Rabbi Shimon Gruen

Torah Lessons for the Home

{ Eikev 5780 }

Abuse and Tolerance

Disclaimer: *With the hope that this topic is not relevant to the vast majority of readers, I would like to touch upon the subject of abuse in marriage (as well as other relationships), as something that should never be tolerated.*

It is my fervent hope that none of you find this piece useful. But if it does help one person who is unfortunately in such a situation to get clarity and direction, then it has accomplished its purpose.

It is also my intention to bring awareness about this topic so that family members need not stand by unsure of how normal or okay a situation is. Once properly educated, they can step in and guide victims of abuse on their best options.

No Time Like the Present

There's a vort from the Apta Rav on the opening words of our Parsha, "*V'haya eikev tishme'un*". He says, "If at the end you will listen to and abide by the Torah and *mitzvos* anyway, '*U'shmartem va'asisem osam*', why not do them right away?" In your heart you know what the right thing is, but you sometimes try pushing it off for various reasons. If you know you will end up doing it anyway, you might as well do it right now.

There are certain situations where immediate action is required. You might like to convince yourself that lying low or pretending it didn't happen, or justifying it, will make it all go away. But in your heart of hearts you feel that this is not okay, and there is a chance it might get worse or more intense. It is in such cases that you must tackle the problem immediately. You're going to be forced to take that step anyway. Do it before more harm is done.

What Does not Qualify

Before we detail what types of behaviors should not be tolerated, we first must clarify what abuse is *not*. People are only human. We all make mistakes.

Sometimes your spouse does something wrong. They don't thank you for a gift, show up on time, deliver on a promise, or any other action that you find hurtful. Is it right? Definitely not. Is it normal? Most certainly yes. It's

not unheard of or harmful or tragic.

That doesn't mean it shouldn't bother you or you have to silently take it. You can certainly bring it up in a productive manner so that your spouse can hear your concerns (as long as you make sure they're not feeling like they're under attack). But normal behaviors are not categorized as abusive, even as they are bothersome or rather hurtful.

In other instances, you might be under the *impression* that you are being abused. "My husband always takes advantage of me." "My wife tries to find every opportunity to hurt me." While you certainly feel that these are your spouse's true attitudes towards you, they never said so outright, and you may be wrong. You assumed that the reason they do or don't do x, y, or z must be because of these sentiments. You might be right, but you might also be very wrong.

It's very important to differentiate between "abuse" and what you think *might be* abuse.

Because this is such a loaded and sensitive topic, it is critically important that in any case when you suspect abuse, you speak to someone who has experience with cases such as these, and who will be able to help you see your situation objectively and determine whether you are in fact being abused. It is also vital to make sure that you go to someone who will actually help you and will not exacerbate the problem.

Denial and Justifications

Nobody likes to think that they might be victims of abuse. So when something happens, we tend to try and explain it away, thinking it will get better over time, or that it really isn't so terrible. However, this can be a very dangerous mindset. *V'haya eikev* – when you will reach the end of your rope, which you probably *will* in a case where you are being badly mistreated, it will not be pretty.

As soon as you notice a problem, you must deal with it. Thinking that you can tolerate it at the present time is a mistake. *Ushemartem* – protect yourself, *v'asisem oso* – and do immediately what you will end up doing eventually.

If someone confronts you and forcefully demands a dollar from you, you may think, "Big deal. It's only a dollar." The next week, he comes and robs you of two dollars, and you think, "Okay. Two dollars is not so bad." But the more time passes, the more brazen the thief will become and you will end up losing a lot of money by the time you finally decide that enough is enough.

By allowing abuse to take place, you are not only tacitly leading them on to believe that their abuse is okay; when you reach your breaking point, so much more harm will have been done, and the abuser might be so far gone that it is much more difficult, if not impossible, for them to change their ways.

Don't Enable It

You also have to be very careful that your actions or reactions are not instigating or exacerbating the abuse in any way. Sometimes, when we allow ourselves to be stepped on, it only serves to egg the abuser on and encourages them to keep at it. We must make it clear to them that abuse of any kind will not be tolerated by us.

A *yungerman* once approached me several weeks after his wedding, that already during *sheva brochos* his new bride began belittling him, demeaning him, and calling him ugly names. When a spouse does that as early as in *sheva brochos*, that indicates a very big problem! The solution in such a case is never to apologize to them for calling

you names or try to appease them so that they stop! This is not okay and should not be allowed to last for as long as even just several weeks. This needs to be addressed immediately.

Thinking that it will stop is only deluding yourself. Most of the time, if not properly taken care of, such situations tend to get worse and worse until they spiral completely out of control leaving tremendous damage in its wake.

Zero Tolerance

A leading expert on this subject has coined a term called "The 90% Rule". There are some actions that as many as 90% of the populace *don't* do. Unfortunately, however, some people do perpetrate these actions. If you are on the receiving end of any of the following scenarios, seek help immediately.

He gave an example (which is thankfully not relevant in our communities)as follows, a wife once called the cops because her husband pulled a gun on her. When the officers asked the wife whether she wants to press charges against her husband, she said, "No, this was a one-time thing. He lost his composure. He promised he'll never do it again." This is a big mistake! Some things, like acts of violence, should never ever be tolerated!

If your spouse ever locks you out of the house, physically assaults you, constantly berates you or shames you – especially in front of the kids, threatens to hurt you if you don't comply with their wishes, exerts control over your own personal rights, or handles finances irresponsibly on an extreme level, or makes you listen to information that makes you feel uncomfortable, you have got to tell your spouse that this is not okay!

With the proper guidance, you need to make it very clear. "I understand that you lost control and didn't really mean to do that. But I want you to know that I cannot live with this type of behavior."

Because of the delicate nature of this type of dialogue, it is absolutely essential that you have an experienced professional guiding you through the process. But a professional will tell you that you must take a stand at once, and make sure your spouse is well aware that should such an incident happen even one more time, you are out! And if, G-d forbid, it does happen again, you need to follow through with that statement.

The above-mentioned actions do not have a justification or excuse. Your spouse might say that they couldn't help themselves, or even go so far as to blame *you* for driving them over the edge. But that is not an excuse. Justifications are okay for normal, everyday infractions. But anything that 90% of the world would not do is *never* justifiable with excuses. Even if it doesn't bother you all that much, you must not tolerate it! Actions like these can and do destroy homes. *Ushmartem* - Be very careful, because those behaviors do not get better with time.

Don't Combat Pain with Pain

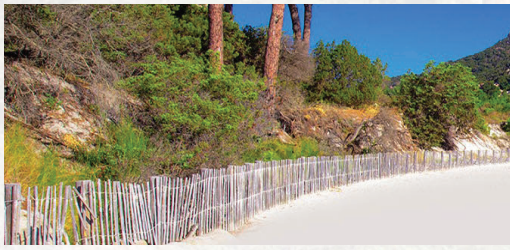
It's also important to mention that hurting the abuser is never the way to put a stop to abusive behavior. If your spouse hits you and you hit them back, it might stop the behavior that moment but it will not solve the problem. It certainly won't foster any peace or closeness between the two of you. Even only verbally shaming or berating them is not going to help you.

What you *can* do, besides seeking professional help and guidance, is to let them know gently but very firmly that you realize that they lost control of themselves, but that you cannot live with it, and you won't!

Chinuch: Stop the Abuse!

Unfortunately, there are times when parents engage in behaviors that are abusive towards their children. It is imperative that if a parent notices (themselves or) their spouse abusing their child(ren) that they immediately put a stop to it. Sometimes an older sibling or even an outsider must intervene. Get help if you must, but don't stand by when you see someone perpetrating abuse.

It is also possible for a child to be abusive towards a parent. We are not talking about your regular, run-of-the-mill (while definitely very wrong) misbehaviors like disrespect or fighting or failing to do household chores. A child who threatens to physically harm a parent, or locks a parent out of his own house, or steals something valuable (like a car, etc.) from his parent, must be stopped immediately. Behaviors such as these need to be nipped in the bud with the right methods and the proper guidance. But they are most certainly not to be tolerated.



Q&A

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



Question:

My child needs me to be very clear with him on everything and I have trouble giving him clear answers to all of his questions. How can I deal with this?

Answer:

This reminds me of that time a father came to tell me that his son needs a lot of compliments and affirmations and he has trouble giving it to him. He asked me what he can do about it. I told him that it sounds like someone who complains that he's thirsty but doesn't want to drink. Either you're going to stay thirsty, or you must take a drink! There isn't always a third option.

If your child needs clarity or acknowledgment, and it is hard for you to give it to them, you have two choices. Either your child can have his needs unmet, or you can push yourself to give them what they need. Normally, it is up to the adult in the equation to concede and give the child in his care what he rightfully deserves.

Furthermore, it doesn't necessarily mean that your child needs perfect clarity as much as he wants you to be decisive in your answers. Most children understand that their parents don't know absolutely everything, and that is okay. Maybe you just have to tell him honestly, "I don't know." Or "This is something I will need to discuss with the *rav* before I can answer you." Saying you don't know won't confuse your child as much as burdening him with all of your own doubts and deliberations.

You can also preface your answer with "I think", and even if it turns out that you were wrong, you can tell your child, "I thought so. I guess I was mistaken." Most children are okay with that.

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