בס"ד

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

TORAH LESSONS

FOR THE HOME

PARSHAS HA'AZINU

IN-HOUSE JEALOUSY

In this week's *parshah*, the *passuk* states, "*Tzur yeludcha teshi vatishkach kel mecholeleka* — You forgot the Rock Who bore you; You forgot the G-d Who delivered you." Many *tzaddikim* explain this *passuk* in a similar manner which contains an important lesson for us all.

Hashem created *shikchah,* forgetfulness, to enable us to move on with our lives. If a person was unable to forget that he will pass on one day, he could become very depressed. If a person was unable to forget his pain at a certain incident, his distress at a loss, and so forth, he would be unable to function. Forgetting is a gift. Unfortunately, we sometimes misuse this gift. We forget things we should remember. We start to forget Hashem, *chas v'shalom*. We forget why we were put into this world and what we're supposed to accomplish.

The truth is that all abilities and character traits are a similar package deal — they can be used for good, but they also have a flipside. We have the ability to choose how to see things, and this is something that should be applied properly regarding how we perceive the personality traits and tendencies of those around us, especially those we love. If your spouse is lighthearted and cheerful you may see it as a beautiful thing. Many people appreciate that even when things are tough, such a person doesn't get beaten down. Sadly, others view the same trait negatively, seeing their spouse as someone who doesn't take things seriously, lacks responsibility, and laughs everything off.

When it comes to ourselves, we should work to utilize the positive aspects of each quality. Take the right things lightly and know when to take things seriously. When dealing with others, however, we have to acknowledge that their traits are part of a package deal. You can choose to frame any trait as either positive or negative, a quality or a problem. It's up to you. If your spouse is stingy, you can choose to appreciate that you don't have debts because of them. If your spouse is quieter and more reserved you can appreciate the fact that they aren't sharing personal information or looking for unhealthy attention. If your spouse is a stickler for punctuality, you can appreciate their innate sense of responsibility and feel secure in the knowledge that they have a serious approach to life. And so on.

In his famous *tefillah,* the Rebbe Reb Elimelech of Lizensk asks that, "*Shenireh kol echad maalas chaveireinu velo chesronam*." The simple meaning of this is that we should see the good in others and not their shortcomings. On a deeper level, this can mean that when we see the *maalas chaveireinu*, the qualities a person has, we shouldn't see the negative aspects of those same qualities.

People often complain about other people's personalities or tendencies without realizing that others see them as positive qualities. The wife who hates her husband's extreme punctuality may have never thought about what life might look like if her husband was chronically late; the husband who resents his wife's tendency to spend money "too freely" might never have stopped to appreciate that there's always milk in the fridge for his morning coffee and the bathroom is always well stocked with toilet paper.

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QUESTION #1

DEAR RABBI GRUEN,

Since I was a *bochur* in *yeshivah*, I have always been the one involved and making things happen. This is what I like to do, it makes me feel good, and people appreciate it. Now that I'm married, I still find myself being involved in all kinds of projects and campaigns.

My wife thinks this means I am more interested in other people than in her, and constantly holds me accountable for this. I believe that I help at home and I try to make myself available for the family as much as is needed and normal, and it doesn't really seem that she feels otherwise.

How do I explain to her that this issue has nothing to do with her? It's simply who I am and not a lack of caring for her. Do I need to suppress my tendency and need to be involved and to accomplish?

QUESTION #2

DEAR RABBI GRUEN,

Thank you so much for your classes. I listen and benefit so much from them.

I've heard you mention a few times that when a wife is unhappy about her husband being social, outgoing, and busy with other people, it's really just jealousy and he's not necessarily doing something wrong. I can clearly say that that's the case by me.

I'm lonely and don't have anyone to talk to. I wait home all day for someone to talk to, and in the meantime, my husband is busy with everyone else. I feel like he's literally just doing a *mitzvah* when he talks to me. I know I can't have complaints about the fact that he's busy with other people and has a lot of friends, but it's very hard to live with someone who doesn't need me and does a *mitzvah* talking to me. I feel like he knows exactly how many minutes he gave me. It's so much more comfortable to live with someone who needs me like I need him.

I was the nebbiest girl in school and I married the most successful and popular boy who everyone needs. I'm left living in his shadow. There's both feelings of jealousy and inferiority because I live with someone who is much more than me. I won't say that he makes me feel this way, but I definitely live with an inferiority complex that he doesn't need me.

I'd appreciate it if you could give me some clarity and help with this.

ANSWER

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN RESPONDS

It's fascinating to read both sides of the same issue and get an insight into what each person is seeing and feeling. These situations are relatively common in some form or another and they affect many aspects of a relationship, from making sure you leave enough time for your spouse and not putting other people before them, to understanding your own needs while taking care not to discount someone else's. There's no question that we need to spend enough time at home and it can take honest introspection to know if one is getting the balance right. This is especially true, as husband and wife often have different perceptions on this, based on their subjective ideas of how things should look as well as how they are affected by the need to be either at home or out-and-about.

While all those aspects are important, I want to focus on one point that seems to be a central issue in each of these situations. It happens that both questions relate to husbands who are out more, with their wives waiting for them to come home, but the suggestions I would like to present can be just as relevant in cases where the circumstances are reversed, and I've witnessed such situations as well.

There's no doubt that it's hard to watch someone be out there and successful when you feel like you're living in their shadow. It's not a comfortable feeling at all. When a spouse feels inferior, there's often a measure of jealousy involved, although often only subconsciously. The second questioner openly admits to feeling jealous, while the first is describing a wife whose complaint is that her husband cares more about other people than he does about her. Nonetheless, it's quite possible that she also feels challenged simply due to her husband's busy schedule and his obvious fulfillment.

I would like to address both the husband and the wife, with the goal of enabling each to understand the other and see what *they* can do to improve things, rather than focusing on what their spouse is supposed to be doing.

To the husband in the first question:

You're popular and successful. You're busy and productive. Your wife feels hurt by this, and wants to feel as more of a priority in your life.

First, I want to reiterate that it's important for you to introspect and be honest about whether you really are present enough at home. But there's a second aspect to this introspection. If you're focusing more than you should on outside interests because, "My wife is anyway jealous and unhappy, so I might as well do whatever I

want," you should recognize this tendency, which is quite a common response. People often justify doing nothing beyond the bare minimum because their spouse "is never satisfied anyway." Even if that is the case (and it doesn't appear to be so here), you shouldn't take advantage of another person's challenges. They don't absolve you of your obligation to be the best spouse you can be.

Does being the best husband you can be mean that you have to suppress what you describe as your tendencies and needs? Not necessarily — but it depends on how you go about doing it. If your wife only finds out after the event that you were busy with a huge project or that you already scheduled a meeting at a time when you would otherwise be at home, it's only natural that she might feel jealous. You can make an effort to avoid this by asking her in advance if she's okay with your involvement with something, and trying to take her schedule into account when making your own. You can even involve her as much as possible, asking for her opinion and input on things you're busy with. This doesn't mean that you always have to ask for her permission — but if you do, you might find that she gives it quite willingly because she sees that you're taking her feelings into account.

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We often teach children to avoid making others jealous. Sometimes, children protest and say, "I'm not *making* him jealous. It's not my fault that I've got a snack and he doesn't." That may be true, but if the child is eating that snack right in front of his friend while telling him how delicious it is, he is almost certainly contributing to any jealousy his friend is feeling.

If you're a person accustomed to constant accomplishments while your wife remains at home taking care of everyday life, being sensitive to these dynamics can make a lot of difference. Notice the tone of voice you use when telling your wife about your various projects, and compare it with the tone of voice you use when discussing family issues with her. If you sound (and feel) so much more excited by all the things you're doing outside the house, you can understand how this could be contributing to the problem. You can get around this by involving your wife more, discussing things with her, and even by asking her whether you should undertake a certain project as you're not sure you feel confident enough to do it. Then *she* can tell you that she thinks you could do it and *you* can thank *her* for giving you the confidence — and afterward, you can even give her the credit for the project's success. This will make her feel less intimidated and could even make her feel positive about aspects of your life she has been shut out of until now.

This doesn't mean to imply that you have to share absolutely every aspect of your life with your wife. If you need to be involved with a certain project that you know she is especially sensitive about, there's no need to tell her. If you unexpectedly find yourself with a spare hour and you decide to use it to help others, why would you want to provide a potential source of pain by letting her know that you chose not to spend that hour with her? (Obviously, this will only apply if you know you weren't needed at home during that time, and if this isn't a regular occurrence.) Couples shouldn't live separate lives or generally keep secrets, but if something occasional is specifically challenging, why not spare your wife the distress?

Meanwhile, you should continue to reassure your wife that your involvement in all kinds of projects is simply part of your nature and always has been, dating back to long before you were married. Try to clarify that it's nothing to do with putting her in second place, *chas v'shalom*. Don't give her the impression that the time you spend with her is time you wish you could be using "more productively." (Don't make her feel like the wife in the second letter who feels that her husband is counting the minutes he spends with her.) Explain that without actualizing this aspect of your life, an important part of your nature would be suppressed. Don't debate it. Don't use logic or bring proofs. Just state the facts without waiting for her to agree with you.

Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach often related a particular story about the Ponovezher Rav and his father-in-law, the Rav of Vilkomir. During the *sheva berachos,* the Ponovezher Rav made his first visit to Vilkomir and his father-in-law was quite taken aback by the interest his new son-in-law took in the *eruv*, *mikveh*, and other local details, as he had understood him to be a *talmid chacham* (which indeed he was) who wanted nothing more than to sit and learn in peace. Noticing the Vilkomir Rav's discomfort, the Ponevezher Rav told him, "This is my nature. If you lock me into a room full of *sefarim*, I'll probably end up smashing all the windows." Rav Shlomo Zalman explained that although this wasn't an easy conversation for either of them, it clarified where things stood — and years later, when the Ponovezher Rav became one of the greatest builders of Torah in Eretz Yisrael, it became clear that he had been right to act in accordance with his nature and utilize it for good.

It's obviously wonderful to be blessed with the capabilities of the Ponovezher Rav, and if you are also very gifted in your ability to help the *klal*, you have a lot to be grateful for — including a wife who gives you the stability and security at home that you need in order to be able to achieve all that you do. Try as much as you can to involve her, ask for her advice and support, and thank her for everything that she contributes. Don't leave her feeling useless or superfluous. Once you start looking, you may find she has a lot more to offer than you realized. If you can help her feel needed, she might feel a lot more positive about the way your relationship works. Sometimes, taking from someone is the best thing you can give them.

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Now for the wife in the second question:

I assume you've heard me say that if a person feels jealous of someone, it doesn't follow that they're doing anything wrong. Jealousy is a character flaw that doesn't mean there's anything inherently wrong with you — all it means is that you have something you need to work on. It's not easy to work on jealousy — it's not easy to work on any character trait, in fact, but jealousy is possibly more challenging to work on than other tendencies. A certain series of children's books on *middos* is labeled for age-appropriateness, and jealousy is labeled for a higher age than sharing, for instance. Acknowledging that you're jealous of your spouse means you've already taken the first and possibly most difficult step (as many people are unwilling to face up to possessing such feelings). The next step is to work on it.

There are many ways to go about this. Reminding yourself that your spouse is not trying to hurt you is helpful. It's not easy to hear, "Don't take it personally — it's not about you." But that doesn't detract from the reality that it really *isn't* about you. It's about your husband's need for fulfillment outside as well as within the home, and the *indirect* impact this has on you. It's not easy to *fargin* him when you feel that your own life is lacking. But these are two separate issues: his needs, and yours. Trying to deny him the fulfillment of his needs in the belief that this will give you what you want is only going to backfire. He will end up resenting you — just as you would resist attempts to deny you what you feel you need.

So, what can you do? Once you start to break down the issue into its component parts, you'll see that it's not as black-and-white as you thought. There are his needs, your needs, his character traits, and yours — and even within the category of "this problematic character trait of his" there are sub-categories. How so?

You describe your husband as: "social, outgoing, busy with other people, and the most successful and popular boy who everyone

needs." If you were describing your brother in such terms, would you also want to transform him into "someone who needs others" rather than "someone who everyone needs"? Perhaps there are actually ways in which you gain from having an outgoing husband who loves to help people. Perhaps it's better to have a husband who helps others than it is to have a husband who is entirely focused on himself.

Now that you're starting to see your husband as someone with many different character traits which impact you in many different ways, you can try to talk to your husband about some of the impacts that you're having trouble dealing with. As you do so, keep in mind all the ways in which you benefit from having an upbeat, generous-minded spouse, and respect him for the ways in which he uses his *middos* to help others, including you.

It's not easy, but you will probably accomplish more by being understanding than you could by complaining about what you feel is his lack of availability, which will only put him on the defensive. If you begin by stressing how much you respect his accomplishments, you'll be creating an entirely different atmosphere, and your request for more time with him will be heard differently too. However, making a vague request for "more time" won't be as productive as asking for something specific — a regular outing together, uninterrupted time at supper, and so forth.

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Another way of dealing with your painful feelings is through "if you can't beat them, join them." Instead of fighting against all the help your husband gives people, become his partner. Show interest in his social activities, make suggestions, and let him know how much you admire all the *chessed* he does and how you'd like to become part of it, too. You don't need to be outgoing to do *chessed*. Sometimes, a more introspective person has more insight into what others need and does *chessed* with more sensitivity. If he agrees to involve you and you enjoy the involvement, you'll feel more accomplished. Even if you decide it's not for you, you'll still feel more connected to him, and he to you.

I don't want to trivialize how hard this is, but sometimes women are too dependent on their husbands — and there are also men who are too dependent on their wives. Dependence becomes unhealthy when a person needs the constant support of others and feels incapable of facing life alone. Healthy interdependence is when two capable people also know how to support each other when necessary. Although there are people who thrive when they feel needed, it's more common for a person to withdraw when he or she feels that someone else needs them so badly, and to prefer being around people who don't put them under so much pressure.

You describe your loneliness, and lack of anyone other than your husband to talk to. It sounds like you don't have family who can fill this void, and perhaps you are also shy and introverted and find it difficult to reach out to neighbors and make friends. Feeling "inferior" only makes this harder, which is why I think that the only way to crawl out of this situation is by conquering these baseless feelings of inferiority.

You describe your husband with such glowing language (even though you personally feel intimidated by his success), and describe yourself as nothing beyond "nebby." Perhaps the world does value social and outgoing people more, and underrates quiet, reserved people who keep their thoughts to themselves. But you must learn to value yourself, regardless, and start noticing all the good qualities that you have. See how they positively impact other people in your life, including your husband. I realize that this is much easier said than done, but even a small change you make in this area could lead to big changes. You can start by admiring the fact that you are so honest about your feelings and ready to address them and make difficult changes in your life. Honesty and humility are rare and precious traits.

Your husband is blessed with different traits and no one should presume to judge which traits are "better" than others. It all depends on how we use them. You can't change your husband's traits, and he can't change yours. Neither should either of you try to, because Hashem made you different for a reason — for many reasons, and you're just beginning to understand why, and how it's actually good for you to be this way.

Learning to accept your husband with all his myriad facets will enable you to see all the ways in which you gain from having a sociable, generous-minded, outgoing husband. Learning to accept yourself as someone different but equal will help you to realize that you don't need a husband who needs you desperately, just as you don't need him desperately either. *B'ezras Hashem* this will enable both of you to appreciate each other and build a healthy and fulfilling relationship.

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME

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