RABBI
SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the home

PARSHAS NITZAVIM

SINCERE COMMITMENTS

Parshas Nitzavim is always read in the days leading up to Rosh Hashanah, a time of year that some see as depressing, days which have to be endured until we reach Sukkos, *zeman simchaseinu*. There are all kinds of things that people wouldn't even consider doing during Elul and Aseres Yemei Teshuvah that they'll do on Chol Hamoed without a second thought. While it's true that there are behaviors that are customary for the holier times of year, and we can't always be on the highest level of performance, the Ateres Yehoshua teaches an important and timely lesson from a *passuk* in this week's *parshah*; *"Pen yesh bachem shoresh poreh rosh velanah vehayah beshamo es divrei he'alah hazos vehisbareich bilvavo leimor, shalom yihyeh li..."* He explains (*b'derech remez*) that the word *he'alah* can be understood as referring to Rosh Hashanah, and the first letters of the words *shoresh poreh rosh velanah* spell the word *shofar*. For such people, when Rosh Hashanah arrives and they hear the *kol shofar*, they take it seriously – but it doesn't stop them from thinking to themselves, *"shalom yiyheh li,"* when the *sukkas shalom* arrives, then I'll do what I want. Hashem doesn't accept such a *teshuvah*, because it isn't sincere. Measures that are only intended to be temporary aren't effective.

This is also an important lesson for every Yiddishe family. Sometimes people think they can run their homes according to a double standard. There are times when they do certain things because their children or others are watching or they're under pressure, but once the pressure's off, they do whatever they want. This is a wrong way to behave, and will also fail to produce the desired results.

Of course that doesn't mean that you should always question someone's intentions. Similarly, people often say: "If I yell, he will do what needs to get done, but I know what's going to happen as soon as I calm down..." But you *don't* know what's going to happen, and even if the changes made don't last, that doesn't mean that they weren't *meant* to last. When a person is sincere, their promise to do better is accepted by Hashem. We should accept it too. People do fall back, but we shouldn't hold it against them. We're only human.

All the same, if you're the person making a temporary promise or change in the heat of the moment, knowing full well that you have no intention of keeping it, be aware that it will do nothing to enhance your *shalom bayis*. If you want a relationship to work, you have to be consistent and do your best to keep your word, regardless of whether the pressure is on or off.

Wishing a Ksiva Vachsima Toiva to all our readers, listeners and friends!

Question:

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

Hi! Thanks for your *shiurim* on TorahAnytime. Your insight and wisdom really help me a lot. I'm b"H married for more than 10 years to a wonderful husband. He's honest, a true *baal middos*, smart, talented, and a devoted father. I love him as he is and wouldn't want to exchange him with anyone. Yet I'm struggling with certain shortcomings. I try to do my part. I've taken a well-known course on marriage. I feel that I'm on a good track and my husband gave me feedback that things are better and we've gotten closer. We still hit bumps, though, and sometimes too often.

My husband claims that he suffers from some kind of social disorder, maybe even Asperger's. I can't see how it can be true since he is basically running the businesses where he works. But I honor his feelings. When he kvetches, I validate his feelings and tell him that I believe that there is help out there. Most discussions usually start with me arguing that he really could help himself if he wanted to, and end with him trying to prove to me that his disorder won't allow him to get help. This doesn't interfere in all areas in life. He's very successful in his *kehillah* and is often asked for advice. It does keep him back from intimate conversations, giving gifts, talking to our children's teachers, attending *simchos* and some other areas. In all these years, I haven't figured out exactly what's hard for him and what's okay, socially, but it's sure frustrating and I feel like he's really more capable than he claims to be.

What can you tell me since there are times when I feel very hurt.

Thanks, *tizkeh lemitzvos*!

Answer:

After ten years of marriage, plenty of people give up, stop hoping and expecting things to change, and tell themselves that they just have to accept the reality that they may never have what they so badly wanted. So it's wonderful that you've maintained your optimistic attitude and are still looking for ways to improve your *shalom bayis,* as there's always room for improvement. Another plus is the fact that you took a course on *shalom bayis* and that you're trying to see what *you, yourself* can do to improve things. Whenever you sense that there's something in your marriage that can use improvement, the most important thing to do is to figure out what *you* can do about it, regardless of who you think is at fault – and even if you're convinced that the problem is one-hundred-percent caused by the other person. If you're invested and you want to do something about it, you probably can.

Before addressing the main issue you describe, I also want to mention that the fact that there are bumps from time to time is normal. You should still address them, but remember that relationships are part of real life and assuming that improvements resulting from your efforts will last forever isn't realistic. As long as you're interacting with real people and real situations, difficulties can arise and need to be dealt with. Of course you can equip yourself to respond better the next time around, but you shouldn't be surprised when that next time around arrives.

You mention that your husband claims to have a disorder. People who suffer from personality disorders will usually not admit it unless they feel they don't have a choice, and it is quite true that their disorder may cause them limitations that they feel powerless to change. If you're married to such a person, acknowledging their disorder will explain certain things that are going on between you, but that doesn't mean that there's nothing you can do to change things. It also doesn't mean that because your spouse is now confirmed to have a problem, you're absolved from doing what you should do. Seeing yourself as the victim of someone else's struggle isn't going to help your situation.

While I don't in any way feel that you're looking to project yourself as a victim of your husband's diagnosis, I'm using this opportunity to address people who do. There's a syndrome called Munchausen in which a person fakes a problem in order to get some perceived benefit. MSP (Munchausen Syndrome by proxy) is where someone fakes a sickness in another person (most commonly a child) because of something they want to gain, such as help or sympathy. Of course, they won't admit to faking it, and they may not even be aware of what they're doing.

A diagnosis isn't an excuse – it's a responsibility – a responsibility primarily for the person with the most "freedom of movement," so to speak. If your spouse is as limited as you think, or as his diagnosis suggests, it's that much more important for you to be invested in making change. Generally people with such "disorders" are extremely sensitive and reactive, and when you treat someone with challenging emotional needs the way they need to be treated, you can see major change.

Just recently a parent who took my course told me that his child's rebbi wanted to know if the child had just started taking medication. He hadn't. But his parents had learned how to support their son's unique emotional needs and his entire behavior changed. With neither therapy nor medication (which *are* sometimes necessary), the right intervention for a child with special emotional needs had a huge impact.

If you know your spouse struggles with an emotional or personality disorder, there's a lot you can do, and even if you aren't strictly obligated to do anything about it at all, you may likely be the one who has what it takes to learn how to treat and support him through it.

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Let's try now to address the specific issue you describe. Asperger's is a condition which makes it hard for a person to process emotions and it can lock a person into their own feelings and perspectives. This can make it hard for them to relate to others, which means that certain events or situations are far more complex to handle. Whether or not your husband actually has this "condition," you're definitely seeing certain symptoms that suggest it. Most of the behaviors described as characteristics of Asperger's (especially the ones you describe) are not symptoms of a contagious disease that just appear out of nowhere for no reason. Usually, they are either the outcome or accompanied by many strong emotions and challenges that have overwhelmed a person who is extremely sensitive. Such people have a hard time handling these emotions and there are many ways in which you can support him.

When a person says of himself, "I have Asperger's. I have limitations," they may be trying to justify what they think they should be doing, but feel they can't. While such a disorder isn't necessarily a justification, you should try to increase your awareness of the difficulties they experience, and of course this applies even if the person isn't being open about his problems. From what you write, it sounds like you're really doing your best to understand and validate your husband. Telling him that there's help out there may not be helpful, especially if he's sensitive or not ready to hear it yet. It may make him feel resistant and could encourage him to use the condition as proof of why he can't go for help. Denying that he has a problem would probably have the same result, as would telling him what to do. Usually, what such a person needs is for you to really understand him and really listen to him... and that's it.

But aside from anything your husband needs to hear from you, he also needs to feel good about himself. Everyone does, but people who are extremely sensitive are far more deeply affected by how they feel about themselves, which impacts their behavior. This doesn't mean that you should just be tolerant of his challenges. It means that your husband needs to feel respected, needed, and looked up to. "What you did was amazing. It means so much to me..."

When someone expresses a limitation, it doesn't mean that you should let them off the hook. Tell your husband that he doesn't have to and then stress how much it would mean to you if he would. Trying to prove that he can or agreeing that he can't won't isn't

productive. When you give your husband the space he needs when you let him know that he doesn't *have* to, you'll see much better results. "I understand it's hard for you to call the rebbi. But you're such a *choshuve* person and I'm sure the rebbi will appreciate hearing from you. And it means so much to me when you take care of this, even though you don't have to." Be respectful and give a lot of healthy attention. But don't hesitate to express your feelings and ask for the things that are important to you, even if you follow up by clarifying that he doesn't *have* to.

And when he *does* do something – even if it's not exactly what or as much as you wanted – express your appreciation. It will get you more of the behavior you want.

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I do want to mention that some conditions are real, whether or not there's an actual diagnosis. When people deal with such issues and those around them are not understanding, it's very hurtful. You should always be understanding of other people's pain, imagined or real. Even if the pain or challenge is not diagnosable, the person may really be feeling it. Always validate what they feel.

At the same time, you're still a person. You're allowed to ask for things, and it's possible that when you express yourself properly, your husband will want to provide them enough to find it within him to do so.

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A word to the husband: I know you can't tell a person to "snap out of it," and that overcoming genuine challenges can be a long process, and this is what I have stressed in my answer to your wife. As imaginary a limitation can look to those around us, to the person experiencing it it's quite real. And yet, it's still important to consider how a justification we give for ourselves can end up coming at the expense of others. It may be hard for you and you're allowed to express that, but you can still remain open to the idea of trying to push yourself just a little more. Is it at all possible that you're making use of a real issue in order to get out of doing certain things? Sometimes we allow a problem to become part of our identity, because it's comforting and absolves us of responsibility, but perhaps we can take a step beyond that. Yes, you can justify how hard it is for you, but that doesn't mean that you shouldn't try all the same. And that's a decision nobody can make but you.

We can all push ourselves to go a little further, do a little more, and in that *zechus*, we should have a *git gebentcht yuhr.*

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

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