RABBI
SHIMON GRUEN

# Torah Lessons for the home

## PARSHAS RE'EH

## BEING HELPFUL: WHEN IT'S TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING

The *passuk* in Parshas Va'eschanan quotes Moshe Rabbeinu as telling Bnei Yisroel: *"Anochi omed bein Hashem uveineichem* – I stand between you and Hashem." The Zlotchover Maggid presents a novel interpretation of this *passuk*, focusing on the word "Anochi – I" and describing how a person's excessive emphasis on himself can get in the way of him being close and connected to Hashem. The Me'or Vashemesh takes this idea a step further, bringing a *passuk* from this week's *parshah*, "*Re'eh Anochi nasati lifneichem es habrachah v'es haklalah* – See I have placed before you the blessing and the curse." He explains that there are times when a person needs to feel a degree of self-importance. When it comes to serving Hashem, a person must feel worthy. He should feel that his *tefillos* and *mitzvos* are of value. However, thinking too much of oneself at the wrong time is damaging. Thus "Re'eh Anochi," the feeling of "I am," is a *brachah* in the right time and place but a *klalah* otherwise.

This is a concept that we find in many areas of the Torah, where a *middah* is wonderful when used appropriately but damaging otherwise. Knowing when and how much to esteem oneself is also vital when dealing with other people. It takes a lot of *chochmah* to find the right balance between not being self-centered and disregarding others, and yet taking yourself seriously enough to ensure that those others don't disregard or take advantage of you.

A relationship in which one person dominates and everything revolves around them is destructive for everyone involved, even if those being dominated allow it to happen (and even welcome it). That's an "Anochi" that is likely to become a *klalah*, with the dominant person's personality tending toward selfishness and the person who's completely obliterating *his* "Anochi" likely to become unhappy and resentful.

**A special thank you to Rabbi and Mrs. Berel Schwartz for dedicating this week's essay,**
May enhancing the Shalom Bayis in Yiddishe homes be a Zchus for them and their family!

# Question:

Dear Rabbi Gruen

I recently started listening to your lectures on Torah Anytime, and I have also read your book, and I find both really beneficial. Thank you.

You write in your book never to disagree with or fight an emotionally sensitive person. I'm trying to figure out what to do instead.

I'm married to a wonderful woman, who's quite sensitive too. Our current situation is like this: My wife had a baby a few months ago and we're still not back to ourselves. My wife doesn't get enough sleep because of the baby and some insomnia, and she's always tired. I've been coming home from shul to get the kids off in the morning so she can sleep a little longer. Now she says she doesn't sleep anyway because the baby is up. I asked if she could start to get the kids off again, but she says she's still too tired. I asked if we could at least switch off days, but she said we don't switch off doing the laundry so why should we switch off with mornings?

I answered that I have a full-time job and it's hard for me to do it every day. She complained that when she worked (twice a week for just a few hours,) we didn't switch off any of the chores. I didn't answer. I realized she'd have something to say to everything. But how am I supposed to respond to these comments? She thinks she works all day because she's busy with the baby and the house. She also feels that I'm not pitching in enough.

I'm a nice, giving person. I do a lot more than she will admit to. There are things I do that I think I shouldn't be responsible for, but I don't know how to tell her. For example, I do bedtime, nighttime feedings for the baby, and other things. How can I take a few things off my plate without getting backlash? Also, how can I do something I usually don't do, because she needs it at that time, while making it clear that this is not my regular responsibility? How would you recommend I deal with these situations?

And last, what do I do when I get the feeling like maybe I just fell in and married the wrong person...

Thanks so much.

# Answer:

Let's summarize the issues you've raised: It sounds like your wife is feeling overwhelmed – especially as she's just after a baby – and that she also feels that you're not helping enough. You, however, feel that in general you're doing enough and are willing to do more when circumstances warrant it – but then you can't get out of it later.

This is not a unique situation and it can also occur the other way around, when a wife tries to help her husband who works long hours and suddenly finds herself responsible for learning with her sons etc. even at a later stage when her husband once again has the time to do so himself. In this questioner's situation, the difficulty is compounded by the fact that he sees his wife as sensitive, and she also becomes defensive when he tries to discuss the topic and reason with her.

The first thing I would like to point out is that there are situations that warrant a lot of help. An overwhelmed mother, especially after a baby, will ordinarily need a lot of help. Men may not realize the extent to which their wives need help at such times, and sometimes, just accepting the situation and getting on with it is all that is needed to resolve disputes. Even when there's no new baby or other reason you can see to explain why your wife is feeling unable to deal with everything she used to, or you have cleaning help for instance, or you're tempted to tell her, "My mother always managed fine with..." you might be better off if you can just let go and accept that your wife is

different. It's interesting, though, that all too often, the issue isn't even the physical help you can provide (even if that's what she's asking for). Rather, your wife simply needs the emotional support you provide just by being *willing* to help more. If you resist recognizing this and treat the struggle as a practical one, you might lose the opportunity to reach a simple solution to what is essentially an emotional issue.

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In most homes, there is an unspoken yet accepted "job description" of "who does what and when." A haphazard arrangement where people only do things (cooking, cleaning, or laundry would be good examples) when they get around to them, or when they feel in the mood, leads to chaos and often spouses end up blaming each other for the situation. The Gemara describes a situation where a pot is tended by two separate cooks and the food ends up either overcooked or raw because neither of them accepts responsibility for the end result. In order to have a functional home, you need to have a basic and normal expectation of who's doing what.

At the same time, the division of chores shouldn't necessarily be set in stone or overly specific. It also shouldn't turn into a source of conflict, "You're the one who's supposed to do... so if you don't do it, it won't get done..." or even worse: "If you don't do ... then I won't do..." If you're married, you're both responsible; you should both care about your home, the children, and each other, and you'll cover for each other when necessary in a healthy manner. While there *should* be a general division of responsibilities, they *should* also be shared. Life and relationships are about balance and flexibility and neither extreme is good.

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Sometimes, women feel incredibly frustrated about what they see as a lack of appreciation for all they do: "You know how many diapers I changed today? You know how many spills (or noses) I wiped? How many meals I served?" They think their husbands should realize and show appreciation without having to be told, but many husbands aren't aware of how grueling it can be to look after small children all day, plus housework. And the same applies in reverse, when husbands become frustrated with their wives' lack of appreciation.

Women who are at home all day, and certainly those holding a job too, are doing a whole lot. Men who work all day long, and especially those who still find time to daven and learn appropriately too, are also doing a lot. Don't use this against each other.

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Back to the questioner and those in similar situations: As an interesting experiment, try telling your wife how impressed you are at the number of diapers she's changing, the number of spills she wipes, and the number of meals she cooks – *before* she mentions it to you. What you're likely to find is that she'll feel the need to mention it a lot less. She doesn't necessarily stress the amount of work she does because she's overworked, or because she thinks she does more (or less) than you, but because she wants to feel appreciated.

So instead of belittling her chores ("What's the big deal about wiping noses?") thinking that it'll get her to complain less or ask less for your help, simply appreciate what she does, without making comparisons. This is what's going to make all the difference – even more than physically helping more – and especially when you're dealing with someone who is hypersensitive where emotions play a large role. If your wife is constantly trying to explain how overwhelmed she feels and never gets the sense that you accept her feelings, her resentment will only mount, even if you do take on more chores. Helping more, accompanied by comments such as, "I shouldn't have to be doing this..." will only make things worse.

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Let me mention another point that husbands of self-proclaimed overwhelmed women often unwittingly get wrong, with the best of intentions. When I ask a husband when the last time was that he mentioned to his wife what supper he'd really like, the response is: never! In such cases, many men stop asking their wives for anything – after all, she's already not managing with the everyday tasks, and she's always complaining, so how could she cope with "extras"? But this is mistaken, because when you acknowledge what someone is doing, making them feel needed and appreciated – and then ask them for something extra (obviously within limits), you open up the possibility of showing so much appreciation for that little extra, which will make your wife feel amazing. Done the right way, you can reduce resentment by asking for more, rather than less.

Another point to consider is that maybe you actually should be more aware of what needs to be done, and shouldn't wait to be asked every time. This applies even if you happily agree to do whatever your wife is asking for. Subconsciously, your wife is likely to feel that she doesn't really deserve the help you're giving, and no one enjoys feeling indebted. Or, she might resent having to continually ask you to do something that you really should have figured out on your own. So offer. Don't wait for her to ask, and don't wait till it's relevant in the moment. Tell her, "I might be a bit busy in the morning, but if there's something I can get you please don't hesitate to call. I want to do what I can for you." She'll feel taken care of and understood. She'll be grateful that you understand that it's not easy for her to put the kids on the bus. And she'll feel your appreciation when she does it herself. That can take care of the need to begin with. She won't have to prove how difficult it is.

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All the same, there may still be times when you have to be a little firm when someone is too demanding. You should feel comfortable saying something like, "I really want to help you and I understand that it's hard for you. Right now I really can't, but if it's still needed later, please let me know and I'll try to figure something out." Or you can say, "I wish I could. Doing this now would make me late for work. Let's see what we can do instead." Sometimes, when people continually give, especially when they feel they're not being given a choice nor being asked nicely, they do it grudgingly and become resentful, or argue that they shouldn't have to step in. Neither approach is productive. Instead, validate your wife's difficulty, while also validating your own feelings and stating them clearly. Then offer to come up with a solution together.

It's important to know how to offer and give help, but it's just as important to know how to take a step back if the other person becomes demanding. The same applies if you feel the need to stop doing something you took on. Emphasize that it's not because your wife doesn't deserve it anymore; it's just that it's become too hard for you. Leave out anything challenging or personal, stick to the technical details, and make sure to speak gently and respectfully. If your wife starts an emotional argument about how this shows that you don't care about her, just repeat, "I understand that it's hard for you. I'm sorry. I feel that I just can't. If I'm able to in the future, I will." You can remind her that you're happy to discuss other ways of resolving the problem, and add that you don't necessarily mean to push it onto her. Remember that your resentment about being forced into the role of "Mr. Nice Guy" isn't going to be healthy for either of you.

Much of the real issue here is emotional and can't be resolved by logic. This is why validating your wife's emotions will achieve the best results – but only when you "validate" your own emotions as well. This is a practical expression of the *vort* I brought at the start of the essay. Being selfish is never good, and yet being too giving is not the solution and can cause its own problems. It's all about balance and how to communicate our feelings in the healthiest, most caring manner.

I do believe that with the right approach and communication you'll see positive results and develop a much more satisfying relationship. But I do want to mention one important point, being that you used the words I've heard many times, feeling like you *fell in*. Nobody ever "falls in." There is no such thing. All too often, such situations boil down to *emunah* and *bitachon*. Even in situations where it really does *seem* like you "fell in," you have to believe and accept that this is the best possible situation for you. You have to realize that this is where Hashem placed you, within a relationship that will ultimately bring out the best in both of you. When you reinforce that iron-clad faith that Hashem tailor-made this situation for you, you'll no longer resent any aspect of your marriage. Instead, you'll be able to deal with all the issues that arise happily, and with the confidence that you both, together, can find solutions.

**Rabbi Shimon Gruen**

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# TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME
## RE'EH 5782

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