RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME

PARSHAS NOACH

A TALK ABOUT TOLERANCE

In his *sefer Imrei Shefer,* R' Shlomo Kluger discusses the various *aveiros* mentioned each time the Torah talks about why the *mabul* happened. He stresses the distinction between *aveiros bein adam laMakom* and *bein adam lachaveiro*, and the different ways in which Hashem responds to each. When a person sins against Hashem, he writes, it's beneath Him, *kaveyuchol*, to "trouble" Himself with punishing the sinner, and so Hashem will look away and allow things to play themselves out over time. However, when a person mistreats his fellow, Hashem steps in to defend him. This is why at first, Hashem seemingly ignored the wrongdoings of the *dor hamabul* and postponed their punishment. However, when they descended to the level of stealing, Hashem sealed their fate.

People often assume that normal problems are part of normal relationships and that minor arguments and hurt feelings don't need to be taken seriously. After all, "Don't all couples fight sometimes?" While it may be true that many couples do quarrel on a regular basis, this doesn't mean that this is a good way of going about married life… The causes of the *mabul* teach us how careful we have to be with the feelings of others. Recalling that Hashem places the *kavod* of people above His own *kavod* can make it easier for us to take our spouses seriously. It's so important to be careful with other people's feelings even if we don't think they "deserve" it.

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THIS WEEK'S ESSAY IS DEDICATED BY
THE SCHLESINGER FAMILY
MAY IT BE A ZCHUS FOR THE FAMILY AND KLAL YISROEL!

QUESTION

I would like to present two questions with similar underlying principles, one from the perspective of a woman and one from a man. The fact that both sent in something similar shows how many issues are really universal.

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

I have two young children. I try to be calm when dealing with them and for the most part I'm successful. Once in a while, like when something spills or breaks, I lose it for a second and raise my voice or gasp. My husband can't handle it and he gets very upset whenever he hears me raise my voice. He can go into bed for an hour and sulk. I tried explaining to him that he can't do that, that it affects the mood of the whole house. I also told him that if I don't get complimented for the 98% of the time that I am in control of myself, then I should not be put down for the 2% of the time that I lose it. My screaming doesn't affect the home nearly as much as his sulking in bed does. What's the way to go with this?

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Hi Rabbi Gruen,

You mentioned in a *shiur* a while ago that in almost all relationships, *how* you say something is what matters most.

There are a few things that bother me about my relationship with my wife. Whenever I'm not feeling well (which happens about once a year or on a fast day), my wife can't handle it. She keeps asking me to do things or gives me "attitude" about how I feel. Instead of telling me to relax and go to sleep in a nice way, she'll first argue with me about whether I'm really not feeling well and then nervously tell me to go to sleep.

I asked her if she can't handle it when I'm not feeling well. She got insulted.

My wife is stressed out every day and is often not feeling well. (I should probably be better in how I react to her. I'm trying but it's really hard when you hear someone kvetching the whole time.)

There are some other things. Whenever anything isn't the way it should be, I feel like she blames me for it. She gets nervous easily and yells at the kids a lot, and so on.

I try to be a good husband and father and help a lot. She does appreciate it but whenever I can't do it, she gets nervous that she'll have to do it instead.

We keep discussing that we need to be better with these things and we need to respect what the other one says, but so far, we haven't changed much. I would appreciate your input.

Thank you very much!

ANSWER RABBI SHIMON GRUEN RESPONDS

To sum up both questions, what can be done when one's spouse has very little tolerance for behavior they feel is normal and within bounds? Both questions describe behaviors which *are* relatively normal, and yet this is something many people experience which leaves them unable to understand why their spouse can't or won't tolerate it.

The first thing I want to mention is the importance of taking a step back and recognizing that in general, a person always sees his own behavior as "normal" and "acceptable" even if it isn't (which doesn't appear to be the case in our two questions). That's why, instead of assuming that you're right about behaving in a certain way, even though someone has a problem with it, it's a good idea to check with an objective third party to make sure what you're doing really *is* normal and acceptable.

Something else to consider when you feel that your spouse is being intolerant is all the things your spouse *does* tolerate about you. Don't wait to be made aware of all the myriad things your spouse quietly puts up with in the argument you could end up having. And don't fall into the trap of protesting that all the things your spouse is claiming to tolerate are so normal they don't require tolerance at all. This isn't a question of right or wrong. It's a question of perception. If you do decide to address an area in which you want or feel you deserve more tolerance, make sure you first express appreciation for all those things that are already being accepted. This is likely to make it easier for your spouse to be more open to what you have to say.

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As one of the questioners points out, how you talk to your spouse is often more important than what you actually say. So beware of saying things like, "We need to work on this," which isn't clear and can put your spouse immediately on the defensive. It's pretty obvious that "we" used here means "you," and that the person you want to see doing that work is your spouse.

Another thing to be careful about is comparing your level of tolerance to your spouse's and implicitly blaming your spouse for causing the problem. This goes back to what I mentioned earlier: You may be convinced that you're in the right, but just remember that the other person feels the exact same way! You'll do much better by admitting this straight off, and then giving your spouse the benefit of the doubt: "I'm sure you didn't mean to hurt my feelings. That comment didn't make me feel good, and I'd appreciate it if we could communicate about this a little differently."

Keeping the issue specific is also important. You're not condemning your spouse; you're just upset at one particular thing. And once you keep to specifics, it's easier to find solutions too. You don't have to wait for your spouse to suggest ways to do things better, either – you can make your own suggestions and ask what your spouse thinks. You can also acknowledge that there are things you yourself can do that might help, regardless of who's right or wrong.

Sometimes, there are also ways to avoid the problematic situation entirely. When I was a *chassan*, I spoke to the Rachmastrivka Rebbe of Eretz Yisroel. One of the things he told me was that it can be helpful for a *yungerman* to have somewhere where he can lie down during the day, other than at home. He doesn't need to tell his wife every time he wants to take a nap. This isn't about hiding behavior from one's spouse – it's just that your spouse doesn't have to know about every single detail of your day, especially if it's going to ruffle feathers. So, if you can find somewhere to rest for an hour before coming home on a fast day, why not avoid upsetting your wife, *even if* there's absolutely nothing wrong with taking that same nap at home?

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In areas where you're already experiencing friction, solutions or workarounds can usually be found. But what about when the unexpected crops up? Sometimes, it's the element of surprise rather than the event itself that makes it hard for someone to be tolerant and accepting. If your wife thought you'd be available to help her when you came home from *kollel* and instead you told her you're going to rest, the surprise makes it harder for her to accept it. If, instead, you call home in advance and let her know, "I'm not feeling so good today, so I'll probably want to lie down when I get home. I hope that's okay with you," then it may be easier for her to handle. Or, when you get home, you could tell her, "I'm not feeling so good so I can help you now, though I'll probably need to rest a little later." Note that you're not asking for permission, but neither are you dictating anything in the moment – and you're also being polite and gentle about what's reasonable and important to you. Expressing your appreciation only helps you in the future and makes you both feel better now too. This idea can be applied to many different situations, and has helped many couples avoid aggravation on both sides.

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In general it's important to recognize that people's threshold for how much they can handle depends on a large number of factors. People are far less capable of being

tolerant if they're hungry, tired, or stressed.That's aside from innate temperament – some people are simply more sensitive and find it harder to adapt. People's tolerance levels are like rubber bands; some are like those extra-large rubber bands like the ones used to wrap parcels and they can tolerate almost anything. Some are like regular office rubber bands. And some are just naturally like the rubber bands used to go around braces, which snap at the slightest thing. Having a spouse who is extremely sensitive doesn't necessarily have to impact what you do, but it should impact how you go about it, and it's always good to understand where someone else is coming from.

That said, I would like to stress the importance of being aware of how some people can unfortunately end up controlling others due to what they see as their low threshold for tolerating adversity. While you might not want to trust yourself on deciding where to draw a line between healthy consideration and unhealthy submission, if this issue is a recurring theme in your relationship you might want to seek the opinion of an outside objective observer.

I recall the case of a certain husband who told me that part of his job was making phone calls in the evening hours (not at the expense of helping at home), but his wife wanted everything completely quiet in the house during that time. She wouldn't make any accommodations for his job – she wouldn't even let him close himself off in a room at home to do his work. Even after he finished working in the Ezras Nashim of a nearby shul he found available that evening, she still didn't want him to come home before a certain hour, even if he gave her prior notice, because she needed "her space." So aside from getting used to seeking out quiet shuls where he could work, he "had" to call his wife and ask for permission to come home. Yes, she was being self-absorbed and unreasonable, but he was feeding her problem by allowing this to happen. When he wanted to make changes, it wasn't so simple (although ultimately it was BH taken care of). Things like this should be nipped in the bud – it's important to know when not to tolerate not being tolerated…

To refer back to the questions above – if you don't react to a child's misbehavior because your husband can't handle it, or you exert yourself beyond your strength on a fast day so your wife won't be upset, you might be feeding self-absorbed behavior. So again, communication is usually the key, and in a nice way, share how it makes you feel and explain what you would appreciate instead. And then remember to compliment your spouse when they do that for you.

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I'd also like to take a minute to address the sensitive spouse with a low threshold for tolerance. Tolerance is at the core of relationships. Most people can tolerate themselves, with all their shortcomings and failures. If they could live life alone they might get nervous less often. But they wouldn't be happy. It's not good for a person to be alone. *Lo tov heyos ha'adam levado*. We have to make room for others in our relationships. If you have the challenge of a low threshold of tolerance then it's important to work on it and extend it, bit by bit, so that you can stretch enough to make space even for a spouse who might be tired, hungry, or not feeling well. Being accepting about a spouse's lack of perfection contributes a huge amount toward building a strong home. Even if you don't feel motivated enough to do this for your spouse, it's worthwhile doing it for yourself. The more people can work together flexibly, the more successful and happier they will be.

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

TORAH LESSONS
FOR THE HOME

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