

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

UNITING FOR THE GREAT MISSION

As Yaakov Avinu is about to pass away, he summons his sons to him and tells them: "Gather, and I will tell you what will happen to you at the end of days." Many *sefarim* explain that this is Yaakov's advice for surviving the immensely challenging days when Moshiach comes — if we "gather" and are united, we will find a way to manage during this last chapter of Golus.

The Ohr Pnei Moshe explains the words differently. He suggests that it is the gathering together itself that brings Moshiach and ushers in the era of Geulah. After all, Golus resulted from *sinas chinam*, from not being able to get along with other people for no good reason. Uniting with others is not just a way to survive the Golus; it's also a way to end it.

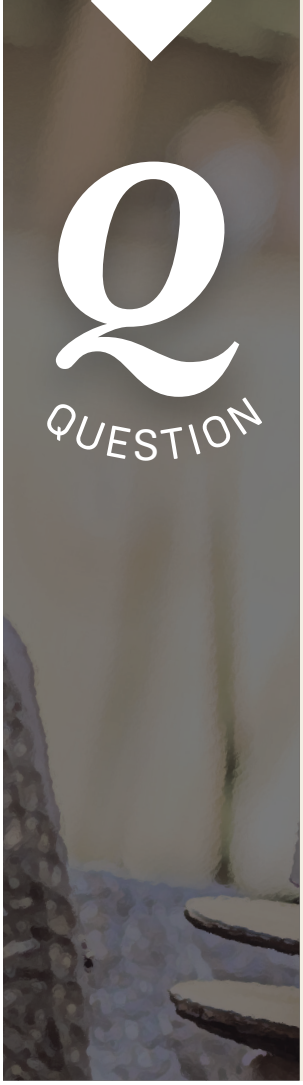
Making peace is rarely simple. It can seem even more difficult when it comes to those close to us — a spouse, a child, a parent. The more we love someone the harder it is to overcome hurt feelings and the pain they have caused. When it comes to our personal struggles, we may not feel so incentivized to have the idealistic motive of bringing the Geulah closer. However, trying to keep this idea in mind and remembering that we're part of a great mission to bring about the Geulah Shleimah, will help us find a way to overcome divisions between us, and gather together as one.

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Parshas
Vayechi
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Question one:

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

Thank you for your *shiurim*. I look forward to hearing them every week. Two *shiurim* stuck in my mind in particular — *shiurim* about anger and how to deal with it.

My question relates to my husband, who very often gets angry. When something doesn't go the way he expected or how he feels it should be done, he will often yell in anger. It's not always easy to anticipate what will set him off.

This problem is made even harder because he doesn't hold back and can even yell at me in front of the kids which leaves me hurt, dejected, and embarrassed. I am often so hurt and angry that I don't want to speak to anyone. I can't function as a mother like this. The kids have also lost respect for me and it's so hard to run the home.

For his part, he doesn't see or want to see the destruction this creates. His anger can blow over in a couple of minutes while it takes me a while to get over the hurt.

I would appreciate your guidance on how to deal with this. Thank you

Question two:

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

Thank you for everything I've learned from you. I have a general question and I'd appreciate it if you could address it.

I have *b"H* a wonderful wife who is a very good person, but somehow I feel like I didn't marry the person with the best *middos*.

My wife gets very impatient and upset at some of the things I do or say, and she has a lot of inner anger as well as not being naturally thoughtful or kind. I know you've spoken a lot about acceptance but it can be really tough living with someone who is so easily angered. Thank you



Living with someone who has a strong tendency toward getting angry is undoubtedly a challenge. Being on the receiving end of someone's angry outbursts is difficult and painful. In some cases, this can accurately be termed abusive behavior.

Being a "*maavir al midosav*" — swallowing one's feelings and remaining silent while being berated, yelled at, shamed, or otherwise abused — is something people on a very high spiritual level may be capable of. It's not something that we should ever demand of someone else or even something that we should advise other people to aim for, because it is so hard to do it the right way.

Telling someone, "Just take it," is not only unreasonable and unrealistic, it is hurtful and can even be harmful. Enabling a person to continue abusing others is no *mitzvah*. An abuser, whether verbally or in any other form, should be viewed as we view any person guilty of any other wrongdoing — he should be warned that his action is wrong, and told to stop. Even if a person thinks he is capable of swallowing his distress and he genuinely aspires to become a *maavir al midosav*, in most cases he would accomplish more by reacting in a different manner.

Swallowing distress while allowing resentment and pain to fester does no one any good. Furthermore, within a family situation, it is rare to find only one person on the receiving end of angry outbursts, and still rarer to have only one person affected by the anger, as the first question illustrates. It's essential to take into

account the effect on the children who witness the yelling and criticism. They do have to know that such behavior is not something they should emulate, and if the spouse on the receiving end remains silent and simply absorbs the abuse, even with the best of intentions, the *chinuch* of the children can be very negatively impacted.

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That said, simply telling the angry spouse that they are wrong and shouldn't continue to behave in that manner is unfortunately not likely to help. No one can "make" another person change. Telling someone how bad they look, or that the kids are looking down on them, is usually not what's going to open their eyes to reality. We can daven that they come to recognize the issue of their own accord and truly desire to change things, but until they reach that recognition, it's hard to alter the situation.

What this leaves anyone in such a situation with is simply the decision as to how to respond and react. This requires first and foremost a great deal of honesty. Without referring specifically to either of the people asking the questions above, I would like to stress how important it is that anyone with a chronically angry spouse first examines himself or herself to make sure that they are doing what they can to be part of the solution and not part of the problem.

To give a simple example: If you know your spouse always flies off the handle when you leave your dirty socks on the floor, you can resolve to be more meticulous about putting the socks in the laundry hamper. Yes, your spouse may still have "an anger problem," but that doesn't mean that you shouldn't do your best to avoid presenting them with constant triggers, even if you are justified in feeling that they're just "normal" things and not really objectionable. It's not your job to give your spouse ongoing *nisyonos* to "force" them to work on their *middos*.

Furthermore, when tense situations do arise, it's very important to ensure you don't react in a way that transforms a small aggravation into a tantrum. If you see that your spouse is becoming tense and your response is to be dismissive of their feelings or to put them down, you may be making things worse. This doesn't mean that you are entirely to blame for the outcome, but anyone in such a situation should take care not to make things spiral out of control.

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It may not be in place to suggest this, but if you're honest, you will probably be able to identify your own occasional triggers which almost always set you off, and you probably wouldn't appreciate your spouse continually attempting to push your buttons.

Recognizing that you too have your triggers, your areas of sensitivity, is vital if you want to help solve this anger issue. Setting yourself up on a pedestal is only going to exacerbate the problems between you. When you recognize your own issues, and realize that you aren't furious with yourself for not having overcome them, you're one step closer to helping your spouse overcome their issues too.

In general, people aren't full of self-loathing for failing to perfect their *middos*. What happens more often whenever we slip is that we justify that slip and explain it away. "Poor me… He was late again and so I had to…" We pity ourselves for having been put in a position where we just "couldn't" help ourselves. Why don't we extend that pity to others?

In fact, we can extend that pity to others, and we should do just that, while remembering that we aren't any better than they are — it's simply that right now, the issue on the table is *their* anger problem, and tomorrow, it might be *our* laziness or whatever other weakness we have.

Just as we feel sorry for ourselves in a given situation, we can feel sorry for our spouse that they haven't yet reached the stage where their awareness of their anger is so acute that they feel absolutely compelled to address it. We can feel pity for their lack of awareness — or perhaps they are aware, and they feel so ashamed of themselves that they dare not admit the extent of the problem and therefore don't dare to address it either.

Keep reminding yourself of your own faults in other areas and you'll be less likely to fall into the trap of feeling superior.

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So, how can we help a spouse who is sunk in anger or any other negative *middah* to emerge from their rut? It's very important here to make a distinction between "their" rut and "our" issue. In the questions above, the problems clearly affect the marriage and the home and so the spouse on the receiving end is entitled to take some form of action. However, in a case where the negative *middah* doesn't have any impact on the other spouse, there really is very little justification to intervene.

The focus should always be on "how this makes me feel" rather than "your anger issue…" In addition, presenting any issue as black-and-white, you're wrong and I'm right, is a recipe for disaster (even if you really are one-hundred-percent right, which is almost never the case). Discussing your feelings versus their "wrong" behaviors is the most likely method to succeed and the least likely to provoke the spouse into defensiveness.

Another important point to keep in mind is that talking about one's feelings should be done when one isn't in the throes of feeling those feelings. Any discussion should take place at a calm moment in a neutral tone of voice, as far as this is possible.

In the event that your spouse takes your comments well, or they actually end up taking the initiative and tell you how much they regret the problems their anger has caused, you must resist the temptation to respond by emphasizing the damage done. It's tempting to take advantage of someone's vulnerability, but it's almost never beneficial. Instead, praise them for being humble enough to admit to their faults and tell them how much you admire them and appreciate their honesty and desire to fix things. Speak respectfully and unite over the issue, instead of talking down to them now that they have finally admitted that it's "their" problem.

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Nonetheless, part of addressing the problem directly is making the other person aware of how important it is to you that something changes. This can be done by telling them how much you will appreciate it if they could do or stop doing abc. You can also say how much you want to do xyz for them, but the expressions of anger make it so much harder for you. Stress how deeply you value the relationship and how you want to do what you can to overcome this obstacle to closeness.

Telling someone, "I really want to discuss this with you, but when you shout my mind shuts down," is so much better and more helpful than telling them, "I can't talk to you when you scream" and then walking out of the room. Nonetheless, sometimes you may need to add that you might feel the need to step outside for a few minutes if an outburst happens, but you should clarify that you would hate to have to do so.

Underlying your approach should always be a sense of balance and equality between you and your spouse. If they gain the impression that you — or the children — look down on them, it's very unlikely that there will be any breakthrough.

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Even when you do everything right — which is hard, because clashes of personality and dealing with poor *middos* are very challenging — don't expect swift and dramatic change. People just don't usually change very quickly.

When you do see an improvement, however small, it's so important to notice it and highlight it and praise your spouse for making that change. Tell them how much it means to you and how you feel so much more positive and optimistic now. Sometimes, people worry that if they express their joy at only a small amount of progress, their spouse will just stop there and not continue to make necessary changes. That isn't how things work, by and large. If you give your spouse a wonderful feeling, they're very likely to want to get more of that good feeling and keep moving in the right direction.

It can be very hard indeed to focus on tiny changes when there is so much left to fix, but it's absolutely worth the effort. Similarly, it can be very hard indeed to focus on all the positive *middos* your spouse has when one huge problem seems to dwarf them all. All the same, it is so important to remember that your spouse is more than their anger or their laziness or their stinginess, just as you are so much more than the areas in which you are most challenged.

When we see the other person as a whole person, with good points and faults, just as we see ourselves as whole people with good points and faults, we are so much more likely to be able to exert a subtle influence on them, and to improve the relationship even when we don't directly address the problematic issues. When we focus on the people and the relationship rather than the problems and the fights, we realize how great the stakes are and how important it is that we do our utmost to get things right. With an added dose of *siyatta diShmaya*, we'll hopefully be able to turn our relationships around, and move in the right direction.

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