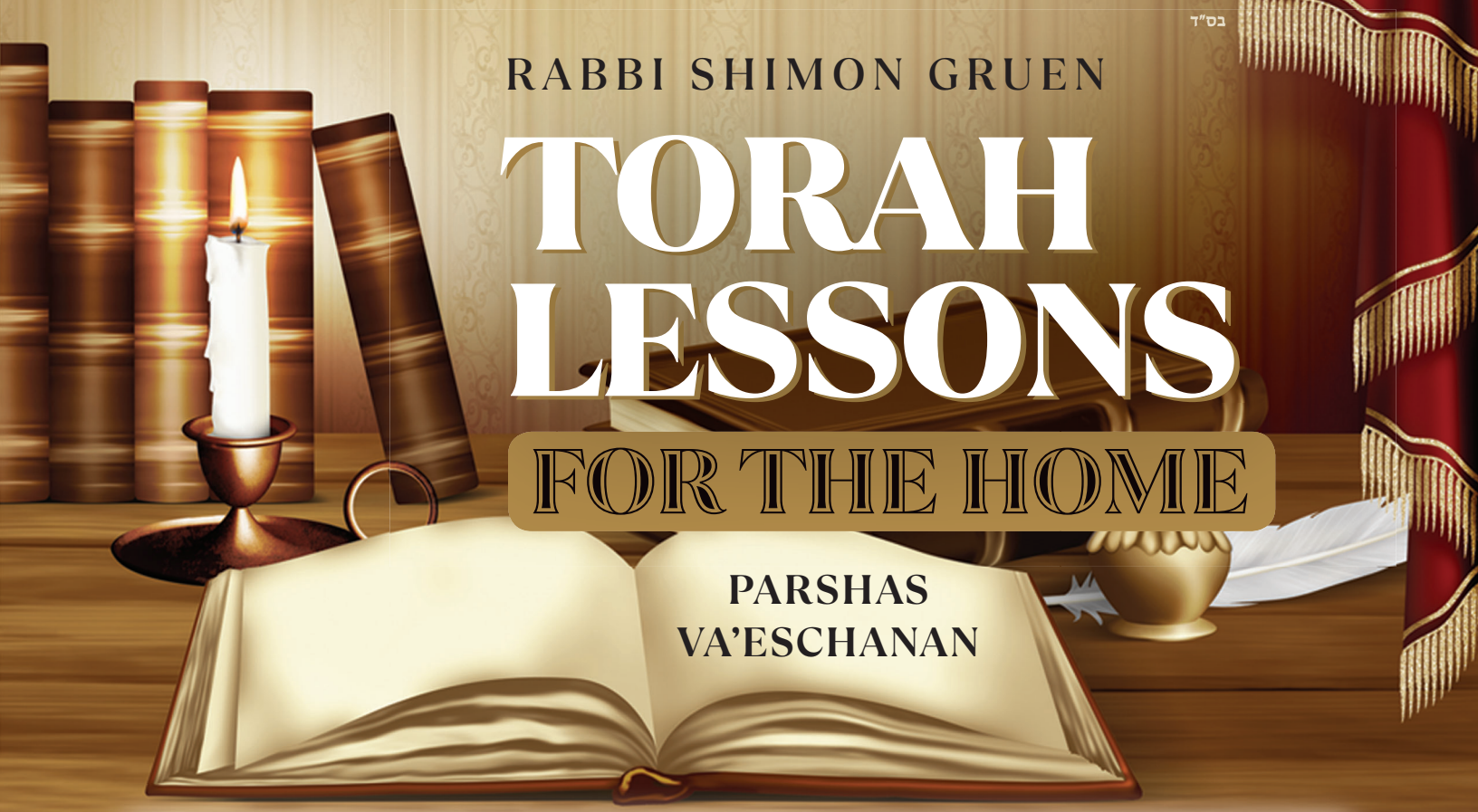
RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

TORAH LESSONS

FOR THE HOME

PARSHAS VA'ESCHANAN



REQUESTING AND EXPRESSING GRATITUDE AND REMORSE

In Parshas Va'eschanan, Moshe Rabbeinu continues his last speech to Klal Yisrael and tells them, *"Anochi omed bein Hashem uveineichem* — I stand between Hashem and you."

A classic Chassidic interpretation of this *passuk* from the Zlotchover Maggid explains that it is the "*Anochi* — I," the feeling of self-importance, that comes between a person and Hashem. It's the person's own ego that gets in the way of connecting to Hashem.

It's so simple and so profound.

This is true in personal relationships as well. When a couple has *shalom bayis*, the *Shechinah* rests in their home. But if the spouses' egos create friction between them, this will come between them and Hashem and drive the *Shechinah* away from their home.

All too often, ego centered battles are provoked over minor issues. Once someone is struggling with something, it doesn't seem petty to him, no matter how small it may be. This is why it's important to get an outside opinion to make sure it's not just an ego inflating matter.

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לזכות ר' חיים צבי בן אלטא פרומט לרפו"ש

PLEASE TAKE A MOMENT AND SAY TEHILIM FOR HIS REFUAH SHLEIMA

QUESTION #1

DEAR RABBI GRUEN,

I can use some guidance regarding a situation, although it wasn't so terrible.

A few weeks before Pesach, I asked my wife if she could still bake *challos* for Shabbos. She was very bothered by the request at a time when she was working so hard to prepare for Pesach. She said she can't do it for me.

I really didn't like how she answered me and we started a conversation about it. During the conversation, she said that she feels that I don't express enough appreciation for all that she does. She really does a lot. It seems like she doesn't really need my help as much as she just wants me to be more appreciative of what she does. I feel that I am appreciative but I'm not sure how I can express it more. I asked her what more she would want but she wasn't clear. I tell her "Thank you" often. I express amazement at her work. Obviously, there's always room for me to do more. Maybe I should buy things for her or write a note (both of which I sometimes do)?

I would appreciate having more ideas about how to show my appreciation so that she feels good about it.

Thank you.

QUESTION #2

DEAR RABBI GRUEN,

Thank you so much for the clarity my wife and I gain from your classes, and for all that they have done for our marriage.

There is something that bothers me very much. I know it might sound silly and trivial, but it affects my marriage very deeply.

We have a wonderful marriage and in general we are an extremely lucky couple. However, there's something about my wife that bothers me very much. It's not something she does or says, it's actually something she doesn't say. It's the two simple words "I'm sorry."

Whenever she does something that hurts my feelings (and I'm not one to be easily offended or hypersensitive) and I tell her that I was hurt, she will never ever say the words "I'm sorry." She'll discuss it, talk about it, and even debate whether it was right or wrong. But she will never use the words "I'm sorry."

I tell her, "All I need is an 'I'm sorry.' That's it. This can all be a thing of the past with two simple magic words." It doesn't help. These words never leave her mouth. She can say, "I'm not sure what you want me to apologize for," and continue with, "I'm not the type that says I'm sorry if I don't know for what or if I don't feel that I have to," etc. etc. In all these years, the actual "I'm sorry," never came.

I'm embarrassed to say that this makes me so angry that I can say and do things that I never say or do to anyone else. I start making a much bigger deal about what she actually did, and show her how wrong she was, all in the hopes of getting an apology. When my wife gets upset at me for these things, I yell at her for being so stubborn and resisting these two relatively simple and stupid words: I'm sorry. "Just say them for a change."

I've apologized countless times in the past and have no issue with saying I'm sorry when somebody was hurt or offended, but for some reason I can't merit hearing from them. I know I should probably just let it go and forget about hearing it, but there's something about it that I believe will ease the tension. What can I do to either accept it, or get my wife to say it?

Thank you.

ANSWER

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN RESPONDS

Both questions are from husbands asking for help, and both mention that their situation isn't so terrible. I agree, yet it's okay to be bothered by something even if it's not "terrible," and no one should feel bad about being bothered by something. If someone isn't apologizing, saying thank you, greeting you, helping you, or anything else, it's okay to be bothered by it and okay to be honest about how you feel. The same applies if you're bothered by the fact that someone is complaining about the way you behave. That said, if it's something relatively small that's bothering you, it's good to acknowledge that it isn't terrible. Don't allow minor issues to throw off your equilibrium.

Since both questioners are discussing situations where one party is bothered by something that isn't being expressed clearly or sufficiently, I'll try to give an answer that will provide a general structure for how to assess what's reasonable to ask for and how to maximize the chances of having your requests met.

Ultimately, appreciation and apologies shouldn't be things you have to ask for. When someone does something for you, common decency is to express appreciation. If you offend someone, common decency is to apologize. Sometimes, however, these things can be blown out of proportion. There are people who demand appreciation when they've hardly done anything, or who demand more appreciation even after you have already expressed it. In general, however, one shouldn't wait to be asked for an expression of appreciation.

The same applies to apologies. There are people who apologize all day at the slightest prompt, and others who demand apologies where none are necessary. Don't use the word "sorry" so often that it loses its meaning. But again, where an apology is warranted, no one should have to ask for it.

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It's important to realize that people can have interesting ways of expressing themselves. A letter I once received highlights this idea:

I recently made a really delicious dinner. I put in a lot of work to marinate and dress an expensive cut of meat. While we were eating, my husband asked me what cut of meat it was, and I told him. Later on, I asked him if he enjoyed dinner. He responded that he already told me it was delicious. I told him I must have missed something because he never said that. He answered that he already asked me what cut of meat I served.

Basically, we all communicate differently and we compliment differently. I still haven't gotten used to it but I'm working on understanding him anyway.

Maybe her husband should have expressed his appreciation more directly, but it's commendable that she is aware that people have different ways of saying things. If your spouse says, "I shouldn't have done that," it could be their way of saying "I'm sorry." Saying, "The house looks really clean," might be a way of expressing appreciation for the effort it took to get it that way. It's okay if your spouse has a different way of communicating their gratitude or regret. And if you still want to hear things expressed in a way that speaks more to you, that's okay too, and we'll discuss how to go about it.

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Perhaps the most important advice I could give on making requests in general, is that they should be framed as requests, not demands, no matter how justified the requests may be. If you want something, by all means ask for it, but make it absolutely clear that you're asking and that the other person is free to say either "yes" or "no." Don't make it sound like what you're asking for is something you expect the other person to give, even if you don't state it outright.

Saying things like, "It would mean a lot to me if you could express appreciation for this," or, "It would mean so much if you could say you're sorry," go a long way to easing communication and defusing defensiveness, and if you can add, "You don't have to, but I would appreciate it if you could," that's even better.

Regardless of what came before, stick to the point — what you would like things to look like in the future. Don't generalize or condemn using statements such as, "You never thank me," "You don't care about my feelings," or "You're so stubborn; why can't you just say it?" Such talk won't get you anywhere.

The first questioner wrote that his issue was sparked by a request that his wife bake *challah*. When you want to ask for something, especially when you know it might be difficult — like baking *challah* close to Pesach (or anytime, for that matter) — it's always a good idea to express your appreciation for everything that's already being done. "I know you're working so hard and doing so much. I really appreciate it. If you can, I would be grateful if you can bake *challah* for Shabbos, but it's okay if you can't." Phrasing a request like this makes it easier for someone to come through.

What happens if the request is rebuffed, or ignored? The best policy in that case is to make the request once or twice and then leave it for a few days. Often, if you don't force the issue, the other person will find it easier to comply. If the other person's response is, "What, you need to hear the 'thank you'?" you can simply and politely say, "Yes, it would mean a lot to me."

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As I pointed out earlier, sometimes people don't express their feelings in the exact way we would like, even when we ask them to. People do have different ways of saying things as well as all kinds of emotional blocks that can make it hard for them to say the precise words you were hoping for. What then?

An often misunderstood point that's relevant to this discussion is this: While your spouse should express appreciation or regret when necessary, it's not their job to *make you feel* any particular way. It's their job to do their best, but they're not responsible for the results — in fact, there's no way that they can control the results in any case, no matter how much they might like to.

Sometimes, an apology doesn't sound genuine and a thank you doesn't sound heartfelt. But you really have no way of knowing whether how it sounds to you is how the other person meant it. If you challenge them, all you will probably achieve is making it harder for them to apologize or thank you in the future.

If your spouse said, "I'm sorry," accept it at face value and thank them. If it doesn't sound heartfelt enough, you can, very carefully, add something such as, "If you could also say

that you understand how hurt I felt, that would mean a lot to me. You don't have to and I understand it's hard, but I would really appreciate it." And mean what you say — it can be very hard for someone to say the precise words you were looking for. They may not be able to, and you may have to accept that.

What if you're left feeling dissatisfied and you don't know how to frame your request? Some people – maybe even most people — don't always know why they feel the way they do. So how can you expect your spouse to figure it out? All you can do is accept their words and be *dan lechaf zechus*. They said sorry? Appreciate it. They said thank you? Appreciate that too.

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Naturally, this advice goes both ways. If you're the person being asked for an apology or a "thank you," just give it. Unless the request is totally distorted, or is presented abusively as a demand,, just say the words, even if you don't totally understand why the other person wants or needs to hear them. Saying you're sorry doesn't mean you're guilty or a bad person. Expressing gratitude doesn't mean you're indebted forever. Such expressions are part of the fabric of a relationship. In normal circumstances, if you don't find yourself using these words relatively often, there may be something wrong. Don't let your ego get in the way.

If you have already expressed appreciation and your spouse keeps asking for more, you can say that you feel you're being grateful and expressing it too, and that if they want something different or more specific, you'd appreciate it if they could clarify what that is.

You may feel that the appreciation or apology isn't called for. Unless the situation is abnormal, that shouldn't make a difference. It's enough that they feel they need to hear those words. You should never call their feelings into doubt, saying things such as, "Okay, I'm sorry, but I don't understand why it's such a big deal," or, "Okay, thank you, but you should have done that anyway." Expressing appreciation on a regular basis is also good for *you*. If you want to become a grateful person, just keep saying, "Thank you." If you want to become a person who is sensitive to other people's feelings, acknowledge when they feel hurt by something you did and just say, "I'm sorry."

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And yes, you do actually have to *say* the words. Thinking or meaning them isn't enough. In many cases, a terse, "I'm sorry" isn't enough either, especially if it's a semi-instinctive reaction to a request to say those words. If you feel genuinely sorry, try to sound it.

One way of achieving that is to expand a little. "Thanks so much for doing that for me. I really appreciate it." "I'm really sorry about what happened. I'll try to make sure it doesn't happen again." Be creative — don't be stingy. Don't assume the other person knows what you mean. "Thank you so much — I don't take it for granted."

If it doesn't come naturally to you to express yourself at such length, you can try writing a short note. You can become accustomed to being more expressive, even if it's really hard at first.

This also applies to the recipient of the thanks or the apology. Express your appreciation when the other person fulfills your request. In relationships, it's important to know how to give as well as how to take. Take a compliment, take a favor, take appreciation.

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People feel good when they can do things for you. It's a mistake to start asking for less when someone gets defensive. The right thing to do is to learn how to ask for things in such a way that they can come through and build the relationship.

B'ezras Hashem, both the questioners and all others in similar situations will learn how to make requests, give, and receive expressions of gratitude, remorse, and all the other healthy and normal feelings (that we should all get used to using more often)and feel good about it as well.

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME

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