

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

FOCUSING INWARD

In describing the procedure concerning the *korban olah*, the Torah tells us that after removing the ashes from the *mizbe'ach*, the *kohen* "shall take off his garments and put on other garments..." R' Shimon Yaroslaver (in his *sefer Toras Shimon*) explains that the word *begadav*—his clothing, can be read *bogdav*—his rebelling. The Torah is thus hinting to us that one must first remove and undo his own shortcomings, his own rebellion against Hashem, and only then occupy himself with rebuking and fixing others.

The *passuk* in *Tehillim* (104:23) which states, "*Yeitzei adam l'pa'alo vl'a'avodaso adei-arev*—Man goes out to his work, to his labor until evening," can be understood in a similar way, he adds. The word *arev* hints at the concept of *arvus*, of being there one for another. All Yidden need to care about one another. However, concerning oneself with someone else's refinement should wait until we have finished taking care of our own deficiencies. People tend to "go out and get to work" taking responsibility for others before (or instead of) focusing on fixing their own shortcomings. The *passuk* is telling us that the right order is first *l'pa'alo*, his own work, and only then *adei arev*, caring for those around him.

It's so much easier to notice other people's faults and think up ways of correcting them than it is to notice our own failings and weaknesses and put in the necessary work. This often results from genuine caring for others — we want to see a spouse, or child, or parent succeed in life and utilize their capabilities, and to us, it's so obvious what they need to do. There's nothing wrong in helping others to overcome their obstacles to success, but the priority should always be on fixing ourselves first.

The Imrei Chaim of Vizhnitz would say that it bothered him so much to see people "pushing time" (a Yiddish expression for wasting time). "I used to think to myself: If only they would 'push' some of their 'spare' hours over to me...! I have so much to do and so little time to do it. But then," he continued, "I realized that instead of focusing on other people's wasted hours, I should instead be looking at how to better use my own 'spare' minutes and seconds..."

Sometimes, when we start fixing ourselves, "miraculously" our problems with others melt away. It's precisely then that we (should) realize that the problem wasn't with the other person at all. Sometimes it's not the other person who needs to be less annoying; it's we who need to have more patience. It's not the other person who needs to be more punctual; it's we who need to be more tolerant and flexible. When we take responsibility for ourselves, very often we find that it's Hashem Who takes responsibility for everything even those things (and people) we can't control.

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Parshas
Tzav
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Shalom Rabbi Gruen,

I have read your book, and I wanted to get advice from you on dealing with my father-in-law. *Baruch Hashem* my husband and I have a beautiful marriage. My father-in-law is a bit difficult to deal with at times. He tends to get angry at my husband very easily and it really has a negative impact on him.

He cannot stand it if you interrupt him and my husband does his best not to, but recently, he called him to discuss something that my husband was really upset about and he couldn't help but interrupt by instinct. His father got so angry he hung up the phone, and my husband tried to call him back right away. My father-in-law didn't pick up and messaged my husband an angry message saying not to call or text him.

My husband is extremely upset and I don't know how to help. He's afraid to contact his father as he told him not to, but the fact that his father is upset with him affects him very much.

Another small example is if we don't want to go to my in-laws for Shabbat one week and prefer to stay home — he gets very upset and always wants to control what we do.

This is not the first time something like this has happened, but it's the first time he said not to call or text him. I hope I explained it clearly.

Please advise! Thank you!



There are many questions people ask me where the first (and sometimes entire) answer is: Ask your Rav. Given that your question revolves around *kibbud av*, you and your husband must certainly ask a Rav to help you define your duties to your father-in-law.

Fundamentally, you need to clarify the difference between being respectful and being controlled. While the former is an obligation, the latter only very rarely is. Many parents try to control their children, to a lesser or greater degree, but children are in most cases not required to submit to this control, and it's usually not in anyone's best interests for them to do so.

Resisting being controlled needs to be done in a very delicate way. It can sometimes be tricky but it can almost always be done. You should certainly listen to any advice a parent wants to give and validate it. Then, however, you need to find the best way to make your own decisions without hurting or offending anyone.

Practically speaking, if your father-in-law calls to invite your husband for Shabbos, what he can reply is: "Thank you so much for inviting us. It's so reassuring to know we always have a place to go. This week I'm not sure it will work out this time, as we already made other plans. But thank you anyway."

If he gets angry, the main thing is to remain calm. Yes, it's easier said than done, but it does get easier with practice. Just keep repeating, "I'm very sorry you feel that way. We really enjoy visiting. This week just doesn't work." In general, a person can only explode for so long when the person on the receiving end doesn't get frazzled.

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Being prepared for "scenes" is also extremely helpful. Most children of difficult parents can detect the warning signs and learn how to emotionally distance themselves from the toxic fallout before the bomb explodes. During this recent phone call, for example, it's likely that your husband could sense trouble coming from his father's tone of voice before the hurtful statement was made, and could potentially have started to brace himself before the blow fell.

When one doesn't see it coming, it's a lot harder to process. Therefore, it's a good idea to have preset reactions to such situations in order to change, little by little, one's instinctive response.

Sometimes, taking a few deep breaths is enough; at other times, one may need to hold the phone at a distance from one's ear and just wait for the other person to stop screaming. Then, in a calm tone of voice, you simply say, "I'm very sorry you feel that way. I had no negative intentions," or whatever else is relevant.

Al pi Torah, one may not interrupt a parent, so your husband really should try his best to find a different way of dealing with such situations, given that they may well continue into the future.

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Many adult children find their parents complicated to deal with at times, and that's normal. Very few relationships are completely friction free; not with a spouse, nor with a child or a parent. Some situations are more understandably difficult while others are definitely unusual, but challenges are common in even the best of relationships. It's always advisable to decipher the patterns and find ways to deal with them in an effective manner.

Let's give an example of a lonely widowed mother who wants to spend an hour on the phone just shmoozing and gets so upset and offended when her married daughter tries to curtail the call. Expecting one's parent to "understand" is not usually helpful, if they simply don't. There are other ways of dealing with such a situation, such as telling the mother right at the beginning of the conversation, "Thanks so much for calling! Your calls give me *chizuk* for the whole day. Right now I'm in the middle of something — will you be available later? I hope there'll be a quiet half-hour after I get the kids to bed and before my husband comes home."

Most people understand and accept that people who are dealing with extreme difficulties or have been through tragedies *R"l* are naturally more sensitive and emotional and that one must make allowances for them. (The same can be said about someone who's especially tired or hungry.) But plenty of other people are just more emotional by nature, which is what makes them come across as "difficult." It would probably be easier and more pleasant for everyone if your father-in-law didn't have the nature he has, but since he does, this is what you have to deal with. As you have noticed, his "difficulty" is, first and foremost, being highly sensitive and reactive. Even the slightest hint of disrespect can cause an explosion. This is why it's so important to be prepared and to find ways to avoid the usual pitfalls. Essentially, a parent has the "right" to have their emotions taken into account regardless of how "crazy" a child thinks they are.

Taking his feelings into account doesn't, however, mean that you should let him control your lives. Aside from this not being required (for the most part) for the *mitzvah* of *kibbud av*, it rarely makes things better and may even make things worse. It's not good for anyone to be surrounded by enablers who allow them to get away with behaving in unacceptable ways. Learn how to stand your ground with true respect, and when things are calm, invest in building a relationship built on the positive.

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When dealing with a highly sensitive person, it can become hard to detect the positive. This is why it's so important to compartmentalize the issues you're dealing with. Yes, your father-in-law needs to feel respected and can go off the deep end otherwise. But he also has many positive attributes and they aren't cancelled out by his more difficult traits. When you and your husband learn to take a step back and look at things with a broader lens, you might start noticing things you didn't see before.

You may even notice that, on occasion, your father-in-law was at least partially justified in reacting extremely to something you or your husband did or said. Even if he was totally unjustified (which is rare), you should still take his feelings into consideration, but once you take a more honest look at the situation, you may start to understand him better.

It's at times like these that an apology is in order. Especially when it's clear that it was prompted by genuine introspection on your husband's part, as well as true remorse, it's very likely that it will be taken well.

This doesn't mean that your husband should abase himself and turn himself into a *shmatte*. He should be very specific: "I'm sorry I interrupted you the other day on the phone. It was wrong of me and I'll try my best to see it doesn't happen again." That's it. Hopefully your father-in-law will accept the apology with grace. Even if he doesn't, your husband doesn't need to add anything more than that he's sorry his father feels that way and that he hopes they'll be able to patch things up.

There are, admittedly, truly deranged people who will never, ever accept an apology and move on. However, my experience is that virtually everyone can be won over with the right tactics. Sensitive people, like your father-in-law, are so easily thrown off balance if they feel disrespected — the flipside is that they tend to mellow very quickly if they do feel respected, needed, and valued.

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Just in case there are any parents of married children reading this, it's worth acknowledging that everyone responds well to having their feelings validated and their wishes respected — both parents and children. You may not be obligated to respect your children in the same way that they are obligated to respect you, but we all have a basic obligation to be considerate of our fellow Yidden, even if they are our children.

Parents often become more sensitive with the issue of decisions their children make after they get married. While that's understandable, parents of married children do need to think about how they come across when they express their reactions in "extreme" ways. Yes, your children (and probably your grandchildren too) do notice your negative traits as well as your positive ones. While children tend to view their parents through rose-tinted glasses at times, they aren't blind.

You want them to understand your feelings; they likewise want you to understand theirs. Both sides are only human, trying their best yet making the occasional mistake. That's okay, as long as fundamentally there is mutual respect and caring.

You may find yourself repeating the mistakes your own parents made. It's wonderful if you can become more aware of this and make sure that issues don't get passed down from generation to generation. We all carry a certain amount of "baggage" from our parents but really, that's not the point. Our responsibility is to make the best use of the tools we have, which can sometimes mean throwing some of them away and doing our best to make a fresh start with a fresh perspective.



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I realize that I have left answering your question directly until last. What is your role in all of this, given that the "difficult" person in question is your father-in-law? Firstly, your place is at your husband's side. A wife's duty is to support her husband. There's generally no need to take sides with him against his father, however. You should simply give your husband *chizuk*, listen to him, validate his feelings, and help him to implement new strategies.

This doesn't seem to be the case in your situation, but unfortunately, some parents actually try to enlist a son- or daughter-in-law against their child, in which case they should not get involved. And this goes both ways — sometimes, a husband or wife will enlist a parent-in-law against their spouse ("Even your mother thinks you should get your act together…" "Even your own father thinks that you should have…") Needless to say, this should never be done.

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Although things between your husband and his father have clearly been complicated for some time, that doesn't mean the situation can't improve. Sometimes it isn't the people themselves who change, but the way a situation is handled—and that can open the door to a very different outcome.

Real change rarely happens quickly, so it's important to have patience and give things time. In the meantime, stand firmly beside your husband. When a couple remains united, supportive, and devoted to one another, they can weather almost any challenge together.

B'ezras Hashem you should be *zocheh* to a positive and nurturing relationship that everyone will gain from.

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