Torah Lessons for the Home

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להאיר
Illuminating Through Clarity and Understanding

Parshas Vayera

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Pursuing Kindness

VAYERA: WHAT SET AVRAHAM APART?

In the beginning of Chumash Bereishis (6, 9) we learn about Noach "A completely righteous man who walked with Elokim". We learn of his devotion to the word of Hashem and how he labored for over 100 years to build the teiva as per Hashem's command. We learn of the korbanos that he brought and his overall righteousness.

If you think about it; Noach should be considered one of the Avos Haolam. He should be given a grand title like "Avi kol chai" –"The father of all the living", and we should invite him as one of the ushpizin on Sukkos. He should be right at the top of the list of the heroes of the Torah. But there isn't very much emphasis placed on Noach, or Shem, or Mesushelach, or any of the other great men who lived up until the time of Avraham Avinu. And that begs an explanation: What set Avraham apart? What was it about Avraham that three times a day we refer to Hashem as being Elokai Avraham? Where does the greatness of Avraham lie?

So the Seforim explain to us that Avraham's greatness lay in his consideration of others. While Noach was "ah tzaddik in peltz" – he was focused inward, on improving himself – yet chessed l'Avraham, Avraham Avinu embodied the middah

of chessed, he was always thinking of others. While it's good to be a great man and to serve Hashem with "complete righteousness", it's much greater to be on the lookout for others – "How can I serve others? What can I do to make someone else happy?" That is why bacharta b'Avram –Hashem chose Avraham, that is what made him truly great.

HELPING FOR THE SAKE OF HELPING

What a powerful lesson for us to take into our relationships! Avraham Avinu was always looking out for others, always willing to help "He sat at the entrance of the tent even though the day was very hot" (Bereishis 18, 1). Avraham Avinu didn't think about himself and how he could be comfortable, rather it was always about someone else. "What can I do to make them happy?"

And even when it came to people who weren't deserving of his kindness, he didn't stop to make cheshbonos. Avraham didn't have people on "his good side" or "his bad side"; he went overboard to save Sodom. For a long time he pleaded with Hashem for the benefit of people who opposed everything that he stood for (ibid. 18, 23-33). Such was the chessed of Avraham – helping purely for the sake of helping.

And while I don't think we still have hope of making it into the siddur as "Elokai you or me", we must use Avraham Avinu as our model. Maasei avos siman labanim –"The actions of our forefathers are goalposts for their children". We must look to the chumash and gain life-lessons and Torah attitudes from the stories therein. The chumash is not a history book. Its stories teach us valuable lessons for life, and we must try to learn from them.

BE HAPPY THAT YOUR WIFE IS SELFISH

Being kindhearted can be the best thing for a relationship, and I'll tell you why. People are naturally self-absorbed – try explaining to your newborn that mommy needs her food and sleep too! And thus they are most gratified when others consider their needs. So if you appeal to your wife's selfishness by always being kind to her, and always being considerate of her, immense feelings of love toward you are building up in her heart.

There is nothing that can build up your relationship like appealing to your partner's instinctive selfishness. The more giving there is in a relationship, the more love will be felt, and the closer and better the relationship will be. And it goes without saying that your spouse will reciprocate and appeal to your selfishness too!

HELPING YOUR HUSBAND BEFORE HE'S ABOUT TO DIE

But some people don't understand this and are all about "tit for tat". "Well, I'll do this favor if he'll do that favor." "I would help her with the laundry, but when was the last time she went to the bank for me?" This attitude is as silly as can be. No one is trying to cheat you out of anything here. You're not dealing with some smooth talking salesman where you want to ensure that every eventuality is covered by the contract. Two people are in a relationship, and so they help each other.

There was a husband who went to the doctor and suddenly noticed his wife was being very nice to him. "What happened, Shprintzy?" he asked, "Did the doctor tell you that I only have two weeks left to live?" We shouldn't be helping our spouse only when it is absolutely one hundred percent necessary. Our spouses shouldn't be surprised by a nice gesture. We should be constantly being nice to each other, constantly doing small – and big – kindnesses for one another.

For some people it naturally comes easier to be considerate and caring for someone else, and for some it is a bit more difficult. But being kind and considerate is an important skill to learn. It can be said that kindness is the key to the heart of another.

BEING NICE WITHOUT BEING ASKED

Now, sometimes it's difficult. A woman complained to me that her husband is so demanding that she has trouble keeping up with all the things he asks for, let alone trying to do extra favors. It doesn't matter. It may be difficult, but try putting in the extra as well. When you do something that your husband didn't ask for, it's not that you fulfilled his demands 100 percent and now you've

added ten percent extra. No, you added another hundred percent!

Extra kindnesses go so far in making a person feel loved and cared for that it pays for you to invest that little extra. Sometimes a little unexpected gift can be more appreciated than a big gift that's expected. If you buy your wife a three dollar coffee you might gain more love in your relationship than when you buy her a new sheitel that she was begging for; even though you spent a thousand times less.

Besides, when you're being nice, you can do it on your own terms. Suppose you come home from work three weeks before Yom Tov and you say "Chana, here's five hundred dollars, get yourself something nice for yom tov". That gesture will be appreciated so much more than if your wife would ask you for money, and it might very well be cheaper for you as well! Of course that shouldn't be your attitude, but it's a point to consider…

IT'S THE THOUGHT THAT COUNTS

Once you're giving, it doesn't matter what you're giving. As mentioned above, sometimes a three dollar coffee is worth more than a three thousand dollar sheitel. It can be something really small – what does it cost you to write a little note to your husband? Write a short simple message and doodle a smiley face and you made his day!

It's so easy to make someone happy if only we put a little thought into it. And that's what makes a relationship. Being married to someone doesn't mean that you have a roommate. When you get married your souls are bound up with each other, and you're expected to think of each other. Even outside of marriage it's beneficial to be considerate of others. But in a marriage, certainly, being considerate will do wonders for your relationship.

Your spouse wants to feel noticed, wants to feel remembered. When you do something small that you weren't asked for, you're showing that you care for your spouse, that you love her, that you're in a relationship. When two people show care and concern for one another, when they're on the lookout for each other – that's when you have a marriage. That's when you have a loving relationship.

GIVING: DO IT FOR YOURSELF

It is an immense benefit to a person to become a Giver. Forget about doing it for the other person, or to benefit the relationship. Forget about the fact that this small investment will bring you great dividends. Do it for yourself. Life is so much happier when you're on the giving end. Life is so much more purposeful, meaningful and fulfilling when you become a giver. Instead of walking around with depressing thoughts of how much you deserve, you can live with a generous spirit, with a feeling of satisfaction that is gained only from giving and doing for others.

And I'll let you in on a small secret; the best kindness is a chessed shel emes, a chessed for which you can expect nothing in return. Try to do things for your spouse that he'll never know about. So if you're straightening out the bedroom, make sure your husband's slippers are facing outward, so that it's easier for him to slip his feet in. Or if you're a man and you're rushing out to work and you notice that the sink is full of dishes. Wash one fork, dry it and put it away. Your wife will never know the difference, but you did something for her and you became a giver. You're changing your attitude and becoming a better person.

Try it out, try doing one secret kindness per day, you'll be surprised at how many opportunities for chessed you'll discover. And you'll be delighted by the change you'll feel in your life and in your relationships with others.

So do it for yourself, whether because you're mature enough to understand the benefit of transforming yourself into a giving person, or simply because it's the sensible and selfish thing to do! If you're nice to your wife she will be nice to you.

JUST KEEP GIVING

So don't wait for your wife to be "deserving", don't wait for your husband to be "appreciative". You just keep on giving because you're giving for yourself, you are benefitting by becoming an ish chessed – a man of kindness. But you should also know that even though your spouse is not expressing any appreciation (yet!), you're kindnesses are having a deep effect on the relationship.

"Rabbi Elazar said: Being kind is greater than giving charity. When you give charity, you're not guaranteed any benefits. The passuk (Hoshea 10, 12) says זרעו לכם לצדקה –charity is compared to sowing. When you sow, you don't always reap… but the passuk continues, וקצרו לפי חסד – kindness however, is compared to reaping. You will always reap benefits when you engage in kindness!" (Gemara Sukkah 49b)

Now, sometimes people are involved in abusive and manipulative relationships, where a narcissistic partner just keeps extorting more and more and is never satisfied. We're not discussing problematic situations now. We're not addressing codependency or other situations where too much giving can actually be detrimental. Such cases require professional help. But here we're discussing a regular relationship with two healthy individuals, and we say to them: If you want to drastically improve your relationship and your happiness, just give and give and keep giving.

GIVE AND LET GIVE

There is another topic that needs to be discussed, and that is: becoming a taker. Just as you want to become a giver, and give to your spouse, you must also allow your spouse to become a giver and give to you!

Very often people make the mistake of thinking that it's altruistic to refuse help. Someone's trying to be nice to you, to make things easier for you. Someone is investing thought, time and money, and you just shrug it "Nah, I don't need it" you might even throw in the word thanks – "thanks but no thanks".

That is a terrible sign of ingratitude. Your husband is offering something – it might not be exactly what you want, but accept it, smile and show appreciation. Don't wait until he offers exactly what you want. By expressing gratitude you're encouraging him to give even more, and eventually you will get what you want. But by rebuffing his offer, you're breaking down the foundations of the relationship. You're quashing the relationship instead of allowing it to flourish.

Some people are afraid to accept something, because then they'll feel indebted to their spouse. What's wrong with that? It's good to feel indebted. In a close relationship both parties feel strongly indebted to one another and are constantly trying to give more and more.

A TRULY LOVING RELATIONSHIP

There is a story related about Rav Yaakov Yosef Herman ztz"l of All For the Boss fame. He and his wife were once stranded in an elevator for several hours. As soon as they got out Rav Herman asked his wife how she was feeling. He told her how concerned he was for her the whole time knowing that she suffered from claustrophobia – not a good condition to have when you're stuck in an elevator.

"Oh" she said "I didn't have a chance to think about it because I was so worried about you the whole time – How you're managing with your bad back and all"… Such is a truly loving relationship where both parties are truly considerate of one another, when both parties truly care for each other. And this is what made Avrah Avinu so great, the fact that he thought about others and cared for others – that is the true sign of greatness.

LEARNING FROM YOUR CHILDREN

We always try to apply the parsha lesson to both shalom bayis and chinuch. When it comes to raising children the importance of giving is so obvious, but there is an important lesson that we can glean from the parent child relationship.

No one is a greater taker than a newborn baby. A baby takes all of its mother's time and energy. When you have a newborn baby you must give and give and give. Yet there is no stronger bond than that relationship. There is no one in the world that a mother loves more than her child - the one she invested most in. The same goes for any relationship; give, and watch your love grow.

LETTING YOUR CHILD LOVE YOU

We mentioned earlier that the key to someone's heart is through being kind to them and giving to them. With children this may be a bit tricky, because children easily fall into the trap of expectations. Children rarely feel that their parents are doing anything special for them, because they are so self-absorbed and so full of expectations.

So the trick to finding the way into your child's heart is by doing those extra kindnesses, the things that aren't expected. Don't stand and lecture your child about gratitude, and how he should be more grateful; it won't work. Instead pick up a little trinket for him, buy her a little nosh. "Just because you're special", "Just because I'm thinking of you". It's these little things that build up feelings of gratitude and feelings of love: והשיב לב אבות על בנים, ולב בנים על אבותם –"When the fathers will turn their minds to their children, the children will turn their minds to the fathers" (Malachi 3, 24).

You can't expect an immature child to be grateful that you pay for his food and board. Maybe one day, when he has his own kids, he'll appreciate it. But he definitely will appreciate getting an extra something here and there. So go ahead, do it, build up the relationship. It is you who will reap the rewards of your kindness.

If we can all move beyond our selfishness, and become more attuned to the needs of others, become more of a giver – without expecting anything in return – then we will surely gain much benefit in all of our relationships and have happier and healthier homes bsiyatta dishmaya.

-Q&A-

Please feel free to send any questions, on this topic or any topic to RabbiGruen@Lehair.org

Question: My wife is very sensitive and overreacts to everything I say. I feel like I'm always walking on eggshells around her. I'm afraid to speak with her about anything for fear of upsetting her and I feel like we're growing further and further apart because of this. Is there anything I can do to reverse this trend?

Answer: Obviously complicated situations such as this one may require personal guidance. But I will respond briefly in a general way. Some people are more sensitive than others. I've written extensively on this topic in my book Get Along With Everyone and in my other books as well. When you meet up with what I termed The Fragile Child, or a fragile adult for that matter, don't run away from the fragility – embrace it!

You've come a long way since playing peek-a-boo with mommy. Things don't disappear just because you're not looking at them. So if you encounter something that you don't understand – a bit of a difficult personality – don't pretend that the personality isn't difficult. Learn how to deal with it. If there are certain things that insult your wife, or make her uncomfortable, study them. Figure out what it is that irritates her and try to understand the reason.

Why should you needlessly create distance between you and your wife and give up on ever being truly intimate? Learn about these things that bother her; is it the way you're saying things? Is it your attitude? Yes, she's overreacting, but to what? She's not reacting to you, only to the things that you say; so learn not to say those things in the way that bothers her.

You won't necessarily hurt her by talking to her once you learn what to avoid. But by distancing yourself, both of you will be hurt. Your relationship will be hurt, your children will be hurt, and your home will fall apart.

I'd like to add that since you're dealing with someone who is extra sensitive, your being distant is only exacerbating the problem. You can't just stop talking and say "If I don't talk to her, I won't hurt her", no, you're hurting her even more by not talking to her. So again, don't run away from the problem, embrace it.

As long as you're sincere, as long as you earnestly desire the wellbeing of your relationship, don't be afraid to openly address the conflicts. Speak to your wife, try to figure out what her sore points are, how she would like to be spoken to, and try to implement this knowledge in your relationship. And maybe, if your relationship is cushioned with a lot of love and mutual respect, the day will come when you'll be able to say anything you want!