still needs to heal. Just learn and practice the rules of handling sensitivity gently and intelligently. This may help you avoid having the events of your wife's past influence your current relationship.

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Knowing how to first understand and only then address emotional issues is something that is important for all relationships, not just those with sensitive individuals. This is a point that I often discuss, because so many people make the mistake of trying to address emotions with logic. It's an easy mistake to make because most people express their emotions as if they were logical, explaining why they are right and why it makes sense for them to feel a certain way, which provides you with the opening to explain why they're wrong after all. Of course, it doesn't work. If you call a businessman for an appointment and he comes up with all sorts of reasons why he can't meet you, you might be able to think of logical solutions to every one of his excuses, but they won't work – because he doesn't *want* to or "feel like" meeting you.

It's the same when you approach emotions with logic. It doesn't work because logic is not the problem. You have to understand what lies behind the rationalizations. Years down the line, your wife may want to discuss her relationship with her mother with you. She may rationalize why she wants it to stay the way it is, and you may want to counter with logic and explain why she's wrong. Realize, though, that it has nothing to do with rational thought. What your wife needs is your understanding and respect. Once you give her that, you may be able to progress a little – but not by explaining why she's wrong. Instead, looking at the issue from a different perspective could give either of you new ideas that she might be able to agree with and feel good about.

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I'll end by again acknowledging that there are situations which do call for more intervention on the part of the husband, if he feels that things are truly out of bounds or intolerable in the way that they affect him. Such situations require one-on-one guidance.

And of course, the best thing any of us can do is daven and ask Hashem to take care of the problems we have – both those we think we can resolve on our own and those we know we can't. May we speedily merit the days when the words of the Navi are fulfilled: *Ve'haishiv leiv avos al banim veleiv banim al avoisam*.

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

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