RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

Parshas Balak

The Power of a Word

The Baal Shem Tov famously said that when a Yid is busy all day trying to make a living, and just about forgets about Hashem all day, but when the time for Mincha comes and he realizes that it's time to daven, he gives a *krechtz* about how he just spent the day, and he runs into some alley and davens Mincha, even though he has no idea what he's saying in his prayers, that *krechtz* of his has tremendous power up in Shamayim, and is Bokeya Rekiyim!

The Trisker Maggid in his sefer Magen Avraham references this vort and explains the opening possuk in our Parsha: "Balak saw everything Elokim did to the Emori". This is a remez to the "saying" of a Yid, meaning the Tefillos of a simple Jew who is merely "saying" his prayers. Balak could not get over the fact that even simple folk have such meaning in the eyes of Hashem and such an amazing impact on the world.

We often do not appreciate the power of our words. We don't realize that with a good word, with one smile or a single compliment, we have the ability to turn someone's life around. With one positive remark we can erase someone's bad mood or hard feelings.

Many people run from person to person trying to get help for problems they are experiencing, while sometimes a single good word at the right time could do so much more.

To Hashem, a Yid's word is precious, even if he doesn't know what he's saying. Maybe it doesn't quite work that way in our relationships, but actually it doesn't take much to say something sincere that will brighten the day of those around you.

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Question:

Hi, Rabbi,

I listened to your Shalom Bayis tele-course and read your book and found both extremely enlightening. Understanding what a key role natural sensitivity plays in relationships, and how it can be dealt with efficiently was a real eye-opener. I feel like it will really help my marriage BH.

From your book I see that both my wife and I are naturally hyper-sensitive, what you term "The UV", but my wife is a bit more so. While I'm not sure if it's related, I'm saying this to give some context to my question.

Although my wife wasn't officially diagnosed by a doctor, I'm pretty sure she has anorexia. I know she isn't eating and is exhibiting real symptoms. Can you advise how I am to deal with this situation and encourage her to go for help?

I am waiting to hear from you and thank you so much for your reply!

Answer:

Before I begin, I want to make it clear that problems such as eating disorders are very serious. A simple response to your question is not an answer, nor a cure, for a situation of this magnitude. It appears that the questioner is aware of this, but I want to underscore it for the rest of my readers. This type of problem generally requires professional and experienced one-on-one guidance and help. There are organizations that deal with this specifically and will gladly offer any help or guidance necessary.

Disclaimer: *I will now address how to send someone who really needs help to get professional advice, yet I must preface this by saying that this is a very sensitive discussion, which is often misused in relationships. I chose to address this topic despite the pitfalls of discussing such matters, in order to provide clarity and information which I hope will be applied correctly. Please don't jump to conclusions upon reading this and always be sure to discuss such matters one-on-one with someone you trust to make sure you are applying this correctly in the situation it is intended for. I am addressing it here in reference to what seems like a serious eating disorder, although there are similar situations in which this applies as well. It's clearly extremely important to get guidance every step of the way, not only for the person suffering from this disorder, but for those around as well.*

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When it comes to sending anyone other than yourself for help, it's often far from simple. This is especially true when the person in question denies that they have any sort of problem – a common characteristic of those suffering from eating disorders.

Furthermore, the sufferer will often counter that *you*, the one sending them for

help, is the one who really needs to go to therapy, while they are perfectly fine.

This reaction most commonly occurs in people who are very sensitive. The "UV" will be deeply hurt by the insinuation that there might be something wrong with them, and any type of logic or reason will not appeal to them.

As an example, someone once told me that his wife suffers from a very obvious problem of extreme anxiety. For the first few months after their wedding, he refrained from bringing it up, because he was uncomfortable to do so. However, the whole time he was sure that she knew about it! Imagine his shock when he finally did bring it up and told her that there's help to be had, and she vehemently denied having any problem at all. She admitted that she suffered from it in the past – as a young child – but she was now completely cured.

It is often painful to witness how deeply a person can bury themselves in their denial, to the point where everyone else around them can see they have a problem, while they fail to realize it themselves.

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Using force or trying to successfully debate the need for therapy with your wife is very likely going to prove itself futile. However, that does not mean that you can't express to your wife how you feel about it or what your opinion on the matter is.

You need to be very careful with how you phrase your opinion, though, so as not to hurt her feelings. Don't tell her that she is crazy or in denial. Instead, tell her that although you can be wrong, you strongly feel that she can benefit from hearing the opinion of a professional, and you will greatly appreciate it if she does.

There are situations where your wife's problem directly affects you or your family,in which you should not hesitate to tell her clearly that she is ignoring the issue and not dealing with it responsibly. You can always add that you might be mistaken, so that she doesn't feel as challenged, and might even be inclined to try to prove you wrong, but you can be clear about your opinion and stance in the matter.

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If someone gets too defensive or tries to make you think that you are the one with the problem, it could be a form of manipulation to get you to retract what you said. But if you did not say it in a hurtful way or make it sound like a personal attack, you generally need not back down from what you said. In fact, sometimes the very fact that a person gets offended can be indicative of the fact that they are aware of the problem, if only on a subconscious level.

Don't be discouraged if your wife makes you feel bad for expressing your opinion, so long as you make sure to say it nicely, and don't give up if you're not successful after trying to bring it up once or twice. Of course, you should not talk about it ten times a day, but don't be afraid to bring it up at the right times as much as necessary, until you're taken seriously. Obviously, when she does go for help, acknowledge and thank her for it, even if going is only for her benefit. Don't take it for granted or make her feel like *fiiiiinally* she came around.

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Bear in mind that even after you have a definitive diagnosis from a doctor, your battle with this illness is far from over. Unfortunately, this is a very difficult problem to treat and overcome, and you will still need loads of guidance, patience, and strength to deal with it, as well as a hefty dose of prayer and *siyatta Dishmaya*.

One of the issues that are important to be aware of for yourself, is that this should not turn into a codependency issue. Her problem is not your problem and you should not take ownership of it. It is not your responsibility to prepare her food or call her repeatedly throughout the day to make sure she ate. When you believe that you are the one who can solve her problem, she will end up relying on you to do it for her, which is extremely unhealthy and generally counterproductive.

It may be very difficult to take a step back and say, "This is what I have to say on the matter and there's nothing more I can do to help you". You *want* to swoop in and make it all right! But while you can and should suggest going for help, and offer her an abundance of encouragement and support, it is not up to you to solve the problem for her.

You might want to get yourself some guidance on how to go about this in the most effective way.

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We often underestimate the effect that getting help for ourselves can have in alleviating situations such as these. If you would seek out guidance yourself on how to deal with your wife's problem effectively, it will become so much easier for you to bear. Very often getting your personal guidance can actu-

ally end up being extremely helpful for your spouse as well. Often when a person is "handled" properly, many issues fade away.

This is true when you're struggling with a spouse, a child, or even just an acquaintance that you have to deal with and you feel like they are in a difficult situation. It might appear that it would be easier to send them for help, but by empowering yourself with the right tools, you might be taking the smartest course of action. Most of the time, they will resist your pleas to go for help anyway, and by forcing them you won't get anywhere.

Eating disorders on their own aren't necessarily an interpersonal problem, but it does have certain interpersonal and behavioral aspects to it, which can be addressed when you go for help. So aside from finding a therapist who specializes in eating disorders, it can be helpful to get expert guidance for others who are involved as well.

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Even once you are successful and your wife does go to therapy, keep in mind that it can become confusing. Sometimes, perhaps not so much with eating disorders, but with other issues, especially with a therapist who isn't experienced, the bystander can end up being labeled as part of – or even the cause of – the problem. Of course there's a chance that a spouse contributes to the problem in some way, and should definitely accept any guidance they can get.

On one occasion, someone told me that his wife went to therapy for her eating disorder. She told her therapist that part of her problem was that she had a lot of pressure before her husband came home to get the house from clean to spotless, and that was what caused her to stress out this way.

The therapist promptly suggested that the husband was suffering from OCD and sent him for help. The truth was, this man never asked his wife to clean up the house for him in the first place! It was entirely a figment of his wife's imagination! Sometimes you need to remember to stay focused, and don't forget who the patient is.

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Often, when one person experiences a difficulty and goes to therapy, it becomes the whole family's problem with fingers pointing in all directions and nobody getting the help they really need. Please don't rely on your opinion alone to answer these questions, as we are all too biased to determine the correct and accurate answers to questions like these. Consider discussing it with an objective third party whom you trust, not someone afraid to tell you the truth, maybe your Rov or a good friend, just to stay balanced and know what you're dealing with.

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Remember that as much as you or your children might be suffering, the person who is having it the hardest is your wife herself. Treat her with compassion and empathize with her pain. It is similar to when a child continually acts out in school and is expelled. As much as you might find the problem exasperating, it is they who are really suffering.

Considering the fact that as you mentioned, your wife is a more sensitive type, and it is possible that the eating disorder is only one part of a bigger emotional problem. You should definitely seek treatment for the disorder - just like you would treat a child who is stuttering as a result of trauma - but keep an open mind that there might be deeper issues that are expressed via the eating disorder and those need to be explored and treated as well.

In closing, without feeling responsible, it is most advisable for you to be aware of the powerful role you can play in your wife's recovery by being open to getting help yourself and being mindful of the common pitfalls. And don't forget the power of Emori - a kind word or a well-placed compliment can alleviate a lot of her suffering and make her troubles easier to bear.

Wishing you much Hatzlacha,

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

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