RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

Parshas Behar-Bechukosai

One Step at a Time

The *medrash* says that "A fool might wonder how he will ever manage to learn the entire Torah which is so vast. But a wise man understands that by learning a little bit at a time consistently, he will eventually become a Talmid Chacham."

On a long road trip, regardless of how many treats and activities you pack into the car, children tend to become impatient. Why is that? The ride seems endless to them. They don't consider the fact that with every mile you travel, you are getting ever closer to your destination. They just want to be there already.

This is how the Rebbe, Rav Moshe'le Koznitzer explains the first *passuk* in this week's Parsha (Behar) "*And Hashem said to Moshe on Har Sinai*". Sometimes things seem like a "*har*", an insurmountable *forchtige* mountain. And yet one must understand that in order to conquer new heights in whatever he puts his mind to, he needs to climb one step at a time. Only by means of a ladder that rises gradually rung by rung, can one acquire greatness. "*Sinai*" has the same *gimatria* as "*sulam*", a ladder. The *possuk* is telling us, when things seem to be a Har, apply *"sinai"* - bring a ladder over and start your climb, little by little you will achieve.

There are many things that we can do to improve our relationships, but they can seem so daunting and difficult. A person gets married with the goal of building a "*bayis ne'eman*", and both at the outset and especially if one is already struggling, it can seem like a really big hurdle to overcome. But if he realizes that taking baby steps in the right direction will eventually effect change, it will make the process so much easier to handle.

Many people think that when they send in a question about a relationship issue they're struggling with, it will resolve itself instantly once it is addressed in a *shiur*. But that is not how it works. Only when you are ready to put in the work with tenacity and patience, can you rise above your challenges slowly but surely, rung by rung with *Siyatta Dishmaya*.

Question:

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

I'm a quiet person by nature, and I don't talk much. My wife, though, is just the opposite. We have been married for twenty years and my wife is constantly complaining that I don't talk.

When she asks me a question and I answer in what she refers to as "monosyllables", she asks me to speak in sentences. She tells me, "Talk already!!" This hurts me very much. I feel like she doesn't accept me, and it makes me very angry.

How should I react? Can I even change? What should I do? I can't take this anymore!

Thank you.

Answer:

As mentioned earlier, a situation that has been going on for this long will likely not be fixed with just one question and answer session. Bear in mind that while I will try to offer my best guidance, you might want to consider getting additional individualized help as you navigate your relationship.

The first thing I want to address is the fact that her criticism is making you angry. I can understand that feeling judged like this can put you on edge, but the anger might stem from a lack of understanding of where she is coming from. It is possible that you are only seeing things from your own perspective and you may not realize that your wife might have at least some point. I would suggest you should begin by trying to see why she is feeling the way she does. It doesn't have to be that your own feelings on the matter will be invalid afterwards, or that you will be wrong, but it might give you some more perspective and temper your anger a little bit. In general, anger only serves to exacerbate problems.

You might wonder why I am telling you this. Shouldn't *she* be the one to try to understand *you*? Why do you have to expend all this energy to try and make this right? The truth is, that had your wife asked me the question, I would have told her exactly the same thing. It isn't a contradiction. You *both* need to try to understand each other better. But being that you are the one who asked this question, I am telling you what *you* can do to possibly make things a bit better.

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Let's examine the problem and determine: what are your options? You are married for two decades, and I'm guessing this has been going on just about as long. You can either choose to stay stuck in the situation as is, keep keeping quiet, and getting angry, and nothing will change. What's more, none of you will feel better about it or be happier. Or, you can try to calm yourself down and find a workable solution, which might seem more

difficult, but will ultimately help you reach your goal of living together harmoniously.

Assuming that you are considering the latter option, let's delve a bit deeper into this. It's good to know that women in general, and especially those that are on the more talkative side, need their husbands to talk to them. That is a totally normal request.

You might counter with the *Mishna* in Pirkei Avos that one should not speak excessively with his wife, but let me point out that it does use the word EXCESSIVE. The Bartenura explains right away that there are certain times when speaking with one's wife is not only allowed, but an obligation. According to Rabeinu Tam (Yevamos 62b) speaking to your wife and making her feel good with your words is one of the basic obligations of a husband.

You can't expect someone to be okay in a relationship where there isn't any communication. The *passuk* says that there's a time for silence, but there's also a time for speech. Just like you can't expect someone to be available to talk to you 24/7, you also can't expect someone to be okay with you NOT talking 24/7. In order for two people to enjoy a mutually satisfying relationship, both of them need to be ready to engage in conversation on a somewhat regular basis.

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In fact, it is the power of speech that sets humans apart from any other species. Speaking to each other is the only way for us to form a human connection with each other. That is why a woman who feels like she doesn't have a common language with her husband is understandably feeling shortchanged.

While you can technically be related to your wife even if you never exchange more than the bare minimum of words, by virtue of having stood under the same *chuppah* on your wedding night, however, that doesn't make more than a *kesher shel kayama*, but in order for it to be a proper *binyan adei ad* it requires communication.

It's possible that at this point, having stuck to your guns for so long, it is hard for you to give in to her request. A common problem in relationships is, resistance to change that someone else demands. This common issue can really hamper any progress. Therefore, it's best if you can try and reframe it. You are not going to talk to her because she has asked you to do so. You are going to talk to her because that is what is required of you in order to have a healthy relationship with her. If the decision comes from you, it might make you more amicable to the idea of change.

You clearly want a better relationship than the one you have now, evidenced by the fact that you sent in this question. However, I assume that knowing all that was mentioned here does not necessarily make it any easier for you to do it. It might help you realize, though, that your wife isn't out of her mind for asking you to talk to her more. Being aware that she has a valid argument might also motivate you to work on it.

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I don't know many details about you, but sometimes quiet people *do* talk, only on their own terms. They might prefer to talk to their friends, or their siblings, or only when they're looking to unload their complaints to someone. That can make the problem even worse, because your wife sees that you CAN talk, only not to her, or not in a positive way!

It reminds me of the fable about an old-time *am-ha'aretz* who didn't know how to make a *seder* on Pesach night, so he sent his wife upstairs to spy on the neighbor. It so happened that the neighbor was in the middle of giving his wife a vicious beating. When she returned to her husband, shaking and pale, she refused to tell him what she saw. When she insisted on staying silent even after he asked her many times, he proceeded to unleash a beating on *her*.

"I see you already know the right way to conduct a *seder*," she said to him, "Why, then, didn't you just do it?"

When your wife sees you communicating successfully with others, she might be feeling this way, as well. *If you do know how to, so why don't you??*

It's possible that there is a reason for it, and it's important to consider what is really going on. Are you afraid of her? Do you think she won't understand or be able to help you? In any case, you need to realize that if you do talk to others, it might just add additional pain on to your wife.

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Now, in regard to your wife, it will probably be much easier for me to tell your wife to be more accepting of you, but why don't you try telling her yourself? As soon as you are ready to get yourself out of your rut, you can tell her, "I realize you want me to talk to you more, and I would like to help make it easier for us." Maybe you can practice finding topics that interest both of you and you can talk about those.

Maybe she can help you by initiating conversation or asking you pointed questions. Maybe you can ask for a couple of minutes after you come home to orient yourself before she drags you into conversation.

You can even tell her that you would appreciate for her to understand you, too, and explain to her what you're going through. You can tell her that when she comes at you so harshly and orders you to talk, you find it hurtful and while you know she doesn't mean it, it makes you feel that she doesn't accept you. You are allowed to tell others that their behavior bothers you, but it has to come from a place of trying to understand their position as well, and as part of trying to find a mutual resolution, all without blaming anyone directly.

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Another question you asked was if I think you can change. It's not really possible for a person to turn into something he isn't, but you can certainly choose to *behave* differently. You can get yourself used to doing things differently. Eventually, it can become second nature to you to make conversation with your wife. That doesn't necessarily mean that your essence will change. You won't become the biggest shmoozer, but your reflexes will be trained to respond in a better way.

It can be compared to someone on a diet. For the first couple of days, it can feel so good to withstand temptation and control yourself. Until, one day, a craving hits. The dieter can feel so discouraged, having thought that dieting eradicated the appeal of those unhealthy foods. Oh, what a perfect world it would be if that were true.

If you are aware that by working on changing your instinctive reaction and making this your new normal bit by bit, it will give you a leg up in the process of change. With practice, it might not become easier or more pleasant, but it will definitely become less of a mountain.

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I once read a story about Rav Rafael Binyamin Levine, a son of Reb Aryeh Levine, and a *dayan* and *rav* in his own right. A couple once visited his *beis din* and asked to arrange for their divorce. When the *dayan* asked them why they were considering taking such a step, they said that while they don't dislike each other or fight, they don't have a common language. Rav Levine suggested a *segulah* he has heard about that might be helpful for them.

"Maybe," he offered, "You can change your names and then your *mazel* will change as well."

The couple was open to the idea. Rav Levine continued by saying that his brother-in-law Rav Elyashiv says that the only way for a name change to take effect, is to use it consistently for thirty days. He instructed the couple to use each other's new name as much as possible for the coming month.

Miracle of miracles, the *segulah* worked! When the couple made it a point to talk to each other, and address each other by their names, they forged a meaningful connection and all thoughts of divorce flew out the window.

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One final point to consider is that there's a chance that you are so stuck on the lack of communication between each other, that you are letting the other components of your relationship slide as well. Maybe, if you can give each other other forms of affection, the lack of communication won't be such a deal breaker.

In any case, it is up to you to try your best to strengthen your connection with your wife in all aspects, and utilizing the right time to speak as well as the right time to remain silent. If you can see that ladder leaning on the mountain and start scaling it step by step, you will be able to reach the summit and attain a true *Bayis Ne'eman Byisroel b'ezras Hashem*.

All the best, Rabbi Shimon Gruen

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME: BEHAR-BECHUKOSAI 5781

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